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- Sam B. Girgus. *The New Covenant: Jewish Writers and the American Idea*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984. 222 pp. \$19.95.  
David G. Roskies. *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. 374 pp. \$20.00.  
Robert McAfee Brown. *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to all Humanity*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983. 244 pp. \$16.95.  
Ezra Greenspan. *The Schlemiel Comes to America*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1983. 258 pp. \$18.50.

These four books under review have three things in common: 1) they deal with Jewish writing and Jewish writers; 2) they are written by academicians; 3) they each propose to work out a thesis. But the differences among them are more numerous and striking.

As expected, Roskies examines the works of the great Jewish writers such as S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Mocher Seforim), Chaim Nachman Bialik, I. L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Babel, S. Y. Agnon, I. B. Singer, and Elie Wiesel. But he also scrutinizes less popular figures such as David Bergelson, Peretz Markish, S. Ansky, Israel Rabon, Yitzhak Katzenelson, Abraham Sutzhever, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Der Nister (Pinkes Kahanovitsh). In his last chapter, "Jews on the Cross," he focuses on Samuel Hirszenberg, Issachar Ber Ryback, Marc Chagall, Marcel Jano, Nathan Rapoport and others who painted and sculpted their views and visions of Jewish catastrophe.

Roskies concludes his examination of literature, song, and art by pointing out that "catastrophe . . . has always been a part of rethinking the past." Moreover, he says, "at the point of unassimilable horror, the new archetype is born." Just as the destructions of the Temple provided an archetype for Jews, hundreds of years later the Holocaust, "the new destruction . . . was lifted from the straight line of allusions back to the old archetypes and inaugurated into its own archetypal nature." In a sense, Roskies believes that catastrophe for the Jews has always, paradoxically, served to remind them of destruction and creation. For "in the midst and in the wake of the apocalypse" Jews have learned how "to know the apocalypse, express it, mourn it, and transcend it."

Roskies' seminal book goes well beyond the typical study of Holocaust literature. He has woven this literature into a new context and in the process has provided scholars with significantly new perspectives.

A contemporary discussion of Holocaust literature without reference to Elie Wiesel would be elliptical. Writing about Wiesel or about writers writing about Wiesel is never easy. After all, Wiesel has "been there" and returned to testify, to "bear witness." He has come back as a survivor from within the abyss and now talks to us, "the others," who haven't even stepped up to the edge and peered over the rim. How are we to respond to those who examine Wiesel's writings critically, linguistically, historically, theologically, personally? We can of course use what expertise is at our command to dispute or confirm historic events concerning Auschwitz and Treblinka. We can debate the efficacy of language Wiesel uses. We can also debate endlessly the complex theological matters raised in Wiesel's writings. But on the personal level we are often at a loss. Wiesel has been there and has returned, and he has told stories—many stories.

How does one deal with these stories? They are either meaningful or they are not. They either offer up crucial questions and answers concerning Jews, non-Jews, the Holocaust, or they do not. Analogously, what does one do with the parables of Jesus? With the stories by Socrates? With compelling stories by lesser figures?

Robert McAfee Brown, Protestant theologian, teacher, scholar, writer, decided to go back to Elie Wiesel's stories, his sayings. In *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to all Humanity*, Brown begins every chapter with a Wiesel story or saying or something quoted by Wiesel. Brown says he did not want to write a "critical" appraisal of Wiesel. Rather, he wished to "confront him at first hand" so that the readers of this book could do the same. But he has compartmentalized Wiesel's writings and thoughts to help his readers respond more easily. At the outset Brown notes that Wiesel's corpus presents five moral dilemmas that ultimately question the decency of people, the silence of the world, humanity's indifference, belief in goodness

Girgus seems at his best in his long discussion of Abraham Cahan, *The Jewish Daily Forward*, and *The Rise of David Levinsky*. He is less persuasive with his other literary figures. There is an uncomfortably flavor of advocacy journalism throughout his monograph. In his last chapter his genteel polemic against Podhoretz and neo-conservatism as an aberration of the new covenant is unconvincing because it lacks supporting evidence.

