

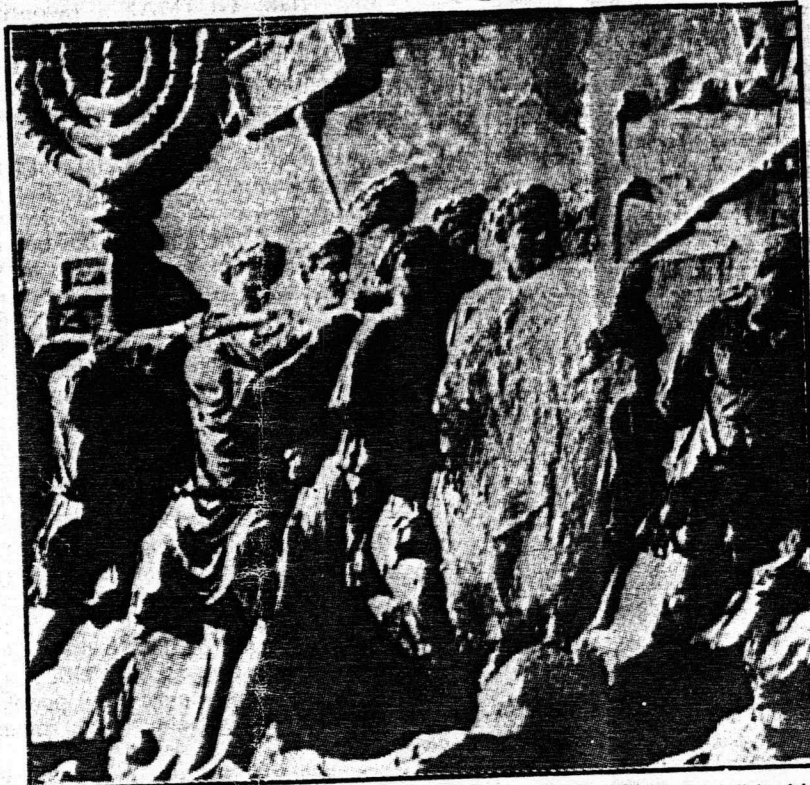
WHEN FIRST published in 1984 this book was excellently received and won the prestigious Phi Beta Kapa Ralph Waldo Emerson Award. Now it has been issued in paperback. The author, a professor of Yiddish and Hebrew literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, succeeds in combining impressive and wide-ranging erudition with deep personal concern, thus making it an academic work only in the positive sense of that term: well-researched, well-organized, intelligently written, and highly informative. It is, however, much more lively and creative than most academic writing.

Roskies' title and subtitle are telling. He advocates a view of Jewish culture *against the apocalypse*. He shows how, rather than being oriented towards the End of Days, the ultimate bottom line where everything will appear in its true measure, Judaism has traditionally rejected — and must continue to reject — that perspective, rebounding from even the most hideous catastrophes. As he writes in the personal introductory chapter, "Ruined Cities of the Mind": "With emancipation and the loss of Yiddish and Hebrew everywhere but in Israel, 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. I have 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... A book that on the surface deals with finality, endings, disruption, and desecration, is really a study in continuities and internal transformation."

WHILE THIS study is primarily literary, it also includes liturgy, folklore, and the plastic arts, using their texts and images to explore states of mind and spirit. Roskies' focus is on the modern period, though in his second chapter, "The Liturgy of Destruction," he discusses religious responses to the destructions of the Temple and other indignities of history from Roman times through the Middle Ages. His point, in brief, is that the destruction of the First Temple offered a "paradigm of destruction and desecration" which shaped Jewish response to every subsequent catastrophe.

One pattern of response was "dialectic:... the greater the immediate destruction, the more it was made to recall the ancient archetype." The other response is "sacred parody," viewing the "act of defilement as an

Transcending history



AGAINST THE APOCALYPSE: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture by David G. Roskies. Harvard University Press, 374 pp. \$9.95.

Jeffrey M. Green

assault on the system of sanctity as a whole."

IN SUBSEQUENT chapters, dealing with writers in Yiddish and Hebrew, essentially from Abramovitsh (Mendele) through Sutzkever and Uri Zvi Greenberg, Roskies argues that the traditional paradigm guided the responses even of those who rebelled against the tradition. "Thanks to Abramovitsh, parody came into its own as a preferred mode of response. Henceforth, the more closely linked a concept was to the central articles of traditional faith — to retribution and redemption — the more likely it was to be subverted, inverted, mimicked, and mocked in the face of catastrophe."

The violence of the period between the Russian pogroms of 1881 and the outbreak of the Second World War gave birth to a specific genre of Yiddish and Hebrew poetry: the pogrom poem, which "uncannily and unpredictably... rehabilitated the rabbinic strategies of favoring the subjective reality to the facts, the timeless configurations to the temporal details, the sacred texts

to the historical context. With this script in hand, the Jews of eastern Europe would enact the crucial transition from pogrom to Final Solution."

