The Holocaust According to the Literary Critics


"Ask now and see, was there ever such a holocaust as this since the days of Adam?" The question posed by Eliezer bar Nathan in the breathing space between the First and Second Crusades has resurfaced with especial force in our own generation. For unlike our ancestors who expected so little from their neighbors, we had all our hopes invested in the promise of secular society, even turning in our God for other gods. Then, as now, the catastrophe has brought about an upsurge of mysticism, a turning to the demonic for explanation. Our thinkers reared on science and positivism convert to a kind of religious syncretism that brings together Kabbalah and Christianity, Midrash and Manichaeism. No words seem to do justice to what our eyes have seen. We dare not even utter the designated word for the murder of our people and speak instead of the Event, something so ineffable that, like the name of God, it can be invoked only by a double euphemism. If our ancestors found the Akedah, multiplied a thousandfold, to signify their mass martyrdom, we grope with borrowed terms to express the sense of unprecedented horror: the Mysterium Tremendum, the mass crucifixion, the Gotterdammerung. Then, as now, new words were coined, only ours derive from concentration camp Esperanto and from Nazi-Deutsch, not from the Holy Tongue. Then, as now, the beloved cities of Europe became cities of slaughter, and a few place names were selected to represent the many. The landscape of our death is dotted with so many ghettos, camps and extermination sites that Warsaw, Auschwitz and Babi Yar have come to be used as mnemonics. Then, as now, history was transformed into liturgy and the victims assumed religious significance.
Bearing eloquent testimony to the profound religious search that the Holocaust has engendered is a spate of recent books on the literature of the Holocaust. Together they shape a new catechism and commentary that are totally preoccupied with death and victimization and only secondarily concerned with their actual topic. Never have professors of English so taken to the pulpit, delivering themselves of hell-fire sermons and liturgical laments. Standing on the Mount of Ashes, Edward Alexander contends with the Chosen People who refuse to accept the teleological message of the Holocaust: its inexorable link to the State of Israel and its absolute validation of Zionism. In far more muted tones, Alvin Rosenfeld instructs us to treat the memoirs, poetry and prose as “holy text,” as not “literary” in the common sense of that term. Arnost Lustig assures us that a certain work of Holocaust fiction “can stand comparison with the best written parts of the Bible” (Sherwin & Ament, p. 306). These ceremonies of the spirit come complete with the ministrations of a High Priest who presides over a school of apostles known as Survivors and everything they say is recorded as Scripture. Judging from these accounts, the real arena of struggle was not between Jews and the Nazi machine, but between Jews and their silent God. In true homiletic fashion, sources are brought out of context, past and present are fused together and the most disparate sources are pressed into action.

The claim for uniqueness has become an article of faith. The Holocaust is viewed as different not only in degree but also in kind. It is as distinct from the annals of warfare as from the prior record of Jewish suffering. Distinct and unknowable. This leaves only the living witnesses to hold on to. They alone can recall to mind the “Holocaust Kingdom” and “Concentrationary Universe.” And when the most prominent witness among us proclaims that only one who has been there has the right to speak, and when he chooses to recast his experiences into a theology of paradox, it is no wonder that his person and message have come to eclipse the Event itself. Elie Wiesel, whose name figures on the cover of A Double Dying, is made to serve as the paradigmatic survivor. As someone who has “actually lived through Hell,” the survivor is endowed with almost mystical powers and is placed well above the real victims. The survivor, according to this scheme, lives with a double burden, bearing witness both to the death of man and to the death of the idea of humanity. Even disabled by this double indemnity, the survivor somehow manages to reach beyond despair into a realm of ultimate meaning. Those who were murdered could hardly be expected to apprehend the transcendental purpose of their deaths. At best, their writings offer only one level of meaning. Thus, memoirs written after the war are preferred to contemporary diaries, for the memoirs express a double burden, that of recalling the horror while at the same time striving for a moral and psychic reconciliation (Rosenfeld, p. 53). Canons of criticism have rarely been more abused as when myth displaces history and the survivor displaces the murdered millions.

