In the mind of the believing Jew, the tragic paradox of the Holocaust must be that it was not the denial but the fulfillment of the divine promise, as set forth in every elucidation of the Covenant in the Bible. To the skeptic, the destruction of European Jewry makes a mockery of the sentences in the Jewish daily prayer book: “With abundant love hast Thou loved us, O Lord.” “With everlasting love hast Thou loved the house of Israel.” To the skeptic, including the Jewish skeptic, who surveys Jewish life from the outside, the contradiction between God’s professions of love for His Chosen People and the way in which these people are tortured and killed must be complete. But the believing Jew has accepted a structure of relations between the Chosen People and God in which love and chastisement are inseparable from each other. He has traditionally acknowledged that the Covenant contained a curse as well as a blessing. The Jews have been chosen to receive the Law, but if they lust instead after idols and so violate the Covenant, they will be cursed and exiled and destroyed. But the destruction will never be total, for that would constitute God’s violation of His own Covenant. Despite the endless transgressions of the people of Israel, “when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them. . . .” The Jews’ destiny, moreover, is in their own control and not in that of the nations of the earth. The God of Israel is the god of all mankind, but the nations of the world are instruments of the Lord in His dramatic struggle with His refractory people. In His lawsuit against His people, God calls heaven and earth to witness against His beloved adversary that “I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse. . . .”

The whole structure of Jewish religious life was
The Resonance of Dust

predicated on acceptance of responsibility for the Exile and its endless humiliations and oppressions. These had been brought upon the Jews not by Assyrians or Babylonians or Romans or Crusaders or Cossacks but, ultimately, by their own transgressions. Regularly, in his festival prayers, the Jew acknowledged his responsibility for his condition of exile and debasement: “Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land and removed far away from our country.” This very act, moreover, of blaming their fate on their own sins tended to reinforce the Jews’ belief in their chosenness because it enabled them to survive when other peoples, who had also suffered expulsion from their homelands and oppression in the lands of strangers, were disappearing. These peoples came to the outwardly sensible and reasonable conclusion that their miserable fate proved the inefficacy of their national god, whom they abandoned in order to worship the gods of their new neighbors; thus were they assimilated, thus did they disappear. The Jews, persistently interpreting their misery as divine punishment for their sins, clung to their God and to the promise of the Covenant, and so survived, albeit in ever diminishing numbers. “Except the LORD of hosts / Had left unto us a very small remnant, / We should have been as Sodom, / We should have been like unto Gomorrah” (Isaiah, 1:9).

The structure of the covenantal relation between God and the Jewish people was so pervasive in Jewish life and in the Jewish imagination that it could withstand and accommodate a considerable amount of resistance and rebellion from within. What is the book of Job but an instance of such rebellion and accommodation? It takes the traditional form of the lawsuit between the two partners to the Covenant, with enumeration of curses, invocation of witnesses, professions of innocence, and allegations of guilt. Job desires “to reason with God” (13:3), to justify himself. Yet even at the height of his rebellion, when he insists “I will argue my ways before Him,” he submits to the inherited structure of faith: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.” Death itself, however seemingly undeserved and unjust, becomes an aspect of endurance if it is acknowledg-
ed as a chastisement from God. This covenantal structure took such hold of Jewish life that it can still today provide a framework for modern Jewish poets and novelists of a secular cast of mind whose instinctive reaction to the Holocaust is, not to reject God, but to accuse and curse Him.

The inherited structure of covenantal relations had to endure unprecedented strains during the Holocaust. For the first time in modern history, the Jews faced an enemy in no way respectful of, or leavened by, the Jews' own sacred texts. From the point of view of Judaism—though not, to be sure, of most emancipated Jews—Christianity was preferable to paganism because it had several drops of Torah mixed in with all its Greek mystery religion. Therefore, it acknowledged that the Jews had once received the divine election (even if they no longer had it), and that their Scriptures were a true, if partial, revelation of the Divine Will. But for the Nazis (as for Voltaire), Judaism represented evil incarnate, and Jews had inherited in their genes a plague that could not be cured, but only extirpated. Modern Jews, for their part, had been trying in every way to slough off their covenantal chosenness and all its signs. But now they found the ancient doctrine that they were indeed the Chosen People spuriously confirmed by their most determined enemies.

Chaim Kaplan: Warsaw Diary

The paradoxes with which the Holocaust assaulted the mind of a religious Jew are conveyed with great immediacy in Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw Diary. If we would anchor in actuality our discussion of the imaginative literature that seeks out the role of God in the Holocaust, we cannot do better than to begin with this remarkable book. For it foreshadows many of the purely literary treatments of the Holocaust we shall examine, from Glatstein to Rawicz, in that its search for a principle by which to impose order on a phenomenon that is the embodiment of chaos is a literary quest that can succeed only through a resort to religious beliefs that the author resents but cannot reject. Kaplan kept his Warsaw Diary from 1 September 1939, when
Germany invaded Poland, until 4 August 1942, when he and his wife were transported to the death factory in Treblinka. His very first entry expresses doubt that they will survive the carnage. He also knows, as the severity of German restrictions on Jewish activity increases, that he literally risks his life by continuing to write. Yet even as late as 2 August 1942, when he feels himself overwhelmed as a writer by the incoherent horror of events, and as a man by the imminence of starvation or deportation, his utmost concern is for hiding his diary, so that he may fulfill his “sacred task” of recording for future generations the unimaginable crimes of the Germans. His last recorded thought was: “If my life ends—what will become of my diary?”

Although Kaplan never speaks condescendingly of the literary aspect of his work, and even invites the application to it of literary standards, he was moved by transcendent reasons to keep his diary. According to the biblical promise, the destruction of the Jewish people would never be total; there would always be a remnant. It is to bear witness to this remnant of the destruction of European Jewry that Kaplan devotes himself to his diary. “O earth, cover not thou my blood!” he prays. He does not know whether anyone else in the ghetto is recording daily events, and is well aware that the conditions of life in the ghetto are not conducive to “literary labors,” yet he senses that if there is such a thing as a vocation, a being summoned to one’s destiny, then he has here received it: “I sense within me the magnitude of this hour, and my responsibility toward it, and I have an inner awareness that I am fulfilling a national obligation.”

The tragic paradoxes of Jewish survival pervade Kaplan’s diary. He is well aware that, according to classical Jewish tradition, redemption will not come except in association with catastrophe. The tenth chapter of the Tractate Sanhedrin states, “The Son of David will come only in a generation wholly guilty or a generation wholly innocent.” Since simple observation suggests to Warsaw’s Jews that few generations seem more likely than the generation of Hitler to fulfill the former condition, they give themselves over to messianic speculation. On 17 November 1939, Kaplan remarks, “The soil is ready even for religious
Messianism.” His own reaction to such messianism is ambivalent, and he speaks of it with two voices. Sometimes, especially when the Jewish masses imagine that Stalin or Roosevelt is in fact the Messiah, Kaplan condemns messianic imagination as yet another form of Jewish fantasy and wish-fulfillment. Yet he also understands that it is precisely this faith in messianic truth and justice, this stupid hope, that has enabled the miracle of Jewish survival. “In actual reality,” he writes in January 1940, “there is disappointment upon disappointment, yet hope flourishes. A nation which for thousands of years has said daily, ‘And even if he tarries, I will await the coming of the Messiah every day,’ will not weaken in its hope, which has been a balm of life."