Another aspect of the destruction of traditional Jewish life which preceded the Nazi crimes, is "The Rape of the *Shtetl*," to which Roskies devotes his fifth chapter. Already in decline for economic and social reasons, the *shtetl* received its death blow in World War One and the Russian Revolution. The chapter ends with a discussion of Agnon's *A Guest for the Night* (1939), probably his greatest work. "Agnon's narrator returns to a home he can barely recognize, so vast is the damage to life and property wrought by the war... [His] persona is caught between 'nostalgia and nightmare' [Professor Arnold Band's terms], between the town of Shibush in its glory (his lost childhood and youth) and Shibush in decline, precisely mirrored in his mid-life crisis."

THE REVIEWER is tempted to follow Roskies' discussions of Lamed Shapiro, Ansky, Babel, Sholem Aleichem, and other figures in Eastern European Jewish literature, as they reel from the blows of history and attempt to surmount them in art. In each case the discussion offers us an insight into the writer and his art and then focuses that insight on the changing Jewish

condition in modern times. Resisting that temptation, however, mention the and poignant discussion of Yiddish folk songs and melodies in the ghettos during the caustic: "Just as the melodies mitigate the horror by shared memories of the lyrics insist on the reality so cruel that it language itself."

Chapter Eight, "The Ghetto," tells about the "gade" of the Vilna ghetto. It mentions the work of Samuel Ringelblum and Emanuel Ringelblum and other writers and poets to record and understand what was happening to the Jewish community. The book's title, "The Book of the Apocalypse," is a study of the work of Abraham Sutzkever, the Vilna, whose "sense of collective responsibility" to emerge while he was in the ghetto.

Roskies gives us a sense of Sutzkever's poetry, showing that poet is not available to the talent and experience are likely to follow him. He had this to say to the greater the loss, the need to transcend the memory, emphatic in its beauty."

The tenth and final book, "Jews on the Edge," discusses "the emergence of a new emblem of Jewish culture." Zvi Greenberg is discussed, for in 1939 *Zvi in Front of the Cross*.

Roskies writes, "A Jew perhaps thought he would utter and would not even dare to proclaim that 'Europe was a 'kingdom where the hatred directly from the inescapable clamor

Later, "from poetic nature led him to pursue all further action: destruction far greater even he could implement... His example... that the loss of smaller price to purchase romance with more loss of life. Faith even the ancient claimed, but the could not be over Greenberg was silenced how to mourn

AFTER tracing Uri's career, Roskies turns to Samuel Hirszenbe

20/9

Dear Roskiesim -

In case you didn't get a copy of this review, here it is. I'm very glad I got a chance to go over the book again and get an overview of it. I am all the more impressed upon this 2nd perusal.

When will the JPS anthology be published? I've submitted an NYER sample to Bonny. I hope she likes it. Meanwhile I'm struggling to turn Bar-Tal's clogged prose into somewhat less clogged English. You need an anti-coagulant!

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the works of Ephraim Moses Lilien, Issachar Ber Ryback, and Marc Chagall, whose representations of crucified Eastern European Jews address "a particularist message to a universal audience." He also discusses a kind of insincerity, exemplified in Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument, a sculpture depicting Mordecai Anielewicz in a heroic posture "so blatantly derivative that it undermines its own pretense. 'We too have heroes!' is what it is really saying."
He also contrasts Wiesel and Singer to Sutzkever and Greenberg. "Whereas [the latter] responded to the Holocaust by excluding all glorified mention of Jesus, downplaying their earlier anger against the passivity of the Jewish people in order to project a collective image of holiness, Wiesel and Singer edited out the shared expressions of faith in order to highlight the terrifying isolation of the postwar individual."
Roskies concludes with a discussion of two more painters, Samuel Bak and Yosel Bergner. They are both shown to be emblematic of the "radical break that occurred in the modern period." The Holocaust has been "inaugurated into its own archetypal nature," and this book is a record of the Jews' "ability in the midst and in the wake of apocalypse, to know the apocalypse, express it, mourn it, and transcend it."
Although I have quoted extensively from it and tried to survey its contents, I do not feel I have done justice to this fine work, and I can well imagine other reviewers singling out quite different passages, for it is a book nearly as rich and diverse as the culture it surveys.
Readers of the book review columns of this paper are well aware that dozens of books about the Holocaust appear every month, and cynics might begin to wonder why we need such a vast body of studies. I am far from being such a cynic, yet I hasten to add that David Roskies' book is far more than just "another book about the Holocaust," in two primary respects.
First, Roskies leads us into knowledge of the rich Jewish life which existed in Eastern Europe before the Nazis destroyed it, and so we see that we are talking about more than a crime against persons: a species of human culture has been wiped out in its native environment. Second, Roskies is concerned with the future, what the Jews can do now. His "answers" are those of the great poets, writers, and artists whom he studies, not the narrow platforms of one ideology or another, but the deep, creative drive to act against the apocalypse. □

Zvi Greenberg's
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g's "Golus," and