MODERN JEWISH CULTURE*

Though his parents had left Vilna in 1930, almost two decades before he was born, David Roskies writes in *Against the Apocalypse* that "its people and places were more real to [him] than those of Montreal," where he grew up. The avenues and alleyways of Vilna, the stories and songs of the workers, marketwomen, merchants, and intellectuals —all passed down to him via his mother's memory—had become *his* memory (12). So when, at the age of fourteen, Roskies discovered in his parents' library the chronicles of Vilna's destruction, the "city of his mind" disintegrated into the "ruined city of his mind." In scholarly retrospect, Roskies recognizes that in their textualization, these "ruined cities of the mind" also began to assume archetypal proportions, and that, by extension, these chronicles of destruction had become his own sacred texts.

Beautifully written and passionately argued, *Against the Apocalypse* is literary history of the highest order. Though his critical approach is somewhat programmatic, which accounts for a few of this work's omissions, Roskies has in the end assembled in English a vast body of Yiddish and Hebrew literary responses to catastrophe, paintings and drawings, and even monuments that have been almost completely neglected in English-language studies of Jewish letters. In fact, at times it seems that whether or not a given response had ever been addressed at length before in English determined its inclusion here. Given Roskies's own specialization in Yiddish writing, this means that the author bypasses the Anglo-Jewish World War I poet Isaac

*David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984. 392 pp. $9.95 paper.

Contemporary Literature XXVIII, 2 0010-7484/87/0002-0278 $1.50/0
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Rosenberg and the Prager Franz Werfel (whose *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* was practically the only response to the Armenian massacres in *or* out of Jewish culture) to concentrate on the pogrom novels of Yekutiel Berman (*The Ravagers at Noon*) and S. Y. Abramovitsh (*The Mare, or Pity the Poor Animal*), and the pogrom poems of Chaim Nachman Bialik, Moshe-Leyb Halpern, Peretz Markish, and H. L. Leivick. He also forgoes discussion of the oft-addressed Holocaust writers Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel in order to bring the ghetto-scribes Simkhe-Bunem Shayevitsh, Zelig Kalmanovitsh, Yitzhak Katzenelson, and Abraham Sutzkever into the center of Holocaust literary discourse, where they belong.

The subtitle of Roskies's book reminds us that "responses to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture" take many forms – from the liturgical to the literary, from the political to the practical. By choosing not to isolate the "purely" literary responses from their more "worldly" counterparts, Roskies emphasizes that since both literary and practical responses share common archetypal assumptions, they may never be wholly separable. As Roskies suggests, in fact, the literary and the practical may even be fatally interdependent; for as he painfully recognizes, the Nazis themselves demonstrated a frighteningly profound grasp of both "archetypal thinking" and its practical implications.

Self-trained as "Hebraicists" in order to annihilate the "Hebraic people," the Nazis understood well the historically-minded nature of the Jews. By reinstituting the Renaissance ghetto, the medieval yellow star, and the seventeenth-century Jewish councils, for example, the Nazis "created a world that was both utterly terrifying and strangely familiar" (191). By coordinating "actions" with the Jewish calendar, they further inflamed this same archetypal thinking and understanding among their victims. Their activities not only encouraged the victims to perceive their circumstances in light of the past and the ancient archetypes, but also encouraged paradigmatic responses to and understanding of their predicament. By thus lulling their victims into analogy, as it were, by recreating all previous persecutions, the Nazis were actually able to screen from view *the difference* of the present persecution until it was too late. Implicit in this study is the assumption that "life" and "life in writing" – catastrophe and our responses to it – have always interpenetrated and that traditional literary archetypes remember past destruction even as they shape our practical worldly responses to current crisis.