From the very beginning of the German occupation of Warsaw, Kaplan had sought to control the disorder that assaulted his imagination by asking what role God was playing in this latest and perhaps final tragedy of His Chosen People. Month after month, year after year, he assails God with seemingly unanswerable questions: “Have we indeed sinned more than any other nation?” “Will the Eternal break His promise?” “Is this the way the Almighty looks after His dear ones?” “Why has a ‘day of vengeance and retribution’ not yet come for the murderers? Do not answer me with idle talk—I won’t listen to you. Give me a logical reply!” Kaplan writes not as a skeptic questioning God’s existence but as a believer openly quarreling with, and directly reproaching, a partner to an agreement who has failed to keep his side of the contract. As the German barbarities grow more unspeakable, the tone of reproach breaks free from mere questioning and becomes accusatory: “O Leader of the city, where are you? But he Who sits in Heaven laughs.” It is not until July 1942, when Kaplan at last has full knowledge of the details of the “final solution” and watches the mass deportations from the ghetto, that he calls into question God’s very existence: “In these two days the emptiness of the ghetto has been filled with cries and wails. If they found no way to the God of Israel it is a sign He doesn’t exist.”

But skepticism is merely a fleeting impulse in the diary.
What is far more difficult for Kaplan to assimilate to his imagination than the denial of some of God’s promises is the confirmation and fulfillment of them, but in counterfeit forms. According to the Divine Promise (Deuteronomy 5:3), the Covenant was given not only to the Jews who stood at Horeb or Sinai but to all their descendants as well, to all those generations of Jews who were not physically present to receive the Law. This promise, it strikes Kaplan, is confirmed in the ghetto, albeit spuriously and with the assistance of the Nazis. Since the destruction of Judaism entailed, according to Nazi racial ideology, destruction of all who could by any stretch of the imagination be thought to belong to the Jewish people, the most senseless suffering depicted by Kaplan is that of marginal Jews or actual apostates or antisemites of Jewish descent. Among the diary’s most powerful scenes are those showing Jewish apostates or their children, “the cream of Polish society, people who had always showed their hatred for the Jews,” being dragged, literally and metaphysically, back into the ghetto. Kaplan freely admits that the misery of these people, whose suffering lacks even a human meaning for them, provides the first occasion in his life when he has derived pleasure from the distress of others. The reason why Kaplan should deal so harshly with these ex-Jews, half-Jews, and Jewish antisemites who must now bear the fate of real Jews, is not far to seek. It lies in his conviction that the Jews are still a covenanted people, with a fate that is collective not individual. “Who of them dreamed that his ancestors stood on Mount Sinai?” The ancient promise that all Jews, including those not yet born, received the Covenant and were not free to relinquish it is thus bizarrely confirmed.

Another spurious fulfillment of the Divine Promise is to be found in the signs of Jewish national rebirth in the ghetto. God had promised that only after the Jewish people had endured the punishment of its iniquities and nearly perished completely in the lands of its enemies would He remember his Covenant with them and remember the Land from which they had been exiled. For Kaplan, one of the most striking instances of the link between the symbols of
destruction and restoration is the charade of a “Jewish kingdom” that the Nazis have established in the ghetto (for the purpose of conserving their manpower and facilitating the process of destruction): Jewish tax officials, Jewish public utility officials, Jewish housing officials. “In short, a Jewish state complete in every detail, but a closed, cramped one, imprisoned, mummified within its narrow borders.” Even the policemen, traditional symbols of gentile oppression in the Diaspora, have become Jews, to whom one can speak Yiddish. “The residents of the ghetto,” remarks Kaplan, “are beginning to think they are in Tel Aviv.” Kaplan sees only too clearly that this is all facade, and that the very logic of their situation may well make Jewish policemen even crueler than their gentile counterparts. Yet he perceived in the most visible symbol of Jewish degradation a sign, from a realm beyond human experience, of Jewish national rebirth. The Nazis order all the Jews of Warsaw to wear on their bodies and to display on their shops the Star of David, in the Jewish national colors of blue and white. “In the future,” muses Kaplan, “everywhere we turn we shall feel as if we were in a Jewish kingdom. The national colors will flutter everywhere. From now on Jerusalem will not only crown our every joy, but also our ordinary weekdays, as we get up and as we lie down. . . .” The Ingathering of the Exiles, the dawn of deliverance—gifts of the Nazis! Kaplan’s tone in such passages is a turbulent mixture of genuine emotion and corrosive irony.

The opposing voices of hope and despair, faith and doubt, the conflicting impulses toward belief in redemption and resignation to meaningless death, eventually became impossible for Kaplan to contain within his own mind and breast. In the depths of his agony, therefore, at the end of May 1942, he invented an alter ego named Hirsch, whose role in the diary is to reject altogether his creator’s messianic hopes and to express the irredeemable gloom of the Jewish predicament. This literary device clarifies, but does not remove, the paradox. Thus, on 7 June 1942, Kaplan writes: “We were always a nation bound by hope—and so we shall remain. Jewish faith is marvelous; it can create states
of mind that have nothing to do with reality. Like the believing Jewish grandfather who in anticipation of the Messiah always wore his Sabbath clothes, so we too await him, 'and though he tarry, I will wait daily for his coming!' " The belief in the imminent downfall of the Nazis and the hope for the physical and spiritual salvation of the Jews are shared at this point by everyone in Jewish Warsaw except for Kaplan’s recently invented “wise friend” Hirsch. "He is the only one who sits like a mourner among bridegrooms. ‘Idiots!’ he shouts, and his face becomes red with anger. ‘Your hope is vain; your trust a broken reed.’ ’" Thus, the belief that because the world has grown thoroughly wicked and that because the Jews have at last been sufficiently punished the Messiah must be at hand, is at once embraced and ridiculed.

In Kaplan’s imagination, it is the path of belief rather than that of skepticism and despair that requires courage. The shockingly intimate relation between the depths of Jewish degradation and the heights of Jewish aspiration is difficult to accept precisely because it appears to bear out the prophetic promise of God’s active involvement in Jewish history and implicates God in the Holocaust. Yet it seems to him that just this belief enables the Jews to cling to life. According to the “laws of nature,” which in perverted form are at the basis of Nazi racial doctrine, the Jews should already be dead, yet despite the frightful suffering in the ghetto, there are no suicides. Kaplan never ceases to marvel at this fact, or indeed at the fact that Jewish cultural and religious life continues in the midst of horror and degradation: “Nursery schools bring their infant charges to the gardens, and older children have their lessons there. . . . We are schooled in life, schooled in the art of living; it is like the words of the prophet: ‘When thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee!’ ” Here was empirical evidence that even if millions of individuals were destroyed the Jewish people would survive. For all his resentment toward the God of Israel for being indifferent to the suffering of His people, Kaplan returns for sustenance to the inherited structure of
belief, according to which God visits all their iniquities upon the People Israel exactly because He has made His Covenant with them alone among all the families of the earth.

Kaplan wrote in 1942 that what would be hardest about his impending death was the necessity for leaving the earth without knowing the final outcome of the struggle between giant adversaries: the Nazis against the Allies; the Nazi will to murder against the Jewish will to live; empirical despair against messianic hope. Kaplan, hesitatingly, bitterly, ironically, casts his lot with the God of Israel, who has been anything but loving to His people, but whose Covenant with them represents the only possibility of meaning in the midst of otherwise unfathomable suffering: “In these fateful hours, we long for life. ‘Blessed is he who hopes, he will live to see the restoration of Israel!”

