

Here is my report on David Roskies' THE LOST ART OF YIDDISH STORYTELLING:

The book has many attractive features but also serious problems of focus and structure. Let me first enumerate its virtues. This is a work of exemplary scholarship. Roskies has a minutely informed knowledge of Yiddish literary history, of the specific historical contexts of all the works discussed, and of the biographies of the writers. He commands the whole range of scholarly and critical literature on Yiddish, in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, in meticulous detail. His readings of these variegated texts are alert, persuasive, and often finely sensitive. He devotes instructive attention to matters of linguistic detail, showing how the writers exploit the richly layered character of Yiddish for their sundry literary ends and how the simplification of translation often betrays the complexity and the cultural density of the originals. His writing is lucid, fluent, and lively: on the whole, I liked the personal and colloquial touches, though perhaps here and there he may strain too hard for the zippy effect. The study as a whole conveys a vivid sense of the distinctive "project" of modern Yiddish literature, and I am not aware of any existing book that covers this ground as he has done here. In particular, I think that the guiding notion of "creative betrayal" provides an illuminating perspective for understanding the richness and vitality and historical ambiguity of modern Yiddish literature. It certainly offers a very welcome corrective to the sentimental and nostalgic ideas about Yiddish that have had such currency in America ever since the days of FIDDLER ON THE ROOF and LIFE IS WITH PEOPLE.

In all these respects, THE LOST ART OF YIDDISH STORYTELLING is a book you could be proud to publish. It is also, as I shall explain, a book that seems to me in need of radical revision, but its virtues are impressive enough that it would by no means be an embarrassment to publish more or less as is. The manuscript, as academic books go these days, is very long--by my estimate, nearly 200,000 words. The problem is not just the length but the unfocused nature of much of the exposition, which I'm afraid many readers are likely to find fatiguing. In its present form, this would be a large book, affordable mainly by libraries, and which only serious students of Yiddish literature would have the patience to read all the way through. With serious surgery, I think this could be a book that would appeal to a larger audience. Let me specify.

The first chapter strikes me as a mistake. It is anecdotal, excessively personal, meandering, and no way to begin a book. Chapter 6, on Yiddish "folk" songs, has only marginal relevance to the question of storytelling, though it is pertinent to the question of creative betrayal. My suggestion would be to keep the first chapter strictly and concisely focused on the phenomenon of creative betrayal as an introduction

to the creation of a modern storytelling tradition in Yiddish, and to incorporate a highly condensed version of the material on invented folksong there as an exemplary instance of creative betrayal. The rest of Chapter 6 could be jettisoned. For all the other chapters, I have the same general reservation: Roskies is ostensibly considering each of these writers in turn in order to follow the tradition of literary storytelling in modern Yiddish, but each of the chapters begins to turn into a kind of monograph on the writer, surveying work after work in developmental order. The ponderousness of this approach is compounded by the fact that many of the texts are relatively unfamiliar to English readers and so Roskies feels obliged to provide synopses and abundant quotations as he proposes his interpretations. This is chiefly what I meant when I said the effect of the book was somewhat fatiguing, for all the liveliness of Roskies' intelligence and writing. Many readers are likely to grow impatient by the time they get to the discussion of the fourth or fifth text, complete with plot summary, by Der Nister or by Manger. And in the last chapter, I think that not only are too many texts discussed but also too many writers. Wouldn't Sustkever and Birstein be quite enough? In general, there ought to be a way of zeroing in on one or two representative works of each writer, with no more than quick background allusions to other texts, accompanied of course by generalizations (one hopes, incisive ones) on what precisely was the writer's particular project in redeploying the resources of storytelling in a conscious literary art. In this fashion, it should be possible to cut down the length of the chapters by at least a third. Perhaps it would help if the author could find some way to keep the definition of storytelling conceptually sharper and more steadily before the eye of the reader. At times, I began to feel that "storytelling" was a kind of rhetorical catch-all, though Roskies is certainly correct in his general claim that there are more intimate links with older traditions of oral storytelling in Yiddish literature than in any other modern literature. I wonder whether Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on the storyteller might be useful to the conceptual argument, at least as a point of departure.

There were a few local errors I spotted that ought to be corrected, whatever else is done with the manuscript. (Page numbers reflect the continuous pagination, added by stamp.)

- p. 78, "and never be forgotten." He has mistaken an Aramaic verb for its Hebrew homonym. The saying actually means "and are no longer found (exist)"
- p. 201, the Hebrew phrase rendered "sojourner of life" actually means "path of life."
- p. 246, in the talmudic quote, khayvo should be khiyvo.
- p. 352, Readers of Agnon will be astonished to hear that the modern psychological studies of AL KAPOT HAMANUL are love stories "in a folk vein".
- p. 383, The nucleus of SEFER HAMAASIM was published in 1932, then in 1939, so it's misleading to give the dates as 1941-1951.
- p. 523, THE BRIDAL CANOPY appeared in 1931, not 1935.
- p. 526, "Pologne, c'est moi," would have to be "La Pologne, c'est moi."
- p. 557, Kafka was a state insurance company executive, never a bank clerk.

I'm mailing back the manuscript under separate cover.