Whether or not it is possible to generate new responses to catastrophe in the frame of the ancient archetypes constitutes the essential

question of this study. For even with the dangers of archetypal thinking so apparent, Roskies finds no alternative: to think about, to remember, and to express events is to do so either archetypally or not at all. As long as events continue to enter the languages of the Jews, they are incorporated into a Jewish continuum and understood in inescapably Jewish ways. "With the emancipation and loss of Yiddish and Hebrew everywhere but in Israel," however, Roskies fears that "Jews have let slip the cultural strand that always tied each catastrophe to the one before. The Jewish people are at the point of turning the tables on themselves, of allowing the Holocaust to become the crucible of their culture" (9). Roskies has, therefore, "set out to challenge this apocalyptic tendency by arguing for the vitality of traditions of Jewish response to catastrophe, never as great as in the last hundred years" (9). By arguing "against the apocalypse," Roskies thus argues *for* the tradition. For as the author insists throughout this study, "The greater the catastrophe, the more the Jews have recalled the ancient archetypes."

It is appropriate, then, that Roskies prefaces the modern responses to catastrophe by recalling the earliest responses found in the Holy Scriptures, the source of nearly all subsequent tropes and archetypes. In "The Liturgy of Destruction," Roskies thus traces the ancient responses from the *churban* of the First Destruction in 587 B.C.E. in Lamentations to the Second Destruction in 70 A.D. and the Lamentations Rabbati, written in light of the first catastrophe. After examining at length the refiguring of scriptural archetypes in Lamentations, however, the author finds that even though earlier figures were indeed recalled by survivors of the destruction, it was not for their intrinsic appropriateness, but rather for their *in*adequacy as analogues: "When the survivors of the First Destruction (the fall of Jerusalem . . .) cast around them for comparisons, what they found seemed anything but consoling: 'The chastisement of my poor people / Was greater than the punishment of Sodom, / Which was overthrown in a moment, / Without a hand striking it' (Lam. 4:6)" (17–18).

From here, Roskies moves to the European Middle Ages and the crusader massacres of 1096 and 1146 in the Rhineland, represented in the Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades. In these writings, he finds again that even though the *akedah* (i.e., the binding of Isaac) is now most commonly recalled as archetype, it also is invoked in *its* inadequacy as a figure for understanding such suffering. Even as Roskies demonstrates the accumulative power of the ancient archetypes to frame new catastrophe, he proposes ultimately that part of the response is always a self-reflexive questioning of these

same archetypes on the part of the scribe, rabbi, or victim in the face of new catastrophe. As he shows, the bitter recriminations and outcries against God and tradition and against the covenantal explanations for catastrophe in works by Bialik, Halpern, Sutzkever, Katzenelson, and the rest are all—inescapably—*within* the tradition. In fact, Roskies even concludes that "inverting Scripture can [thus] be seen as a means of *keeping* faith" (19; emphasis added).

As Roskies is quick to add, however, once the scribes do any kind of violence to the sacred texts—through either gentle mimicry or outright rejection—the parodied text is never quite the same, for "it would always carry with it the pain of that momentary defiance" (69). By absorbing this parody, the sacred texts are thus enlarged and enriched—even reinvigorated—and the potential for parody is simultaneously codified. At this point, Roskies makes an important distinction between what he calls the "sacred parodists" of the tradition and the modern "sacrilegious parodists" of the tradition. On the one hand, even though the survivor-scribes of Lamentations may have declaimed bitterly, questioning the efficacy of the figures and archetypes available to them, they ultimately accepted the covenantal framework of guilt, punishment, and retribution; that is, while they may have questioned the paradigm, they accepted the meaning it conferred on their catastrophe. On the other hand, Roskies tells us, "the modern writers use parody to unmask the artificiality of the accepted conventions and to argue for radical change" (69).