Yiddish Holocaust Poetry

Just how irresistible was the inherited myth of the Covenant between God and his Chosen People may be seen in Yiddish Holocaust poetry, one of the most coherent and substantial bodies of writing on the subject. From its inception, in the nineteenth century, Yiddish poetry had been secular in idea and outlook. The idea that literature might be a profession suitable to a Jewish male was itself an act of defiance, so much so that Isaac Bashevis Singer recalls how his father “considered all the secular writers to be heretics, all unbelievers—. . . . To become a literat was to them almost as bad as becoming a meshumed, one who forsakes the faith. My father used to say that secular writers like Peretz were leading the Jews to heresy. He said everything they wrote was against God. . . . And from his point of view, he was right.” Although most writers of Yiddish literature considered themselves Jews, they were devoted to a secularization of Jewish culture. Moreover, many who came to prominence in the second and third decades of this century sought to reject the traditional subject of Yiddish literature, the fate of the Jewish people, sought to reject, that is, the chosenness of the Jewish people.
For why could not Yiddish writers, like their counterparts writing in French or German or English, range freely through the world for their subjects instead of being limited to the concerns of the collective body from which they had sprung? Thus, Jacob Glatstein wrote in 1920 of himself and his fellow poets in the Inzikh group: "We are Yiddish poets by virtue of the fact that we are Jews and write in Yiddish. Whatever a Yiddish poet may write about is ipso facto Yiddish. One does not need specifically Jewish themes. . . ." But the Holocaust proved that the Jewish poet no more than the Jews themselves could become "normal." After the Holocaust, as Irving Howe has written, 'Yiddish poetry . . . returns . . . to its original concern with the collective destiny of the Jewish people. . . . In the desolation of memory, Yiddish poets find themselves turning back to the old Jewish God, . . . a God inseparable from Jewish fate, a God with whom one pleads and quarrels.'

In some of these Yiddish poems about the Holocaust, the tone of bitterness and reproach is dominant. This is not only because the poet has been dragged, kicking and screaming, back to the very subject he defiantly abandoned in his youth, before the deluge of the Holocaust. It is also because of a revulsion from the God who has done the Jews the dubious favor of choosing them without allowing them the option of surrendering their chosenness and so avoiding the sufferings specially reserved for God's servants. Perhaps the best-known single expression of outrage and resentment at the imposition of divine election is Kadia Molodowsky's poem "God of Mercy." Here the poet does not deny the chosenness of Israel, but declares that it has been always a curse, never a blessing:

O God of Mercy
For the time being
Choose another people.
We are tired of death, tired of corpses,
We have no more prayers.
For the time being
Choose another people.
If a covenant there must be, let it descend upon some other people, for the Jews can no longer afford the price exacted by the Law they were chosen to receive:

God of Mercy  
Sanctify another land  
Another Sinai.  
We have covered every field and stone  
With ashes and holiness.  
With our crones  
With our young  
With our infants  
We have paid for each letter in your Commandments.  

(Translated by Irving Howe)

What is still more remarkable about this poem than its bitterness and indignation against God is its entire indifference to the worldly aspect of "chosenness." Molodowsky writes with a secular animus, yet takes it for granted that both Jews and Germans were only puppets of God. She ends the poem with a plea to God to "Grant us one more blessing— / Take back the gift of our separateness." The fact that many Jews had in fact already given back that separateness when they were identified by the Nazis as Jews does not even enter into her vision of this ghastly drama. The poet rebels against God, yet never thinks to question either His existence or omnipotence.

In the poetry of Jacob Glatstein,* the Yiddish tradition of intimate quarrel and mutual reproach between the Jew and God is continued, but subjected to strains and storms that threaten to shatter the old framework. In the wake of the Holocaust, the poles of the ancient antithesis between suffering and faith, the terms of the paradox whereby the unending misery of the Jews is precisely a sign of the unending Covenant with God, move so far apart that their link is almost ruptured. Glatstein cannot fathom the Holocaust without viewing it as part of the ongoing quarrel

between God and His Chosen People. The Jews cannot be themselves without God, for "without our God / we have a funny look." Neither can God exist without the Jews, in whose post-Holocaust absence He is

pursued, forsaken,
wandering around,
looking for a Jewish face,
a hand to give you shalom:
_Shalom aleichem_, Jewish God.

But neither, finally can Glatstein live with the horror of believing that the Holocaust _was_ part of God’s ongoing quarrel with the Jews:

From the crematory flue
A Jew aspires to the Holy One.
And when the smoke of him is gone,
His wife and children filter through.
Above us, in the height of sky,
Saintly billows weep and wait.
God, wherever you may be,
There all of us are also not.

(Translated by Chana Faerstein)

Any impulse toward locating the source of the unspeakable horror in God must mercilessly be squelched. If the God of history has indeed been involved in the Holocaust, then the Jews must sue for divorce from Him.

At times Glatstein sounds like the “radical” theologian Richard L. Rubenstein insisting that Jews cannot believe in a God who acts in history “without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God’s will.”⁴ But just as often he sounds like Emil L. Fackenheim refusing to abandon a God who is Lord of actual history and insisting that “in faithfulness to Judaism we must refuse to disconnect God from the holocaust.”⁵ Glatstein’s Holocaust poetry is not informed by a consistent theology. Rather he seeks imaginatively to assimilate the Holocaust by perceiving it through the inherited myths of Jewish religion. He looks upon this religion to some extent as an outsider, one who has become alienated from its language and beliefs, and who revisits it nostalgically:
It’s as hard to return to
old-fashioned words
as to sad synagogues,
those thresholds of faith.
You know exactly where they are.
Troubled, you can still hear their undertones.
Sometimes you come close and look longingly
at them through the windowpanes.

The world of his youth provides not so much truth as
warmth, familiarity, and shelter: “I love you, dead world of
my youth, / I command you, rise up, let your joy revive, /
come close, letter by letter, warm, pulsing, meaning
nothing.” The religious myths that once provided the
shelter of a protective covering have now been hollowed out,
by intellect and by history. Yet still they seem to the poet the
only framework within which he can begin to make sense of
what has happened. Having been disillusioned by Western
culture, by its “Jesus-Marxes” and “weak-kneed democ­

Glatstein conceived of his Holocaust poetry as a safeguar­
ding and even a resurrection of the dead. In a poem called
“Nightsong,” he imagines the post-Holocaust imaginative
life of the Yiddish poet as a nightly stroll among the graves,
among the “valleys and hills and hidden twisted paths”
that have become the landscape of his mind. Here he
gathers to himself the whole vanished Jewish world, in a
heroic attempt to “grasp and take in / those destroyed
millions.” If they are to be redeemed, it can henceforward—
such is the implication of the poem—only be through
literature. The appropriate language of the literature is
Yiddish, but its structure can be provided only by the myths
of religion, that is to say, by the world-view that Yiddish
literature, at its inception, was intended to erode and
supplant. Glatstein’s work is pervaded by anger, but
especially by anger directed against himself for failing to
perceive, until both Jewry and Yiddish were virtually destroyed, that neither Yiddish literature nor Jewish life could survive without in some way incorporating the religious heritage. Amidst the wreckage of European Jewry, the lesson was now brutally clear: Yiddish, once the language of militant secularists, had suddenly become a “dead” language whose only future was as the sacred tongue of martyrdom: “Poet, take the faintest Yiddish speech, / fill it with faith, make it holy again.”

