

Review of: David Roskies, Against the Apocalypse

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David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

David G. Roskies has written an ambitious and comprehensive book that traces Jewish responses to historical tragedies since the fall of the First Temple. Culminating in the thesis that what we now call Holocaust literature exists within a firmly established tradition of liturgical, literary and historical archetypes, Roskies examines a broad range of texts. In the process, he must reconcile a series of apparently contradictory claims: that the Holocaust is unique, although responses to it are

traditional; that it represents both a break with the past and is part of an ongoing tragedy; that writers returned to archetypal images as a way of creating new archetypes.

The creation of "new archetypes," oxymoronic though it may seem in literary terms, is linked here to a continuous need to re-shape an inherited tradition of response in the face of new horrors. The artistic process, argues Roskies, anticipated the Holocaust in its variety of responses to catastrophe and thus belies the contemporary view of the Second World War as an apocalyptic event. The strength of the apocalyptic view lies in the understandable desire to subvert the tragic sense of Jewish history; a rupture, cataclysmic though it may be, is unassimilable as a link in an endless chain of tragedy.

Analyzing ancient texts as well as modern Hebrew and Yiddish prose and poetry in the language of contemporary literary criticism, this book combines textual exegesis with sweeping summaries of historical and cultural trends. Modern writers addressed in some detail include Babel, Bialik, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, Markish, Katzenelson and, especially, Avrom Sutzkever. The range of material is more impressive than the reading of any single text, illumination of an author or theoretical claims in the book. The latter, in fact, are overshadowed by the panoramic scope of Roskies's enterprise and the sheer number of citations.

The book's scholarship is a model of the ways in which secular and religious views, Yiddish and Hebrew, ancient and contemporary sources can be combined. In addition to establishing historical trends and major themes, Roskies is sensitive to the changes in mood and literary mode that marked different historical periods. His discussion of the responses to the Kishinev pogrom is especially significant here since it serves as a turning point in the literary documentation of Jewish catastrophe. Bialik's selective reportage and desire to "desacralize history in God's own name" (p. 89) become the new standard of poetry freed from theology. The secular writing within Polish ghettos, Katzenelson's quest for the epic, Sutzkever's focus on Vilna and those closest to him create archetypes based on the old, but are transformed by different historical realities.

Beyond the scholarly evaluations of thematic developments, Roskies's book emerges as an often surprisingly personal account. It traces the author's own sense of what one may uncover when "reading oneself back into history" (p. 10). His engagement with the material and with Jewish history emerges most explicitly in the introduction and more subtly throughout the book. *Against the Apocalypse* moves beyond both liturgy and literature, concluding with discussions of visual artists (Chagall, Bak, Bergner) and their use of Jewish images and metaphors. Whatever the primary or secondary material, the sense of an involved scholar personally connected to the themes and nuances of response remains constant. Finally, in his rejection of the apocalyptic view of modern Jewish history, Roskies insists on a vibrant interpretation of Hebrew and Yiddish belles-lettres, political expressions and, especially, a view of Jewish culture as continuing, viable, cohesive within its variety, and even comprehensible.