Consistent with this theology, which everyone from social scientists to rock stars has contributed to, Holocaust literature has itself been displaced by the literature of survival. Survivorship too has lost its real meaning, ever since George Steiner spoke of himself as “a kind of survivor.” Now there is an entire book on the postwar immigrant-survivor in Jewish American fiction. What
appears to be a new kind of hyphenated Jew is actually an old culture hero in disguise. The immigrant-survivor, we are told, is a secular tsaddik, a latter-day Elijah figure who brings moral guidance to the exiled flock and offers himself as a living link with the past. And when honorary membership is conferred upon Arthur Cohen’s hero Simon Stern, who is neither an immigrant nor a survivor, “post-Holocaust consciousness” proves that it can be further expanded to include everything written in Yiddish since 1939 (Bilik, p. 40). The Holocaust can also insinuate itself backwards. Once Steiner has crowned “The Penal Colony,” Kafka’s harrowing fable on victimization, as the precursor of Holocaust literature, Alexander is free to judge everything written in Yiddish prior to 1939 (which is all about victimization anyway) as pre-Holocaust literature!

And so the critics have added their voices to the choir, transforming the survivor into Everyman and Holocaust literature into Everything. Even such a careful critic as Sidra Ezrahi who subtitiles her book “The Holocaust in Literature,” finds no place in 220 pages of text for the real thing, that is to say, for the vast body of creative writing produced in the Holocaust itself: the over three hundred writers in Yiddish and Hebrew alone, who spanned the entire arena of Nazi domination with a full range of literary expression. The lone dissenter is Yechiel Szeintuch who, from his enforced isolation within the Yiddish department of the Hebrew University, turns the whole subject on its head. Szeintuch insists on completely separating the literature written during the Holocaust from the literature on the Holocaust. So strict is his demarcation that he would exclude from the authentic canon anything restored from memory even a week after liberation and certainly anything re-edited after the war. Szeintuch believes that a writer automatically changes his perspective as soon as a given stimulus is removed, so that anything written after the fact is colored by the new reality. Though it smacks of literary behaviorism, this rigid approach provides a useful corrective to the chaos that reigns elsewhere and has yielded some extraordinary discoveries. For Szeintuch has shown with his painstaking research of only three authors, that the study of Holocaust literature has barely begun and that most of it started from the wrong end.

Just as the critics disagree on the definition of Holocaust literature, they place a very different value on the history that produced it. At one extreme is Szeintuch, who reconstructs the exact chronological order and specific historical setting in which each and every examined work was written. In order to show how the literature of the Holocaust reflects the author’s perception of reality at any given moment or place, he must know that reality as closely as possible, to which end Szeintuch has read a staggering amount of historical and archival documentation. All this, however, goes at the expense of any aesthetic evaluation whatsoever, and the sole measure of greatness then becomes how amenable a work is to historical evaluation. If, for example, we accept Szeintuch’s judgement that the Vittel Diary, the sole non-fictional work of Yitzhak Katzenelson, is that author’s most lasting contribution to an understanding of the Holocaust, we might as well not study his huge output of poetry and drama, especially if it means ploughing through Szeintuch’s impenetrable writing style.

Ezrahi avoids this trap by using history as an organizing principle. She orders her material along a mimetic line, beginning with such documentary works as Jean-François Steiner’s Treblinka and Peter Weiss’s The Investigation,
texts which preserve the closest tie to historical fact, and ending with the Holocaust transposed into myth by the writer in search of the eternal meaning behind the facts. In between are two modes of writing which she sees as the unique and fullest expression of the Holocaust—concentrationary realism and the survival novel.