A short poem entitled “My Father Isaac”* illustrates Glatstein’s habit of lending significance—albeit ironic significance—to his experience of the Holocaust by casting it within the framework of biblical story. The poem gains its power at once from the sense of timeless and inescapable repetition of a pattern, and from a striking departure from it. The Isaac to be sacrificed here by the Nazis is, unlike the biblical Isaac, a father (the poet’s father) rather than a son, an old man rather than a young one. He is thoroughly accustomed to the procedure, as if he were the descendant of untold Isaacs who have been chosen by God and know that, unlike the Isaac of the Bible, they will not be rescued by a good angel from the sharpened blade. “Isaac, old, was not deceived / as when he’d been that lad from Genesis; / he knew that there would be no lamb.” Always he speaks in “a tired voice,” as if wearied of the process of being chosen and being sacrificed, and knowing better than to expect rescue from a God who has done nothing to rescue his Isaacs since the original binding told in Genesis. Indeed, the poem implies that the Genesis story is an archetype of Jewish experience except for its ending, which is not to be believed. But this ancient Isaac, having long ago learned not to expect mercy and rescue from this God, submissively goes to the altar:

and as he smelled the searing fumes,  
he spoke his mind thus:  
“God will not interrupt this slaughter!”  
He called out in a tired voice:  
“Here I am—prepared to be your ram.”

*Translated by Etta Blum.
Several of Glatstein’s Holocaust poems take the form of a dialogue between the poet who presents the accusations of his people and the Jewish God who tries to justify His action or inaction during the great destruction. In “My Brother Refugee,” Glatstein appears at first to be sacrificing God’s power in order to rescue the belief in His goodness. In the first part of the poem, God is presented as just another powerless, persecuted Jew, in fact a “brother refugee.” The poet discovers new fellowship with so miserable a character, and wonders how he could in olden times have expended so much energy in profaning the words and blaspheming the person of so helpless and pitiful a creature. But is this “human” and lovable God really the God of the Jews, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Glatstein’s mixture of skepticism and belief, of aggression and reconciliation, is conveyed in the declaration “The God of my unbelief is magnificent.”

This God, when His turn comes to speak, is in no mood to make great claims for Himself. In fact, He acknowledges that the Jews (whose faithfulness to Him has, after all, been greater than His to them) have now become, by virtue of their unprecedented “wallowing in dust,” “godlier than I am,” and predicts that the nations “will yet bow / to their anguish.” But here the poet’s irony and bitterness overcome his newfound affection. Who needed, who requested, such exaltation?

But God, my brother,  
why have you exalted my people like this,  
constellating their misfortune  
across the whole sky?

God comes up with an extraordinary, and perhaps desperate answer that says, in effect, that since the Christian version of the Messiah—“a childish fable with foolish words”—left the world just as it had always been, He decided to crucify the whole Jewish people, thus “constellating their misfortune across the whole sky.” No sooner does Glatstein allow himself to imagine a God with the power to act in history, than he imagines a God implicated in monstrosity, who confirms the election of His people
through eternity by decimating them, and dreams that His people "will bloom / crucified forever on a shining tree." The poem ends, therefore, with Glatstein's retreat into the image of a very small, childlike, helpless God, entirely dependent on the few remaining Jews willing to dream Him into existence.

In another poem, Glatstein states boldly yet with inescapable logic that "Without Jews there is no Jewish God. / If we leave this world / The light will go out in your tent." If God's ultimate purposes for the universe required the creation and election of the Jewish people, how can God condone the extinction of that people? The removal of any member of the family of nations is a crime against humanity, against human diversity and the nature of mankind. The removal of this particular member, however, must constitute God's self-destruction. Without Jews,

Who will dream you?
Who will remember you?
Who deny you?
Who yearn for you?
Who, on a lonely bridge,
Will leave you—in order to return?
(Translated by Nathan Halper)

These lines are not only an expression of the peculiarly intimate relation between the Jews and their God, or a skeptic's suggestion that God's existence is merely subjective, the creation of human minds, but a recognition that God had made the Jews the special instrument for the achievement of His purposes and their life His chief interest. The death of the Jews means the death of God: "The Jewish hour is guttering. / Jewish God! / You are almost gone."

More than any other Jewish myth, however, the Covenant between God and the Jewish people is for Glatstein the locus for his paradoxical mixture of faith and denial, submission and outrage. "Dead Men Don't Praise God," one of Glatstein's most ambitious poems, is based entirely on the idea that the Jews as a people have been called into existence to serve God's purpose in the world, and that they
were created by His special act of Covenant. It depends especially on the doctrine, whose use we have already noted in Kaplan's diary, that Jews of all generations were potentially present at Sinai, and were as much recipients of the Torah as those physically there. But it treats the Holocaust too as an event of more than human significance, whose full implications for Jewish existence can be fathomed only if it is understood in precisely the way we have traditionally understood the Covenant, of which it is at once a validation and a denial:

We received the Torah on Sinai
and in Lublin we gave it back.
Dead men don't praise God,
the Torah was given to the living.
And just as we all stood together
at the giving of the Torah,
so did we all die together at Lublin.

If the gift of life at Sinai was a collective one to every generation of Jews, then the plague of death at Lublin-Maidanek (and all the other death factories for which it stands) must also implicate every Jew; if all stood at Sinai, then all fell in the slaughter at Lublin:

The souls of those who had lived out their lives, of those who had died young,
of those who were tortured, tested in every fire,
of those who were not yet born,
and of all the dead Jews from great grandfather Abraham down.

That Moses, Aaron, King David, and the multitudes already dead should come to die again at Lublin perversely confirms the logic of the Covenant. What they were given at Sinai was not physical but spiritual life; if they were indeed being required to return the Covenant, then their souls must be killed as well as their bodies. What better place for such a second death than Lublin?

That the Jews of all generations should congregate for death in the Holocaust in the same way that they had congregated for life in the Covenant shows the continuity between Sinai and Lublin and the unity of the Jewish people—in both cases, a kind of arbitrariness visited upon
all individual Jews, whether they liked it or not, and whether they “deserved” it or not, the collective fate of the Chosen People. But this continuity of chosenness is threatened by the discontinuity between the old and the new covenants. The pain and suffering that devolve upon the Chosen People may themselves be a sign of their invisible destiny, but the Holocaust, far from bringing a voice of redemption, seems to drown out the redeeming voice of Sinai. “Above the gas chambers / and the holy dead souls, / a forsaken abandoned Mount Sinai veiled itself in smoke.” The Sinai Covenant makes its presence felt above Lublin, but the smoke of the death factories blackens and conceals Sinai itself. The new covenant obliterates the original one, for if all Jews are present to be killed at Lublin, then the new covenant is none other than a covenant for death; if all Jews have been done to death at Lublin, then it logically follows that the Torah has been returned: “Dead men don’t praise God, / The Torah was given to the living.”

Whereas Glatstein’s anguish moved him, again and again, to resort to traditional structures of religious meaning only to fill those structures with a body of experience that seemed at once to make sense only within them and to defy all sense whatever, Aaron Zeitlin stood virtually alone among Yiddish poets in viewing the Holocaust of the Jewish people not only within the confines of, but as a terrifying testimony to, the truths of orthodox Jewish religion.* He was among the few who claimed to hear a redeeming voice from Auschwitz, and who refused to back away from the recognition that God, if He is indeed the traditional Jewish God who acts within history, must be the God of the Holocaust as well as the God of Sinai. He may also be the hidden God of Isaiah, but he cannot be the reduced, powerless God sometimes imagined by Glatstein.