David G. Roskies's *Against the Apocalypse* is deceptive. Deceptive because it is so well written (often in a comfortable conversational tone) that one may not immediately recognize the ubiquitous breadth and depth of scholarship throughout its ten chapters, thirty-seven pages of notes, and ten pages of primary bibliography.

Writers as different as Elie Wiesel and Emil Fackenheim have contended with responses to the Holocaust. For Wiesel one response has been silence; but more often it took the form of "silence, and the tension between silence and the need of the witness to speak," as Terence des Pres has demonstrated. For Fackenheim the Holocaust was "Hell surpassed." Therefore, Fackenheim has been constantly tormented in his search for a religious/philosophical response. Alvin Rosenfeld in *A Double Dying* insisted that after Auschwitz "we know things that before could not be imagined." Thus traditional critical approaches such as Freudian, Marxist, formalist, linguistic simply will not work for Holocaust literature.

David Roskies does not deny that the Holocaust was unique. However, he tries to show that it fits into the continuum of Jewish cultural response to catastrophe in the modern period, from the 1840s to 1948. His examination of this response leads him to close readings and classifications of literature by Jews who wrote in Yiddish, Hebrew, English, Polish, Russian. But he also analyzes song, painting, and sculpture.

Early on he asks the important questions: "Is the Holocaust an event or an Event? [Note the capital E.] Does it admit of analogy or is it sui generis, an indescribable manifestation of evil that stands at the cataclysmic end of history?" He answers by emphasizing his own approach, that is, "to reach back over" the Holocaust "in search of meaning, language, and song." This method, he believes, "is a much more promising endeavor than to profess blind faith or apocalyptic despair."

Roskies reminds us that Jews "have let slip the cultural strand that always tied each catastrophe to the one before." He is afraid that they may allow the Holocaust to become their pivotal event, and so he has written this book, which he capsulizes as follows:

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. And responses to the Holocaust do not mark the end of the process. Elsewhere in the Jewish world, where the war still goes on, traditions of remembrance have been revived, and that too is part of my story.

In an early chapter Roskies draws upon the Bible and Biblical commentaries to document a "liturgy of destruction." A bit later he would distinguish between ancient and modern responses to catastrophe this way: "The liturgical models of prophecy, midrash, piyyut (synagogue poetry), and chronicle had placed greater stress on the repeatability of the pattern as it confirmed the archetypes and had ignored the time-specific location of the catastrophic events. The moderns reversed the emphasis, stressing the event itself, its social and political context."

and God, and the possibility of building a better world. Given the enormity of these questions, merely glossed here, Brown feels forced, obligated to respond, and thus proposes his book, a dialogue, which is to take the form of listening to Wiesel's stories and commenting.

In the process Brown uses the journey metaphor, whether he emphasizes particulars of Wiesel's novels, stories, essays, talks, or whether he focuses on concentration camps, Jews, Christians; or whether he wrestles with Christian responses to the Holocaust. He starts with "a journey of the self." Then he continues with journeys he labels moral, historical, theological, Christian, human, and, finally, "an unlikely journey."

Brown's "dialogue" overflows with illustrations from twenty volumes in which Wiesel has documented the dark side of man. But it ends, as does Wiesel, optimistically, a sober, humane affirmation of life, and with what both Wiesel and Brown conclude is "a small measure of victory." Within Brown's stated limits he has provided a sympathetic and helpful guide to the reading of Elie Wiesel.

*The Schlemiel Comes to America* really deserves a more comprehensive title: perhaps *Superficial Studies of Sholem Aleichem, Abraham Cahan, Henry Roth, Daniel Fuchs, Nathanael West, Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth*. In his Preface Greenspan acknowledged his debt to books on the schlemiel by Ruth Wisse and Sanford Pinsker, but he does almost nothing with them in the course of his "study."

