

Modern Judaism 10/85

David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). 374 pages.

It is rare that one reads a work of literary and cultural criticism which is written in a human and humane manner, written in a personal tone which reveals the voice of the critic, not as a professional academic, but as participant-observer. David Roskies's study of modern Jewish responses to catastrophe is such a book. Roskies's study has been widely acknowledged as one of the most striking works on Jewish literature and culture, winning Phi Beta Kappa's Emerson Award for the best work of criticism of 1984. But it is also by far the best work published in the question of the literature written about the Holocaust because it places the writing about the Holocaust in the tradition of Jewish thinkers dealing with history. More than even the recent spate of books about Jews and history (as object and as subject), this present study sees the writing of fiction as one of the primary modes of shaping and reshaping the Jewish sense of history. And for the Jews, history is the same as catastrophe.

Roskies' book is also the best study so far of modern Yiddish literature and culture. (I say modern, but what Roskies describes is the center of the Yiddish corpus.) More so than even Dan Miron, Roskies sees Yiddish as much as Hebrew as the mirror of Eastern European Jewish experiences. Like Miron, he sees literature as one of the primary responses of a people robbed of any political structures through which to focus

their reactions to historical events. The written word is, for the people of the Book, the central (and often sole) means by which the unbearable continuity of history can be controlled. For the act of writing, as Roskies stresses over and over, is a creative manner of dealing with the inexpressible by reducing it to another link in the history of the Jews. Whether or not this continuity is a reflex of a deep understanding and knowledge of Jewish history or the result of the most superficial awareness of its contours is therefore unimportant. Such a movement has been taking place in "Jewish" letters (whether written in English, French, Hebrew or, indeed, even Yiddish) over the past decades in attempting to place the Holocaust of 1933-45 into (or remove it from) the continuity of the Jewish past. This constant recreation and extension of the history of Jewish persecution creates a matrix of experience. It is this ability to generate such a matrix (perhaps more than even the matrix itself) which is quintessentially "Jewish," in Roskies's presentation.

Roskies's point of departure for his study is the images of destruction which haunt the Yiddish writers during the first World War. He centers on the work of S. Ansky, not his *Dybbuk*, but rather his ethnological studies of Eastern Jewry undertaken at the point of its destruction. Ansky, a Westernized Jew, with a deep identification to Western, specifically French culture, turns to the tradition of Eastern European Jewry to document it in what was perceived as its demise. Ansky, who later shaped one of the legends he recorded in the quasi-Expressionist Yiddish drama which made him world-famous, is an exemplary case for someone whose sense of the implications of the past shaped his understanding of the future. But his sense of the past was not a traditionally Eastern European Jewish one.

Over and over again, from Bialik to I.J. Singer, from folksongs to the highly stylized poetry of Abraham Stuzkever, from the purified *fin-de-siècle* images of Ephraim Moses Lilien to Yosl Bergner's surrealist paintings, Roskies returns to the use of images taken from secular which means, of course, Christian society, and their incorporation into the historical self-representation of the Jews as objects of persecution. Ansky does this in his very undertaking — an ethnological survey of the Eastern Jews is a structure of perception borrowed from Western anthropology, which becomes atuned, in the late nineteenth-century to the fact that many of the groups of outsiders which fascinated them had vanished or being absorbed into the broader culture. What he recreates in his play is the idea of continuity of Jewish experience, but represented within a form (and indeed a content) which is Western, Christian, experimental, modernist, or whatever label one wishes to apply to it. Ansky's *Dybbuk* is no more a part of the traditional vocabulary of Eastern European Jewry than Martin Buber's retelling of the Hasidic tales. But like Buber's tales it becomes part of this tradition by placing itself within the historical consciousness of Eastern European Jewry. Thus, today we understand

Eastern European Jewry as much through the modernist tradition of Ansky as through the traditional Purim plays.

But what remains "Jewish" in all of these undertakings is the question of the role of the Jews as the exemplary martyrs of Christian society. The Jews seem to be a necessary presence in Christian society to fulfill the need for a locus where all of the evils sensed within the dominant group can be projected. The acceptance by the Jews of such a role (and its inclusion within the traditional understanding of the role of the martyr) is one of the most frightening moments documented by Roskies. Roskies shows how the Christian images of martyrdom as incorporated within Jewish consciousness provides a structure for Jewish experience. However, one of the only themes which Roskies's study does not touch on is that of the nature of martyrdom as raised by Rashi. In a striking moment, Rashi asks whether or not the suffering of the Jews could be in atonement for the sins of the Christians. The Jews as a collective presence become a surrogate for Christ. And this in a Jewish historical tradition, not a Christian one. Roskies's analysis of the complex image of the crucified martyrs of Kishinev (the Jew as Christ surrogate) thus has a longer history in Jewish tradition than even he documents. [For a detailed analysis of this tradition see J.E. Rembaum's essay on the "Development of a Jewish Exegetical Tradition for Is. 53," *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982), 289-312.]

It is a bit superficial to recommend this book to your attention. If you have any interest in modern Jewish history, literature, and culture; any interest in Yiddish or Hebrew or, indeed, in modern Jewish painting; or, if you are simply interested in reading a strikingly well-written work, you will read this book, whether I recommend that you do or not. This book is now the measure against which all further studies of Jewish culture will be compared. One might add an endnote to this review: I have reviewed a number of literary studies over the past few years and have had to add an obligatory sentence about the poor presentation of the study. This is a beautifully printed work, with the works of art (in black and white) clearly and elegantly reproduced. It is a book well worth its price.

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