

April 20

Dear David,

I am writing this to you from our Passover retreat, watching the waves lap the Florida shore and the pelicans dive for their dinner. It gives some perspective.

There seemed to be so much left unsaid after your visit to Jerusalem. But it was wonderful to see you and to sit at the "round table" with you, embattled knights struggling with the pen...

I loved your Proof texts article--written in a lucid but elegant style and organizing a vast amount of material around a central axis.

The above is not meant as vacuous praise to offset my criticism (enclosed) of your other essay, to which I am not a disinterested party. I welcome the opportunity to debate the issues with you privately, pre-publication, rather than later, in the public forum, so that if I can convince you of any inaccuracies or misplaced emphases, you may take them under advisement. It is important to me, personally as well as professionally, that you apply your insights and sensibilities to what is really there--since, as you know, you are one of the very few people whose opinions I really value.

I will try to call you when we are in New York en route to Israel (Apr. 26). But if I fail to reach you, please keep in touch. We look forward to seeing you both this summer.

With love as always,

Idra

P.S. Our phone no. here is 305-784-2522.

Comments on Review article for Prooftexts:

With as much objectivity as I can muster, I offer you some comments which might in some small way help to transform a glorified book review that becomes by turns strident in tone and extreme in its polemic, and enmired in minutiae which are uninteresting to anybody not intimately familiar with these books--into a significant and unique contribution to the critical discourse on this subject.

The first page is a masterpiece. And your two first points constitute, I think, major insights that should be both enlarged upon and rendered more subtle (I would like to see these issues become the focus of the essay you would write for the small volume we are preparing selectively from the conference proceedings; Hillel will supply details). The theological or pontifical tone in which this literature is being discussed needs to be exposed and you do it very well. The issue of writer as "survivor" vs. writer as "victim" is very problematic and, I think, should be handled more delicately. The question I raised in our discussion must be addressed in this context: does Sutzkever, (or, if you will, Ilona Karmel) as a victim writing in the ghetto merit more attention as "authentic" poet than Sutzkever writing in the tranquility of his "after-life"? (In this connection you do me a serious disservice in claiming (p. 5) that in all "220 pp." of my text I find no place for the "real thing"--cf. pp. 15-20 and passim in my book. True, the main emphasis is on literature written afterwards, for reasons which I enumerate. One does not preempt the other, but I think the questions we ask and the critical tools we apply are very different. It is, anyway, a major and acknowledged premise of my study that what is written after is catastrophe contemplated at a distance and that all these writers are, even as survivors, presenting a vision and not a reconstruction of what they experienced.) Furthermore, in your eagerness to find someone who has examined the literature of ghettos and camps (maybe that should be your task) you place Szeintuch on a pedestal without really dealing with the serious problem that his lack of literary distinctions should raise. There is generally here a lack of balance which actually diminishes the power of your thesis, I think.

P. 7: I have not intended to make the claim for uniqueness in the form that you present it, and if it so appears, then I would count it as a major failing. Most of the introductory chapter is devoted to a kind of genealogy of the literary responses to violence, relying heavily on Hoffman, Fussell and others. See also the discussion of documentary literature within the broader context of contemporary literature. The "primacy of shared experience" which generates a "transcultural" literature does not presuppose uniqueness in the sense of a total absence of literary antecedents. It is more a matter of emphasis. Borowski may or may not have read his Babel (the claim is probably unverifiable). I think, anyway, that there is a vast gulf between them. I also tried to argue with the unexamined assertion of other critics that Borowski has "forced upon the reader the accomplice's point of view." But out of the confrontation of inherited traditions and unprecedented experience something different was created--which I have tried to show has its parallels in responses to other contemporary catastrophes.

I must say I find your argument about the women writers of survivor novels confusing and, to the extent that I understand it, unconvincing. The category, "pale of collective Jewish suffering" is as dangerously monolithic as what you criticize in my use of the term "tradition." The point that I tried to make is that thousands--millions-- of assimilated Jews suffered because they were Jews and that the literary expression of their private ordeal is no less "authentic" than the collective voice of Katznelson or Sutzkever or (!) Wiesel. Langfus was a fugitive, Karmel survived at least two camps--how can their novels be disqualified as being "marginal" rather than "paradigmatic?" And what of writers like Becker or Fuks, who I believe are writing in the same genre and do not ^{quite} fit the description of "young women who looked Aryan... had some money at their disposal" etc.? Finally, I am not claiming that these novels are more representative than the novels of Schwarz-Bart, the poems of Celan or Sachs, but that they reflect a different spiritual reality that generates specific literary forms.

Pp. 10-11: I accept, generally, your criticism of the assumption of a monolithic "Tradition" which can be applied as a yardstick. It is not accurate that I do not build on "a prior body of criticism" (cf. references to Habermann et. al.). I do think, however, that by delineating the collective literary response to the Holocaust within the "lamentation" tradition I broke critical ground which had been passed over. The more detailed, painstaking and subtle analysis is left to you, Mintz, and others. I think it is deceptively simplistic to claim that I find that Schwarz-Bart, Sachs and Steiner have "betrayed the Hebraic spirit" or that Singer is canonized as a "paragon of the Tradition revitalized." And it is downright misleading to claim that I have written that the "symbolic inversion" dates from the modern era or from the Holocaust alone (I have shown on pp. 100-1 and n. 20, p. 234 that this can be traced back at least as far as the Mekhilta of R. Ishmael-- and dwelt at some length on Bialik's seminal inversions and their influence on the tradition).

What disturbs me most in your "public" reading of my book, unlike your private comments to me over the years, is that there seems to be a hidden agenda which ^{is important in itself} dictates your ascribing things to the context that are simply not there and overlooking others that are. I am not asking for flattery from a friend, but for a fairer, more careful reading than this review contains. And for your own sake, David, less concern with the minutiae and a broader development of some of the major critical issues you raise--which could constitute an important contribution to a field which needs a more solid theoretical framework and serious self-examination.