Ezrahi’s canon is built around the displaced writers of the postwar era, on those men and women young and fortunate enough to have survived the war and to tell about it in a new, acquired language. In her view, the force of their shared experience is so great, that it lays a stronger claim on their artistic expression than allegiance to the literary traditions of either their native or adopted country. They form a transnational community with themes, styles and structures distinctly their own, a kind of displaced literature of destruction understandable only on its own terms. Now Ezrahi’s bold thesis flies in the face of an acknowledged principle of criticism, namely that art borrows as much from previous art as from life. The burden of proof is on her to show the primacy of shared experience, and she very nearly succeeds in her task. Ezrahi illustrates how the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski forged a “concentrationary realism” out of the language and imagery of Auschwitz itself, and how three women novelists of diverse origin and writing in different languages, created a single type of “survival novel.”

Unfortunately, theology intrudes even here. The claim for uniqueness must be made, even though there is nothing more difficult than to establish beginnings in the history of culture. Borowski may be able to evoke the mechanized horror of Auschwitz as nobody else, but he is certainly not the first to force upon the reader the accomplice’s point of view. Babel was there before him, and Borowski read his Babel. Similarly, the literature of survival, as in the novels of Ilona Karmel, Anna Langfus and Zdena Berger, appears so distinct in Ezrahi’s rendering, due to a peculiar aspect of the Final Solution: that young women who looked Aryan, were fluent in the co-territorial language and had some money at their disposal, stood a much better chance of survival than anyone else and were most likely to commit their experiences to writing after the war. Their narrative would necessarily reflect the tragic course of young womanhood—first love, disengaging from one’s parents, the struggle for independence—against a backdrop of total destruction which lies outside the pale of collective Jewish suffering. No such coherent picture emerges when one enters the labyrinth of literature written in the Holocaust. At any given moment in the Warsaw, Vilna or Lodz ghettos, there were memoirists, prose authors, poets and playwrights of every generation writing of their collective death and degradation with the widest range of human response. But virtually none of the children, the Orthodox or the old among them survived, and their published writings never made it to an English edition. Thus, the literature of survival is recognizably distinct for reasons that have little to do with its intrinsic qualities—because of the Nuremberg Laws and the tyranny of translation. It describes a marginal rather than paradigmatic reality. As for uniqueness, the “Generation of 1914” was also made up of a single cohort, was drawn from all over Europe, and was united in a baptism of mud and gas.

Alexander and Rosenfeld both pay lip service to history and end up blurring the distinctions between fact and fiction. For them, reference to diaries of
the time is a substitute for serious contextualizing. A pietistic bowing to the testimonies of Chaim Kaplan, Emmanuel Ringelblum and Moshe Flinker obviates the need to do any sustained historical research. This is particularly unfortunate in their use of Ringelblum’s *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* which are available to the English reader only in a highly abridged version. Once we get to the thinner book that Rosenfeld might have written, a sensitive reading of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs, we discover a critic doing what he does best. For Rosenfeld, now at home in German literature, can pick up allusions to Hölderlin and other German poets and thereby capture the specific resonance of an image or line. Alexander, in contrast, is interested in literature only as a sermonic text for his own ideas on the relationship between the Holocaust and the fate of the Jewish people. The further removed a modern writer is from the real business of the Holocaust, the better he serves Alexander’s purpose. Bilk too feels constrained to include a chapter on the literature of survival, though she is really arguing for the continuity between the prewar and postwar immigrant novel. The treatment of the Holocaust in Jewish American fiction doesn’t do much to strengthen her case.

Finally, with Bosmajian, we enter the realm of pure criticism. In a no-nonsense, thoroughly systematic manner, she arranges the sources by genre and explains how the form of each determines its meaning. Beginning with the diaries and memoirs whose language is outer-directed in their historical and ethical orientation, she ends with the private and precarious expression of lyric poetry. Though the discussion of diaries and memoirs suffers from the same ahistoricism we have seen elsewhere (she equates ghettos with death camps and has no awareness of the self-censorship built into every Holocaust diary), Bosmajian succeeds in her main task of reading these works as literature. Fifteen years ago, Marie Syrkin observed that what makes ghetto diaries particularly moving is their tragic irony: even the wisest diarist knew less than we do (her essay is reprinted in the Sherwin-Ament volume). Bosmajian detects a more complex form of irony—an inversion of fact and fiction. We assume a diary or memoir to be true, yet the closer the author himself comes to his own death or deportation, in a world laying constant siege to his individuality, the more untrue he perceives his life as becoming. The quest for identity is turned on its head. Wiesel’s *Night*, for example, ends with what Bosmajian calls a “demonic epiphany” in the mirror (p. 48).

