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BOOK REVIEWS

Rubina Peroomian

Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience—Studies in Near Eastern Culture and Society, 8. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1993. x + 238 pages, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 1-55540-894-X $44.95 cloth; ISBN 1-55540-895-9 $29.95 paper.

This book examines the literary treatment of a literally unspeakable subject, mass annihilation. The term "Catastrophe," as Peroomian uses it, is both a proper name designating two historical events, the Armenian Genocide and the Final Solution, and a common noun that designates the diverse calamities visited upon Jews and Armenians over the centuries. Thus Peroomian sets out to put literary responses to the great modern Catastrophes—Holocaust and *Aghed*—in the context of traditional Jewish and Armenian responses to the countless catastrophes that preceded them. But this eminently comparative project issues in an only intermittently comparative study. The discussion of the Jewish experience dwindles steadily until it has become no more than a decorative backdrop for the book's real subject, the literary treatment of the Armenian national tragedy. The bulk of this "comparative" study is accordingly devoted to works by four Armenians: Zabel Esayan, Suren Partevian, Aram Andonian, and Hagop Oshagan. This choice implies a further narrowing of focus to a generation and a genre: the four authors studied in depth were all between thirty-two and forty years old in 1915, and they all wrote mainly prose fiction. Its title notwithstanding, then, Peroomian's book is best described as a study of the influence of Armenia's Judeo-Christian literary tradition on four modern writers' treatment of the Genocide, with an occasional sidelong glance at Jewish Holocaust fiction.

But if Peroomian's reach exceeds her grasp, she nevertheless grasps a good deal, at least as far as Armenian literature is concerned. Her study begins with a useful overview of the responses their religious traditions made available to Jews and Armenians confronted by the catastrophes to which both peoples were repeatedly subjected. These responses took, she says, essentially four forms. Catastrophe could be

regarded as well-merited divine punishment; as punishment disproportionate to the sin which provoked it; as martyrdom, which it was a privilege—and consequently a triumph— to endure; or, in a Christian variation on this last possibility, as a ticket to glory on earth and eternal recompense in Heaven.

This little classificatory scheme admits of a few principles of variation. Thus the four ways of regarding catastrophe just mentioned, and the vision of oneself and the enemy which they imply, can be identified as more or less characteristic of a people or a period. This provides Peroomian a basis for comparing the Jewish and Armenian traditions in various historical epochs, something she does in interesting, if hardly earthshaking fashion, in the first, all too brief part of her book. It is, however, a second, chronological principle of variation that, more or less explicitly, founds the central discussion of Esayan's essayistic treatment of the 1909 pogroms in Adana, and Partevian's, Andonian's, and Oshagan's fictional evocations of the Genocide. Here Peroomian is guided by the idea that the modern Armenian tradition should be read as a gradual translation into secular terms of the key concepts of the traditional religious response to catastrophe—notably martyrdom and glory—a secularization that culminates in a rejection of the model that inspires it. This notion is finally inadequate, as Peroomian herself seems to discover as she goes along; but it nevertheless provides a way of organizing a number of fine close readings of some key texts, permits intelligent criticism of, say, Partevian's unrelieved bombast or Oshagan's occasional racism, and clears the way for a critical discussion that can rise above the impressionism and emotionalism of much modern Armenian literary criticism.

Finally, not the least of the virtues of Peroomian's book, which has a good many, is that she gives us English translations of a generous sampling of the texts she focuses on. Though they sometimes betray, like the rest of the book, that they are the work of a non-native speaker of English, they are nevertheless accurate, clear renditions of judiciously chosen passages, and will, one hopes, stimulate a demand for more and better English translation of modern Armenian classics. ■

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