THE RESONANCE OF DUST

Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate
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By Edward Alexander

In 1948, when awareness of the Holocaust, the systematic destruction by the Nazis of the Jews of Europe, began to penetrate the literary world, Lionell Trilling predicted that no work of literature could possibly fathom the enormity of the crime perpetrated and the suffering endured. “Before what we now know,” he wrote, “the mind stops; the great psychological fact of our time which we all observe with baffled wonder and shame is that there is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald.”

Trilling was writing shortly after the end of the Second World War, and however true his denial of the possibility of responding to the fact of genocide was at that time, it no longer seems an accurate description of our situation with respect to the Holocaust. For after a prolonged silence on the subject, a substantial body of literature has come into being: novels, poems, memoirs, histories, diaries, and biographies. But what Trilling really meant to say, of course, was not that there is no possible way, but that there is no adequate way, of responding to the murder of millions of people for the sole “crime” of having been born — to the spectacle, enacted in full view of much of the world, of a genocidal campaign that taxed the human and material resources of the German people for over six years, until its murderous work was completed or interrupted by invading armies.

In The Resonance of Dust, Edward Alexander proposes that the touchstone of adequacy in literature on the Holocaust should be the recognition that the tragedy of the Jewish people is something more than a “theme” for poems and stories, a peg on which to hang reflections on the capacity of

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