

David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant. *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide*. The Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry. Waltham, MA: Brandeis UP, 2012. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. xii + 355 pp. \$35.00 (paper).

“No matter who they are,” notes a historian of the Holocaust, “people want answers, guidelines, something firm to hold on to in the swirl of disorientation and nausea that is a common reaction to study of the Holocaust. History can almost never fulfill that desire; the who, what, and how questions that historians can resolve unequivocally turn out to be only the tip of the iceberg of the why. Many people leave a historical presentation resolved to turn elsewhere with their big questions—to philosophy, religion, psychology, or literature” (Doris L. Bergen, “The Barbarity of Footnotes: History and the Holocaust,” in *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes [New York: MLA, 2004], 38). For those who turn with their questions to literature, David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant’s *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* is essential reading.

Holocaust literature has already been extensively discussed by scholars such as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, Lawrence L. Langer, and Robert Skloot. It might well be asked, then, what Roskies and Diamant hope to add to a vast fund of scholarship on the subject. They address this question at the very beginning; their answer is threefold.

First, they reject a widespread claim that Holocaust literature is “*sui generis*, to be measured against itself alone and demanding a unique interpretive lens” (1). For some, as they point out, this lens has been transcendent, facilitating the creation of a narrative of sacred dimensions; for others, the lens has been anti-transcendent, providing disturbing insight into “the rupture in human values after Auschwitz” (7). Roskies and Diamant put aside “all such essentialist claims” and “propose to study Holocaust literature as literature” (4, 5). Second, they reject a division of Holocaust literature into documentary and imaginative writing. Their discussion is guided by a working definition, at once capacious and flexible: “Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it” (2). Third, they recognize that “[f]or Holocaust literature to speak anew, every generation of readers had to see itself as the first to bear witness and to feel profoundly scandalized by the presumed silence of those who came before” (126). To counter such misleading preconceptions and mistaken convictions, they offer a new map and a new periodization of Holocaust literature.

One way of summarizing Roskies and Diamant’s argument in this book would be to say that they seek to carry the scholarly discussion of Holocaust literature a stage further. They challenge “the broad scholarly consensus” and “the accepted story line,” introduce “a whole new cast of characters,” and throw open “dozens of new and heretofore unexplored directions” (6, 8). Along the way, they raise searching questions that bristle with intellectual provocation: “[W]hy should readers care about this catastrophe [i.e., the Holocaust] when there are already so many others to compete for their attention?” (1). “Who speaks for the Holocaust?” (1). “Why include a novel with no Jewish characters or any reference to the Jewish experience in a collection of Holocaust literature?” (197).

Roskies and Diamant’s arguments are passionate and eloquent, and their evidence is massive and convincing. Their resourceful marshaling of a wealth of materials originally written in twelve languages enables them to pursue incisive comparative analysis. They argue, for example, that what has been perceived as the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld’s “new artistic code” is “actually a Hebrew variant of the sober, understated, plain style of the Polish, Italian, and French survivor witnesses who had preceded him but who remained virtually unknown outside of their communal settings” (126). Citing books such as Michał Głowiński’s “singular masterpiece,” *Czarne sezony* [*Black Seasons*, 1999; English trans. 2005], they make an intriguing point that “Poland might be a breeding ground for a highly individualized approach to the Holocaust,” and they encourage scholars to consider “why this might be so” (8).

Roskies and Diamant supplement their extraordinarily rich and sophisticated discussion with the useful though highly selective *Guide to the First Hundred Books*. On the one hand, all the writers discussed in the Guide are given equal time, in contrast to studies and compendia in which the allocation of space to each author is often based on celebrity and current fashion. On the other hand, some omissions are puzzling. For instance, the Guide is silent about Jerzy Andrzejewski's *Wielki Tydzień* [*Holy Week*, 1945; English trans. 2007] and Hanna Krall's *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [*To Outwit God*, 1977; English trans. 1986], as well as the first play in any language on the Warsaw ghetto uprising—Stefan Otwinowski's *Wielkanoc* [*Easter*], drafted in 1943 and published by the Central Commission of Polish Jews in 1946.

Throughout the volume, Roskies and Diamant make extensive use of available translations, although they do note, for example, that the translators of Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1943 short story "Zeidlus the Pope" from Yiddish into English "systematically neutered the anti-Christian style" (41). With regard to translations from Polish, in contrast, Roskies and Diamant seem unaware that some of them are often rather free. It might still be asked whether this really matters. No doubt works such as Zofia Nałkowska's *Medaliony* [*Medallions*, 1946; English trans. 2000] are products of a still largely unfamiliar literary culture, and no doubt it is regrettable that translators slip up, simplify, or avoid offending potential readers. But hasn't a lack of sustained attention to such matters betrayed us into interpreting texts in a reductive way? Admittedly, this is not the sort of question to which one can expect a knock-down answer on either side. Yet the problem remains. Meanwhile, non-specialist readers will never guess that pivotal sentences in Tadeusz Borowski's *Pożegnanie z Marią* (1947) and *Kamienny świat* (1948) are missing from the English translation, published as *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* in 1976; that the anti-Semitic ranting of the eponymous character in Nałkowska's "Kobieta cmentarna" ["The Cemetery Lady"] has been bowdlerized in translation; that a major point of Nałkowska's "Przy torze kolejowym" ["By the Railroad Track"] is that the shooting of a wounded Jewish woman who escaped from a train to the Treblinka death camp was not, *pace* Roskies and Diamant, a "mercy killing" (86); or that the closing lines in the English version of Jan T. Gross's *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* [*Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, 2000; English trans. 2001] erase his superb and bitter irony.

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Cyprian Norwid. *Poems*. Trans. Danuta Borhardt. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2011. Notes. 140 pp. \$12.80 (paper).

Danuta Borhardt's new translations of selected works by the late-Romantic poet Cyprian Norwid (1821–1883) make a welcome addition to the library of Polish classics in English. The major poets of Poland's Romantic era have had a precarious existence in English-language literary consciousness, perhaps for two primary reasons. First, their subject matter is deeply rooted in specific problems of Polish history that often fail to resonate with contemporary readers outside Poland. Second, their works present translation challenges on a daunting scale. Consequently, the choice of editions for English-language readers interested in Polish Romanticism has been limited and often uninspiring. With her new bilingual edition of Norwid's poems, Borhardt brings an important Polish voice to life for the English reader, though her renderings do not always succeed in capturing the formal aspects of his work.

Norwid is a Janus-faced figure in Polish letters. Scholars have variously characterized him as a footnote to the glories of the Romantic age, a precursor or patron of Polish modernism, and even as the first modern Polish poet. Like the other major Polish Romantics, his fate was to live largely in exile from a partitioned homeland. He struggled with poverty and ill health through-