Coming as she does from the perspective of German literature, Bosmajian finds that the ironic mode undermines all other genres as well. Most compelling is her analysis of the documentary drama, Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation* and Rolf Hochhuth’s *The Deputy*, whose very titles suggest a parody of the medieval passion play. While Ezrati and Rosenfeld sharply differentiate between these two works (Rosenfeld comes down very hard on Weiss’s politics), Bosmajian shows both plays to be “rituals of judgement” which cannot dispense any justice. The Christian origins of *The Deputy* are obvious keys to its meaning, but only Bosmajian gives *The Investigation* a sympathetic reading, because she alone perceives that the courtroom transcripts are carefully patterned on Dante’s vision of Hell.

Method is meaning in art as in criticism, and the debate comes down to the place of religious tradition in the literary response to the Holocaust. Bosmajian,
borne out by much of recent scholarship, argues that Nazism was a deliberate attempt at displacing Christianity. She therefore sets out to document how postwar German novelists, playwrights and poets, moved by an ethical imperative, have tried to undo the Nazi myth, mainly through the use of irony. Their answer to Nazism is not to reassert Christian values, which could not have survived intact from this brutal assault, but to desacralize both Nazism and Christianity in the name of secular humanistic values. Thus, Bosmajian sees Hochhuth and Weiss as engaged in the same enterprise; the postwar German-Jewish poets Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs also fit comfortably into her scheme.

The Jewish critics, in contrast, necessarily focus on Jewish destruction and on its uniqueness. Ezrahi’s book centers on the Holocaust as Jewish tragedy in Hebrew and Yiddish writing which draws, in turn, upon a centuries-old “Lamentations Tradition.” According to Ezrahi, those working within the Tradition, whether in medieval or modern times, are distinct from the sui generis school of Holocaust writing in their placing of the collective over the self, history over biography and theodicy over survival. With no prior body of criticism to build on, Ezrahi undertakes the impossible task of defining the Tradition almost from scratch. Tradition, even in so sketchy a form, becomes the measure for all those who claim to speak in its name. She finds that any number of writers have fallen short of the mark: Jean-François Steiner, André Schwarz-Bart and Nelly Sachs are criticized for betraying the true Hebraic spirit; Wiesel—for being too Hebraic. Even more puzzling is her treatment of I. B. Singer. Perhaps in an attempt to replace one culture hero with another, or to pay posthumous tribute to Yiddish literature, she holds up Singer as a paragon of the Tradition revitalized, though it can be demonstrated that his basic attitudes to catastrophe have not changed since 1935. The few references to Yiddish and Hebrew literature are in themselves curious, given the central place that the Hebraic Tradition occupies in Ezrahi’s book. For all its high-sounding principles, the Tradition is no match for the secular model of a displaced literature which Ezrahi applies so convincingly to European languages.

Something similar happens to Rosenfeld the moment he invokes the Tradition. He will not rest his case on Celan and Sachs until he places them on a liturgical pedestal. They are not merely German modernists in a post-symbolist tradition, as Bosmajian presents them, but poets of a dying language, like their counterparts who write in Yiddish. To join these two cultural strands, Rosenfeld brings prooftexts from earlier works of Yiddish literature. Mani Leib’s manifesto for a poetry and politics of resignation, written in 1914, appears as the epigraph to a chapter on its very antithesis—the “poetics of expiration.” Paul Celan’s tortured flight into mysticism is illustrated by a passage from I. L. Peretz: his story “Kabballists” written in 1891 as an antihasidic satire. Alexander and Bilk also go out looking for false continuities, with similar results. To the extent that the critics are dealing with a unique Event, they must find a unique strategy commensurate with the unapproachability of the subject. That is why they adopt a pietistic mode. Piety knows no bounds and recognizes no distinctions.