Zeitlin was saved by an accident of fate from perishing in the Holocaust. He had written a play about German militarism called In Keynems Land (In No Man’s Land)

* All Zeitlin translations are by Robert Friend.
that opened in Warsaw in 1938. In the spring of 1939, he was invited by Maurice Schwartz to New York for the Yiddish Art Theatre's premiere of his play. While he was in New York, the war broke out and prevented his return to his family, all of whom were murdered by the Nazis. The Holocaust came to occupy the center of his emotional, poetic, and religious life. Unlike Glatstein, he wrote from the compulsion of religious conscience, rather than from the impulse to memorialize and resurrect the dead through art. In fact, the Holocaust seemed to him to have rendered the whole literary enterprise frivolous: "Were Jeremiah to sit by the ashes of Israel today, he would not cry out a lamentation, nor would he drown the desolate places with his tears. The Almighty Himself would be powerless to open up his well of tears. He would maintain a deep silence. For even an outcry is now a lie, even tears are mere literature, even prayers are false."

It was a religious, not a literary, impulse that moved Zeitlin to the composition of his two-volume justification of the ways of God to men: "I Believe."

Belief pervades the poem, since for Zeitlin the beginning of inquiry is not "If there be a God, how could the Holocaust have been permitted to happen?" but "Since there is a God, what does the Holocaust mean?" The aggression directed toward God in other Yiddish poems on this subject is here directed primarily toward competing religions that claim to derive from Judaism. "Should I believe in Spinoza's geometric god?" he asks. This is a god "without horror or miracle," to be sure, but also without relation to men in general or Jews in particular. There is an intentional ambiguity in Zeitlin's reference to this monistic and naturalistic god as "a distant relative / who won't acknowledge me as his relation." The "me" refers not only to humanity at large but to Zeitlin's Jewish identity; and Spinoza's god is a kind of snobbish relative because he was conceived by a Dutch Jew yet explicitly rejected the election of the Jews acknowledged by Christianity itself. Rather than believe in this utterly detached and indifferent god of nature Zeitlin would "willingly believe in Satan and damnation."
Christianity too is objectionable both for its general inadequacy to the human condition—its location of human guilt and divine mystery in the wrong places—and for its need to affirm itself through the denial of Torah, to found its life on Jewish death.

Should I believe in the redeemer who never redeems, the dreamed-up god who dangles on all the crosses, . . . the god of cloister bells whom the dark dreams of sadists bleed and kill with the deliberate will to torture my truth with his lie?

Zeitlin here means to call up the centuries-old invocation of alleged Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus as a license to kill Jesus (over and over again) and the Jews at once. How trivial, in any case, does the Christian mystery of a god become a man appear when viewed by a generation that has experienced the reality, and the mystery, of Hitler,

a devil who became a man, who lived with us here upon earth, lived and was seen, lived and was heard, and—incinerating, gassing—crucified a people.

Here are transformations enough to satisfy the most voracious appetite for mysteries. Yet it is clear that the Christian myth evokes something more than vituperation from Zeitlin. Like Glatstein, Zeitlin is ensnared by a certain morbid fascination for the very Christian image that he exorciates into imagining the whole Jewish nation as a crucified people. By so doing, he claims (again like Glatstein) to be giving to a literary fable the moral significance that always inhered in it, but that was never fully realized until the Holocaust. (Neither of these Yiddish poets seems aware of the fact that by the very act of insisting that the murder of six million Jews is the true crucifixion, they are endorsing the very Christian scheme that they derogate, which claims that the conformity between the Cross and the suffering of all mankind is precisely what makes innocent suffering bearable.)
Having disposed of the claims of the Spinozistic and Christian rivals to Judaism as untenable in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Zeitlin dismisses modern secular ideologies and man-made religions with a mere wave of the hand as "More hollow than ever . . . / After the all-destroying flames." Whatever cries of rebellion arise from the Holocaust can be flung only at the one God who could have ordained the Holocaust. What but an orthodox structure can make rebellion meaningful?

Who would rebel against pale Jesuses?
And who would rage
against a Spinozan god,
a nonbeing being?

Zeitlin feels himself and his God to be locked into a pattern from which there can be no escape except at the price of denying one's principle of being. "One is—what one is. / I am Jew as He is God." Zeitlin's must be a living God; and since He is living, He is of necessity and unavoidably the God of cataclysm, the God of the Holocaust.

Zeitlin's voice is as a rule far more personal, far less representative and collective than that of other Yiddish Holocaust poets. He typically uses "I" rather than "we." Yet in the most deeply felt passages expressing the irrevocability of the covenantal relationship between the Divine Father and the favored but chastised child, Zeitlin is forced to link himself with all the others who are no more, and without whose tacit consent he could not with any decency accept justification or consolation for their suffering.

Can I then choose not to believe
in that living God whose purposes
when He destroys, seeming to forsake me,
I cannot conceive;
choose not to believe in Him
Who having turned my body to fine ash
begins once more to wake me?

The pressure of emotion obliges Zeitlin, without ever forsaking the singular pronoun, to join himself with the body of the Jewish people whom God has burned in order to
reawaken. That “aspiration” to the Holy One through the crematory flue which provoked bitter irony in Glatstein becomes a declaration of faith—albeit tragic and paradoxical faith—in Zeitlin. Although he uses the Yiddish word Khurbn, for Zeitlin the idea behind the English word Holocaust retains its full, original meaning, derived through the Greek holokauston from the Hebrew olah, “an offering made by fire unto the Lord.”

Although Zeitlin does not hesitate to involve God totally in the Holocaust and to profess faith that the burning and the awakening are part of a single process, he gives no indication of where the signs of new life are to be found in this world. That so much suffering is even more difficult to conceive without God than with Him, that “even my pain confirms Him,” that without God our cries are like dead letters reaching nowhere: all this is convincingly expressed. But that there is in truth a divine rationale for what the poet has himself labeled the devil’s destructiveness remains an article of faith, a willed belief sustained by no evidence:

I believe God gives
His inconceivable hells
because somewhere else
His eye surmises
Inconceivable paradises
for his slaughtered fugitives.

That “somewhere” has, to the mind of anyone but an orthodox believer, a fatal vagueness; for Zeitlin, however, it is the next world, whose standards are simply incommensurable with our own and can therefore hardly be conveyed through human language.

Whereas Glatstein thought that the Covenant granted at Sinai was dissolved by the great slaughter at Lublin-Maidanek, Zeitlin insists that God’s presence manifested itself in both places: “Who so volcanic as my God? / If He is Sinai to me, / He is Maidanek as well.” Maidanek too confirms the covenantal relationship between God and the Jews, who are depicted by Zeitlin as locked into a fatal embrace from which there is no escape but through death. “We cannot let go / of each other, / not He of me, nor I of
Him.” A secular poet like Yehuda Amichai can respond to such a recognition with the ironic “My God, my God, / Why have you not forsaken me!” But for Zeitlin the death that is the price of the Covenant is a death that breaks through the limits of this world to a new life. The Holocaust is for him nothing less than the biblically promised destruction of the world by fire, as well as the catastrophe that according to Jewish tradition must precede the messianic deliverance. So far is Zeitlin from the view that Auschwitz and Maidanek represented a radical evil, wholly divorced from God’s purposes, that he repeatedly, even compulsively, refers to God’s “experiments” in the Holocaust, “experiments on me, / experiments in fire.” He knows that no other word so effectively calls up the obscene, cold cruelty of the Germans’ treatment of people they had relegated to the status of laboratory rats. No other word could serve to involve the Jewish God so totally in the depredations visited upon His people, and thereby give credence to the blasphemous view of the skeptical writer (see, e.g., the Israeli novelist Kaniuk) that the God who willingly presided over Auschwitz must himself be a Nazi.