He apparently realizes that his book is mistitled when he says his primary purpose is to comment on style, sensibility, historical and social context. He does comment—briefly—as he leads into and away from his many lengthy plot summaries, blissfully unaware, it seems, that he has commented superficially on that which has been already examined meticulously by others well before his book was spawned. His brief Conclusion is as much a misnomer as is the book's title. It should be called "Unrelated Afterthoughts."

LESLIE FIELD



Frederick R. Karl. *American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation*. New York: Harper & Row, 1983. 637 pp. \$32.50.

Any review of Frederick R. Karl's monumental *American Fictions* threatens to become a catalogue of the book's strengths. The amount that Karl has read—and absorbed—is staggering. So thorough is his knowledge of American culture, so firm his grasp of social trends, and so detailed and discriminating his readings of individual novels, such as James McElroy's *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), that *American Fictions* looks like the product of many fine minds rather than one. Interpreting culture broadly, Karl records the impact upon the national sensibility of the unlikely Jackie Robinson and George Shearing. Shearing, the jazz pianist from England who first won fame in the early 1950s, represented for many the blind man who

sees more than the sighted. By overcoming virulent racism as the first black major leaguer, Robinson revived the primordial white American suspicion, dating back to the Puritans, that nonwhites live more fully and truly. In his excellent chapter on female-written fiction, Karl shows the influence of both Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 President's Commission on the Status of Women upon American women writers in the following decade.

Dip nearly anywhere into this rich broth of a book and you'll find something flavorsome and nourishing. Here is plenty, indeed. Karl makes you rethink books we've read and thought known; he reminds you of truths forgotten; tracing forebears and establishing artistic contexts, he makes new connections and introduces some exciting ideas of his own. Meriting special attention is his rehearsal of the process by which American writers have adapted European modernism to native traditions. The cuts, convolutions, and other distortions of John Hawkes's *The Cannibal* (1949) portray the phenomenology of war more accurately than *The Naked and the Dead* despite being only a quarter of the length of Mailer's more conventionally told 1948 novel. The pressure conveyed by *The Cannibal* also tallies with the conflict and antirationality undergirding American life in general. Arguing from works such as William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955) and James Purdy's *The Nephew* (1960), Karl discloses the prominence of forgery and counterfeiting in the fiction of the 1950s, a conservative era where closed, formal systems prevailed and where material possession and respectability outranked self-expression. A later chapter finds fugitive American vitality in obscure, inaccessible works such as Rudolph Wurlitzer's *Nog* (1969) and Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* (1979).

Careful to note the discontinuities in American tradition, Karl shows basic fictional and social values rooted deeply in the American past. He says in his conclusion, for instance, "The dominant form of American fiction must be rejection." His judgment holds up well. Both the Puritans in the 1620s and the political radicals of the late 1960s sought rebirth and renewal by going back to the soil, by rejecting sophistication for fundamental life styles, and by regulating their lives in accord with basic spiritual truths. Despite its obliqueness, Hawkes's *Second Skin* (1964) belongs in the same Edenic tradition of American letters that includes Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The search for fullness of being amid pastoral values makes baseball a lost paradise in Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) and Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968). In *Catch-22* (1961) and Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast* (1982), it sends characters to Sweden and Honduras.

Like these characters, Karl also devotes tremendous energy to the quest for an America commensurate with his ideal vision. But how many will join him on his quest? Produced as 595 double-columned pages, the text of *American Fictions* cautions as it beckons. Harper & Row's decision to print the book in double-column format couldn't have pleased Karl. But then Karl's delivery of a 1200-page typescript couldn't have brought his publisher joy. Let's hope that its production doesn't relegate *American Fictions* to the reference shelves. Here is a work that belongs within close reach of all students of American culture.

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