

Transcending history

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



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

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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, I will, however, mention the fascinating and poignant discussion of original Yiddish folk songs set to old melodies in the ghettos during the Holocaust: "Just as the melody serves to mitigate the horror by recalling the shared memories of the group, the lyrics insist on the radical break, on a reality so cruel that it almost defies language itself."

Chapter Eight, "Scribes of the Ghetto," tells about the "Paper Brigade" of the Vilna ghetto, Emmanuel Ringelblum and Yitzhak Katzenelson of the Warsaw Ghetto, and other writers and poets who sought to record and understand what was happening to the Jews. The following chapter, "The Burden of Memory," is a study of the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, a survivor from Vilna, whose "sense of himself as the bearer of collective memory began to emerge while he was still in the ghetto."

Roskies gives us generous samples of Sutzkever's poetry in translation, showing that poet making choices not available to those without his talent and experience: "Though few are likely to follow his lead, especially now, with the death of his culture, he had this to say to all the others: the greater the loss, the greater one's need to transcend it with selective memory, emphatic rhyme, and natural beauty."

The tenth and final chapter of this book, "Jews on the Cross," takes up "the emergence of Jesus as the emblem of Jewish catastrophe." Uri Zvi Greenberg is central to that discussion, for in 1922 he wrote *Uri Zvi in Front of the Cross*.

Roskies writes, "What a traditional Jew perhaps thought but would never dare utter and what a secular Jew would not even dare think, Greenberg proclaimed for all to hear: 'Europe was a 'kingdom of the cross' where the hatred of Jews grew... directly from the church and the inescapable clamor of its bells.'"

Later, "from poetry his passionate nature led him to politics, but when all further action was eclipsed by a destruction far greater than anything even he could imagine, he fell silent... His example shows... clearly... that the loss of faith was a much smaller price to pay for the Jews' romance with modernity than the loss of life. Faith could be regained, even the ancient land could be reclaimed, but the death of a people could not be overcome. And so Greenberg was silent - until he discovered how to mourn."

AFTER tracing Uri Zvi Greenberg's career, Roskies turns to paintings: Samuel Hirszenberg's "Golus," and

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. □