Few readers, whatever their religious convictions, are likely to give intellectual assent to Zeitlin’s defiant affirmations. But they can hardly fail to be awed by so passionate a commitment to the biblical promise of consolation, and so complete an expression of the experience of loss and gain, curse and blessing. Far from being suppressed, the pattern of violent oscillation between love and chastisement in God’s tragic relationship with the Jews is the cornerstone of Zeitlin’s faith:

He lets no one go under,
as He lets me go under,
lets no one be
so utterly
a paradigm in fire.
There is no one He will equally desire
to find, to lose.
And I for my part find and lose Him, too,
lose Him and find Him,
an interchange of beatitude and law,
lamentations and the Song of Songs.
There is no coherent and connected body of fiction about the Holocaust that has the weight and impressiveness and unity of theme of Holocaust poetry. A poet facing a world emptied of his people and his God can make of those very absences his subject. This is particularly true of the postwar Yiddish poets. For them, as Glatstein wrote, “earth and heaven [were] wiped bare”; the Yiddish-speaking world that was their subject and their potential audience no longer existed. Their poetry became an extended elegy for what was no more and a reproach to, and quarrel, with, the God who was, whether by inadvertence or design, responsible for the disappearance of the Jewish world.

For a writer of fiction, it is far less easy to find a sufficient subject in deploring the absence of his proper subject, or to make his art solely a vehicle for accusing God of having emptied the world of meaning, of words, of the Covenant itself. Yet novelists too, albeit with greater indirection, have assaulted the heavens with question and challenge, and have sought to define the religious dimensions of the Holocaust, sometimes against the background of Jewish history, sometimes through an apocalyptic mode that makes Jewish experience the instrument for revelation of the darkest universal truths. Andre Schwarz-Bart’s The Last of the Just (1959) provides a representative example of the first approach, and Piotr Rawicz’s Blood from the Sky (1961) of the second.

For writers whose primary quandaries about the Holocaust are religious in nature, the long continuance of Jewish suffering over thousands of years appears in a double aspect. On the one hand, the endless persecutions and hideous massacres seem a blatant contradiction of God’s love and concern for His Chosen People. As an old Eastern European Jewish quip, half-Hebrew, half-Yiddish, puts it:

אלה בחרתנו מכל העמים: והם באים?
 cứngאלם פון דיי פאלאן יראלאן?
Thou hast chosen us from among all the nations; why did you have to pick on the Jews?  

But on the other hand, the endurance of the Jewish people in spite of suffering and loss, its ability to survive long after its most potent enemies and overlords had disappeared from the face of the earth, to survive against all odds, seemed inexplicable except by miraculous causes, and specifically by a God whose chastisement of the Jews was inseparable from the desire to fulfill His purposes through them. The very decision to view the Nazis as descendants of Haman and Pharaoh, to see the Holocaust as an event of Jewish history, the latest and culminating disaster in an ancient series, would seem likely to predispose an author to imply an element of supernatural design in even the most dismal universe, a promise of continuance even after the impending cataclysm.

In Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just*, these opposing attitudes (or conflicting emotions) coexist in uneasy tension with one another. The book traces the history of a family named Levy from the York massacre of 1185, "a minor episode in a history overstocked with martyrs," through its apparent extinction in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The thread that links the many generations of the family is not only persecution and suffering—the "holocaust" that is said to have afflicted the Jews "since the beginning of time"—but their possession, in every generation, of a Lamed-Vovnik, one of the thirty-six Just Men upon whom, according to Jewish tradition, the world reposes. It does so because the Lamed-Vovnik takes everyone's suffering upon himself and "'raises it to heaven and sets it at the feet of the Lord—who forgives.'" Schwarz-Bart's history of the Levy family is a dismal record of frightful persecution, but it is also a chronicle of noble heroisms and, above all, of miraculous survival. The original Just Man of the Levys went to his martyr's death convinced that he was the last of his line and his generation, the last of the Jews. So too did many of his successors through the centuries. But they were mistaken; always a remnant remained. Consequently, that part of the novel which carries us from the twelfth to the
twentieth century beautifully celebrates what Simon Rawidowicz once called the phenomenon of Israel as the ever-dying people: "a phenomenon which has almost no parallel in mankind's story: a nation that has been disappearing constantly for the last two thousand years, exterminated in dozens of lands all over the globe, reduced to half or third of its population by tyrants ancient and modern—and yet it still exists. . . . "

The largest segment of the novel is devoted to the story of Ernie Levy, who learns at an early age that he is destined to be the Just Man of the Levy tradition in the era of Nazi domination over Europe. The fate of the Jews throughout history and now under the Nazis moves Ernie to curse and blaspheme God, between whom and himself "there was an unbreachable wall . . . of Jewish lamentations." Yet as the Nazi net closes upon his people, and he moves to fulfill his inherited role of comforter and martyr, finally turning himself in voluntarily to the Germans at Drancy, Ernie becomes a believer in precisely the God who has been the author of Jewish misfortune through millennia. En route to the gas chambers with a group of Jewish children who have come to think of him as their "rabbi," Ernie prays: "'O Lord, we went forth like this thousands of years ago. We walked across arid deserts and the blood-red Red Sea in a flood of salt, bitter tears. We are very old. We are still walking. Oh, let us arrive, finally!' " From such passages, in which Ernie's experience fits into an assigned place as the culmination of a series of like events in Jewish history, one could indeed conclude with Rawidowicz: "A nation dying for thousands of years means a living nation. Our incessant dying means uninterrupted living, rising, standing up, beginning anew. . . . If we are the last—let us be the last as our fathers and forefathers were. Let us prepare the ground for the last Jews who will come after us, and for the last Jews who will rise after them, and so on until the end of days." But there is another, contrary movement of the novel, in which Schwarz-Bart uses Jewish history only to repudiate it, and to deny the consolation implicit in the old affirmation, periodically made after Jewish populations were
decimated: "the people Israel lives." The segment of the novel that describes Ernie's journey into death really does insist that he is indeed the last of the Just, that he will be survived by none, and that this is final death for him and his people. "Ernie realized clearly that he was entering the last circle of the Levys' hell." In the camp, he does fulfill his historically prescribed role as Just Man by offering to the children the consolation of new life to come in the "Kingdom of Israel," but it is a false consolation, a lie that he dispenses because "'there is no room for truth here.' " Not in his words, but in his face "the death of the Jewish people . . . was written clearly." In the moments before death, "it seemed to him that an eternal silence was closing down upon the Jewish breed marching to slaughter—that no heir, no memory would supervene to prolong the silent parade of victims." In all these passages, the novelist appears to say that the Holocaust was truly the end of the Jewish people and even to warn that longevity, which may cultivate its own illusions and complacency, is no guarantee of permanence.