By stopping here, however, Roskies does not take this distinction as far as he might, thereby avoiding a possibility that may not be as palatable for him. For even though the moderns may indeed reinvigorate the routine archetype by forcing new and extreme experience into its frame, perhaps radically changing it, unlike the sacred parodists of the past, the moderns repudiate both the mere figure of the archetype and the meaning it imposes on experience. That is, they may have used the traditional paradigms because these were the only ones available to them, even as they attempted to discard the meanings and explanations attending these same archetypes. More fully elaborated, this difference between "sacred parodists" and "sacrilegious parodists" suggests the possibility of using the forms of faith while simultaneously rejecting the tenets of faith. The modern writers may thus, by necessity, be a part of the tradition, but are *not* necessarily keeping faith in it, as Roskies suggests.

In order to argue against the Holocaust coming as an apocalyptic event—the "end of history," as it were—Roskies has demonstrated persuasively that even as the ancient archetypes are abused, creatively

reused, and repudiated altogether, scriptural figures like Sodom, the destruction of the First and Second Temples, and the *akedah* serve inescapably as reference points for the expression and interpretation of subsequent catastrophes. By the end of his book, however, other possibilities also begin to emerge, especially in his important section on the ghetto-scribes of the Holocaust, which ultimately tests his dialectic of Jewish response. For even though Roskies began his study by arguing "against the apocalypse"—that the greater the destruction, the more it is made to recall the ancient archetypes—he eventually proposes that the Holocaust was indeed a breaking point in history, a breach that could not be mended by the superimposition of the ancient archetypes. He even specifies the precise breaking point, which he finds in the ghetto writings of Shayevitsh, Katzenelson, and Sutzkever:

> It happened in 1942 when all the old strategies had already been tried: when the earlier tradition of realism and revolt allowed a writer like Goldin to portray the extreme isolation of the individual as an all-out attack on group norms, when secular writers such as Shayevitsh and Katzenelson cast about for traditional anchor and forced new meanings upon such classical concepts as *Kiddush Ha-shem,* exile, the triad of God-Israel-Torah . . .
>
> It happened when they took away the children, because without the children there was no hope whatsoever. The forcible conversion of the children in Cantonist times, so pathetically invoked in Shayevitsh's poem, could not compare with their wholesale annihilation. . . . The death of the children was the decisive omen of the End. (221)

The End. Of history? Of ancient archetypes? Of knowledge? Without clarifying this "End," Roskies not only seems to fight the current of his own argument "against apocalypse," but also risks a certain mystification of the Holocaust—something he has vehemently resisted before. For as the "End" of history and its archetypes, the Holocaust falls outside all paradigms of knowledge: it becomes unknowable. Yet as long as we *name* the events of this period (Holocaust, *shoah, churban*), remember them, or write them in any form, we also *know* them—however poorly, inappropriately, or dangerously. In this way, the Holocaust may not be a breach in knowledge or in the continuum so much as it is a traumatic breach in our uncritical *belief in* the kinds of knowledge we have of it. After such a breach, we may stand humbled in our limited epistemological resources and the tentative understanding they bring to the Holocaust, but we continue to know the Holocaust nevertheless.

Still, by locating the modern responses to catastrophe so surely in the larger continuum, Roskies articulates and sustains the power of "the tradition." And by treating this literature in terms of its deeper structures and guiding tropes, with practically no cumbersome methodological language, Roskies has elevated the critical discussion of this writing to a sophisticated and challenging level. For he has shown us that, as long as we are dependent on the "vocabulary" of our culture and its sustaining archetypes, it may not be possible to generate entirely new responses to catastrophe.

As he seems also to suggest in this approach, however, it may be possible now to respond from within traditional paradigms with self-critical awareness of where traditionally conditioned responses might lead in this world. If the modern responses to catastrophe have included the breakdown and repudiation of traditional forms and archetypes, then the postmodern response to catastrophe might be to recognize that even as we reject the absolute meanings and answers these forms provide, we are still unavoidably beholden to them for both our expression and our understanding of catastrophe. With this in mind, Roskies has shown that criticism and literary history can lead not only to further understanding of sacred and modern literary texts, but also to new understanding of the ways our lives and these texts are inextricably bound together. It seems only fitting that this insight in itself might now become part of the tradition.

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