The search for Tradition has yielded but one significant discovery: that Jewish writers subject Scripture to abuse in order to convey their sense of
atrocities. This technique is called "symbolic inversion" by Ezrati (p. 105) and "counter-commentary" by Rosenfeld (p. 31), only they make the mistake of reserving its use to the modern era and even to the Holocaust alone. In fact, this is the very basis of Jewish response to catastrophe, going all the way back to Lamentations. Even to claim that the tension between Scripture and atrocity has never been greater than in the Holocaust is to deduce from a record that has not yet been fully examined. If anything, Szeintuch's research points to the opposite conclusion. Most works written in the Holocaust proper use the Bible as a source of consolation, not as a ground for sacrilege. Especially in the epic poems of Katzenelson, Sutzkever and Shayevitsh, biblical and rabbinic motifs collapse the boundaries between present and past. More astonishing still is Szeintuch's discovery that those who survived did not think it appropriate to up-end Scripture when publishing their work after the war. Abraham Sutzkever, the poet laureate of the Vilna Ghetto, held back his strongest denunciations for over thirty years. Those of Isaiah Spiegel's ghetto stories which allowed for no transcendence were published only in mitigated form. And even the angriest passages in Sutzkever and Katzenelson have their counterpart in the responses of Abramovitch, Peretz, Bialik, Varshavski, Greenberg and Markish to earlier catastrophes.

If the ghetto Jews and the handful of survivors felt the overwhelming need for consolation, that is surely their prerogative. But the critic has no such right. Poetry is not prayer, criticism is not theology, and Artur Sammler is not a tsaddik, secular or otherwise. In seeking to express their sense of moral outrage, the critics have set the Holocaust apart from the world on the basis of history, but they quickly lose patience with history and fall back on a pietistic mode.

The real task of the critic, it seems to me, is to chronicle the break, the point at which analogies no longer hold and the Tradition is radically altered for all time to come. Szeintuch reconstructs the precise moment in Katzenelson's life when the full extent of the Final Solution became clear. Katzenelson's abrupt move from one language to another, from consolation to denunciation, from defiance to total despair, is a turning point in the history of Western civilization. Alexander may ramble on about the "incredibility of the Holocaust," but Szeintuch actually documents it. Bosmajian, Ezrati and Rosenfeld find other ways of chronicling the break, by showing a discontinuity with earlier traditions or by showing the emergence of a new tradition of extremity. These are real achievements of Holocaust criticism.

There remains one break the critics are reluctant to have us see, to which their books bear painful testimony nonetheless: the complete break with the civilization destroyed. There is hardly any sense, except in Szeintuch's work, of the people, of their specific historical destiny, their political aspirations and cultural idiom. We are presented instead with a disembodied Event, with Evil incarnate as refracted through language and literary convention. An Event with no past has no future. The presence of a few survivors who speak in borrowed tongues is nothing more than a phantom of that which was lost. To do moral justice to the Holocaust would be to recall the Lamentations Tradition, to be rooted in something that makes of the outrage more than flag-waving, more than ill-informed reverence. The Tradition is anything but
monolithic. Seen from the inside, it reveals an ever-changing mosaic: Hebrew as opposed to Yiddish; Hebrew and Yiddish as opposed to European languages; the differential impact of secular ideologies; the role of folklore and iconography; the emergence of anti-traditional responses to catastrophe which reach a peak of blasphemy in the wake of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution; the return to biblical motifs prior to and throughout the Holocaust; the memorial imperative of the postwar era. These are the contours that have yet to be examined. If the missing third of our people, with all its fractious diversity, is not the point from which all acts of memory originate, then we will have lost even more than we imagine.

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