The tension between the impulse to see the Holocaust as another tragic event within the history of an ever dying and therefore eternally Chosen People and the contrary impulse to see it as the end of Jewish history and a denial of the Jewish God continues to the end of the novel, and beyond it. A moment before his death by gas, Ernie recalls the legend of a rabbinical ancestor who, martyred by Roman fire while wrapped in the scrolls of the Torah, told his people with his last breath that although the Torah parchment was burning, its letters were taking wing. "'Ah, yes, surely, the letters are taking wing,' Ernie repeated as the flame blazing in his chest rose suddenly to his head." But whatever of affirmation is to be found in Ernie's final revelation of Jewish continuance is turned to mockery by the blasphemous concluding prayer of the narrator himself:


Earlier in the novel, an elderly Jew in Paris had called God
to account for His unending punishment of the Jews for their iniquities by warning: ‘We Jews will soon sleep in the dust, and one day you will seek us . . . and we will no longer exist.’” By finally identifying himself with this reproach to God, even Schwarz-Bart—a writer with only the vaguest idea of the meaning of the Jewish Covenant, and with an abundant hostility toward the Jewish God—finds himself, like Glatstein and Molodowsky, partner to an ancient quarrel that confirms the very attachment it wishes to deny.

Two years after The Last of the Just appeared, another French-Jewish writer of East European background, Piotr Rawicz, published a novel also in the tradition of the Jewish quarrel with God, but much more profoundly aware of the paradox of chosenness that is at its base. Blood from the Sky (1961) is at once more nihilistic and more mystical than Schwarz-Bart’s book. Its innumerable “excursions into ontology” generally terminate in the conclusion that Being is “a foul-smelling dough in a kneading machine” and that “the only enemy of beings is Being.” After watching the Germans, in scenes of unbearable horror, cut out the tongue of a Jewish boy and the eyes of a Jewish girl, the narrator sees in the monstrosity before him, “the belly of the Universe, the belly of Existence . . . gaping open, and its filthy intestines invading the room.” This is taken as irrefutable proof that “God is mad, stark raving mad. . . .” If He exists at all, He should create only atheists. But alongside the nausea and cosmic disgust that reverberate through the book, there is another impulse, which must be responsible for the fact that the book exists at all, since one target of its metaphysical fury is literature itself, “anti-dignity exalted to a system.” The novel’s narrator and protagonist is a Ukrainian Jew named Boris, whose story and reflections and poetic fragments are framed by the editorial comments of the author Rawicz, who claims he has had to do much cutting and reshaping to give some coherence to Boris’ outpourings. Boris, in his grim and peculiar fashion, is a continuator of the tradition of a rabbi among his ancestors who had pleaded on behalf
of the Jewish people against God. This rabbi had readily acknowledged his own sins and those of his brethren, but had challenged God to say what He would do “‘If You were the permanent target of every kind of mockery and cruelty and yet, in the teeth of it, had to survive? To survive, not because You love life . . . but from a sense of duty, so that someone survived by whom Your Law would be more or less rigorously observed?’” Boris, witness and victim of more terrible mockery and cruelty than his grandfather’s generation had ever known, flings his people’s reproach against a God who now threatens not only Jewish existence but, through His punishment of His wayward people, the ground of all being and the meaning of existence itself.

Jewish history exists in Blood from the Sky primarily as an aspect of the mental world of its protagonist, who comes to view the Holocaust as both a collapsed history of the Jewish people and a test of whether that history had ultimate meaning. Boris senses that this long history and the ordering it gave to human experience may now be not merely ended but rendered absurd by the new barbarism. All of Jewish history was now being relived within a few years and “was possibly about to be extinguished before our eyes, and together with us.” Both the horrible events recounted in the novel and the concurrent story of the narrator’s attempt to impose coherence on them by writing a “composition on the subject of decomposition” call into question the power of Jewish history to provide a meaningful background to the Holocaust. One character asserts that “both past and future must be destroyed so that they may be integrated in the solely existing present.” Rawicz, unlike Schwarz-Bart, does not believe that the destruction of European Jewry can be presented or contained within the historical mode because it is an apocalyptic event. His postscript to the novel insists that “this book is not a historical record.” Elsewhere he has maintained that in his writing he is less concerned with the historical than with the psychological, the metaphysical, “above all the ontological aspects” of the Holocaust. “I believe that the fate and condition of the Jewish people are
the very essence of the human condition—the furthest borders of human destiny. And the fate of the ‘Holocaust Jew,’ . . . is . . . the ontological essence of that ontological essence.”¹¹ Yet the ontological revelation toward which the novel strives would be meaningless if it did not provide an answer to the question of whether Jewish history pointed beyond itself to the relation between the Jewish God and all mankind. The novel’s implicit claim to greatness depends upon its ability to demonstrate Emil Fackenheim’s assertion that, precisely because the Germans cut off Jews from humanity and denied them the right to exist, Jews have since Auschwitz come to “represent all humanity when they affirm their Jewishness and deny the Nazi denial.”¹² Boris, in his most desperate moments of imprisonment and torture, declares that “the body of History [is] attacked by cockroaches . . . but they will not devour it. . . .”

The paradox of chosenness whereby the gift of the Covenant that the Jews were singularly privileged to receive became the single reason for their persecution and murder is the pivot on which the novel’s action turns. Boris, the hero and narrator, at first speaks ironically of a certain unwillingness to escape from the fate of his fellow Jews because “I have the feeling it would be a cheap way out not to pay for all that I have received from my God.” In fact, Boris has many traits that would aid his escape from the Nazis and their Ukrainian helpers. He is fair-haired, he speaks excellent German, he has mastered Ukrainian history and literature, and he has managed to obtain a Christian birth certificate. Only one thing can keep him from passing as a non-Jew: “The sign of the Covenant, inscribed in my body long ago, as it had been inscribed in the bodies of my forefathers and THEIR forefathers, could be made out all too plainly by those taking part in the hunt that was going on in our town. It was within the capacity of the dimmest oaf from Bavaria to interpret this hieroglyph. . . .”

It is not too much to say that in this book not only Jewish history but the nature of literature and ultimately the whole
of the universe converge on the circumcision as sign of the Covenant. From the outset of the book the ultimate meaning of the Covenant, the question of whether Boris can ever become sufficiently attached to life to prefer it to death, and the ability of Boris (or anyone else) to compose a work of literature about the Holocaust are intertwined. Of the novel’s three parts, the first and the third make explicit reference to the mysterious link between the circumcision by which the Jew is distinguished from the gentile and the metaphorical habit whereby writers discover surprising similarities between things apparently dissimilar: Part One is called "The Tool and the Art of Comparison," Part Three, "The Tool and the Thwarting of Comparisons." From the outset, the novel asks whether the paradigm for the writer’s act of creation is supplied by God or by the Nazis. There seems a deliberate ambiguity in Boris’s reference to the yellow stars that the Jews must wear in accordance with Nazi decree as “yellow stars of the Poet-King.” This would seem to be a reference to the God of the Covenant, but when Boris’s madly brilliant friend Leo L. contemplates the Germans’ impending sweep through the town, he calls them “destroying angels” and says that it is they, not the Jewish God, who hold the key to the whole cosmic drama, since “‘this Performance of Nothingness . . . is less misleading than everything else. . . .’” When the Germans, having already “chosen” the whole Jewish people to be murdered, are contemplating those Jews from whom they will select the first group to be murdered, Boris describes the moment as one of “vibrant complicity that arises between artist and raw material before the act of creation begins.”

Before the town was destroyed, Leo L., though cynical about all else, had spoken to Boris of “the vocation to be witness,” the only vocation that could ever again matter. But when, after his survival, Boris turns to the task of bearing witness to the saving remnant of the Jewish people, he finds that both the town and its memory are dead, that the “I” who lived in the town and who then survived prison and torture hardly exists in the man who puts pen to paper. “When a whirlwind comes along, one must make the most of
it, exploit it, start writing at once, lying at once.” But the difficulty of ascertaining any substantial relationship between the events of the Holocaust and the literature that describes them is only the beginning of the conundrum. After the Holocaust, “the ‘literary manner’ is an obscenity by definition.” Rawicz’s own dilemma in re-creating and interpreting the cosmic catastrophe that he survived is made a main subject of the novel itself. Blood from the Sky deplores, in every conceivable way, on the suggestive as well as the discursive level, the paralysis of language and imagination caused by this crime of unprecedented magnitude against the Jewish people and the human condition itself. “One by one,” complains Boris, “words—all the words of the human language—wilt and grow too weak to bear a meaning. And then they fall away, like dead scales. All meanings evaporate.” If this happens to the writer, he must cease to be one. The novel is therefore filled with would-be writers searching out ways to continue to write in a universe emptied of meaning. One madman named David G. keeps a diary that after the war becomes the basis for a widely popular novel. Its idea of “constructive action” in modern literature is to “spit on everything.” At one point when Boris is masquerading as a Ukrainian, he is obliged to listen to a story composed by a Nazi second lieutenant of literary inclinations while outside the window the heads of five Jewish men who have been buried, alive, upright in a garden are being licked and chewed by pigs. At least this Nazi litterateur remains untroubled by the inadequacies of naturalism, for his sole subject is cockroaches killing other cockroaches.

It is this very image of the cockroach, almost compulsive in the novel, that invades Boris’s thoughts after he is arrested and asked to drop his trousers, revealing the penis. “On it, the sign of the Covenant is inscribed in indelible lettering, all too easy for these bustling men to read. The tool and the art of comparison.” Henceforward, his “dreams could not possibly come under any heading but entomology. Cockroaches’ dreams.” Since their escape from the Ukrainian Jewish town, Boris and his mistress Naomi had
attached themselves, however precariously, to life not only through guile and luck but through their shared sexual passion. Now the tool of passion that had kept alive in Boris at least the illusion of meaning in life becomes the means of flinging him back among the members of the Jewish community covenanted to death. He wishes to pass as a Ukrainian among his gentile fellow prisoners, but they single him out in the shower by pointing to his circumcised tool:

Boris would stare at the subject of contention: so this was the instrument, the poor instrument, of all his past metaphysics? Of all his metaphysics which in the past had seemed so personal, so exceptional, and which today were no more peculiar to him, no more “individual,” than are the entrails of one squashed cockroach as compared to the entrails of another?

The book’s most daring exercise of that “art of comparison” with which the “tool” is consistently linked either by similarity or contrast comes at the conclusion of part one. The Germans have just made an abattoir of a Jewish kindergarten, mutilating but not murdering the children. Two hours after the Germans leave, Boris manages to return to the scene with a nurse, who carries a syringe. “Several mutilated children were still suffering. The nurse went around distributing death, like portions of gingerbread stuffed with darkness. For they do exist, Boris assures us, cakes stuffed with darkness. He also compares the nurse to the gardener who fulfills the destiny of the flowers and the sunshine by picking them.” Here the art of comparison exemplifies literature’s ability to assimilate new realms of experience to the imagination by linking disparate sensations through the bond of simile and metaphor. This is an artistic triumph of sorts, and yet it fills the author with revulsion rather than pride, for either it admits us into a world it would be better never to have known or deludes us into thinking we can know this world through words. Not long afterward, therefore, Boris, about to succumb to the temptation to compare each of the millennia that have elapsed or are yet to come to a squashed bedbug, resolves “to
kill comparisons, to expunge them all, to exterminate the whole tribe, the whole pernicious breed.” He must reluctantly admit, of course, that if figures of speech are killed forever, nothing is left to the writer but “mere recounting, mere enumeration, so pullulating, and so ugly . . . worthy only of a storekeeper.”

What then is the connection between Boris’s revulsion from the Covenant and his revulsion from literature? If the genocidal extermination of the Jewish people as if they were bedbugs or cockroaches has spread its poison even to “the Throne of God, who lay in a swoon . . . surrounded by His own vomit,” then it has also transformed literature into “the art, occasionally remunerative, of rummaging in vomit.” It is absurd and irrational that the sign of the Covenant, a mere detail of physiognomy, should, despite all one’s talents and cleverness and acquirement, make him indistinguishable as an individual from all other Jewish males and obliterate every distinction except that between Jew and gentile. But if it is so, fears Boris, then the German aspirant to literature who writes exclusively about cockroaches killing other cockroaches is the real master of the old art of comparison. Everything hinges on the question of whether the Jews have been chosen by God or only by the world.

Finally, Boris’s sixty-six days in prison, during which time he tries to persuade his captors that, despite his circumcision, he is a Ukrainian and not a Jew, reveal to him the true connection between the Covenant and creation, both literary and biological. Just prior to, and again during, his interrogation by the S.S., Boris perceives the Sign of Terrestrial Life, “a transverse line giving rise to three stems, each surmounted by a small flame.” He had first learned to recognize this pattern when he was nearing his thirteenth year, the age of ritual maturity in Jewish males, and was being initiated into the mysteries of the Book of Creation. He had been visited by it on three subsequent occasions. Now, in its crucial visit to Boris, the Sign of Life drives all developments and phenomena “back to their point of departure, back to their seed and even to the seed of
their seed.” The Sign brings Boris to the recognition that the Covenant, which has come to him, like life itself, from his ancestors, is exactly the Word become flesh. The Sign of Life brings him to awareness of the implications of the fact that his tool, “this factory for producing metaphysics,” has come through the shipwreck of everything else still alive, still responding, still capable of creation. “And there he was, unbuttoning his trousers with his manacled hands and baring, yet again, the organ on which the sign of the Covenant had been inscribed years before. Did this door still open onto God? Did it at least open onto the Divine . . . ? Dull rites, dull symbols, and those which are less so: are the Covenant with God and physical passion, sharing the same site and founded in the same crucible, the same thing . . . ? Could the Biblical patriarch, that forefather clad in the red desert and resonant dust, have foreseen this thought of mine? Did he set me a playful riddle, one that I am succeeding in solving after thousands of years—at the LAST moment?” This is as close as Rawicz and Boris will bring us to unraveling the mysterious connection between the Jewish Covenant and the creative act that underlies not merely literature but the universe itself. Less mysterious is the revelation to Boris that from a moral point of view there is one fate worse than being circumcised: namely, being uncircumcised. For no sooner is Boris accepted by his fellow prisoners as (what he is not) a gentile than he receives membership in the society of those Czeslaw Milosz called the “uncircumcised, the associates of death.”

**Blood from the Sky** is built upon two enormous paradoxes. It asserts in a variety of ways that the Holocaust cannot be assimilated by the artistic imagination, and that “man never so much resembles an insect as when he engages in the activity of writing.” But its intellectual brilliance admits us to a realm beyond grief and so belies the very paralysis that it deplores. It gains its unique power from Rawicz’s ability to “constellate [Jewish] misfortune across the whole sky,” as Glatstein would say, and to show how the destruction of the Jews has permanently disarranged the universe and altered the human condition. Yet Rawicz has
placed himself firmly within the Jewish tradition that pleads on behalf of His people against the God who has chosen them. Cynical as he is about the universe and the powers alleged to control it, Boris argues that the Jews, "by dint of strange and inhumanly systematized meditations, had succeeded in approaching what was godlike in the human condition as no one else had ever done. . . . " With bitterness and cynicism, Rawicz reduces the Covenant from the spiritual to the merely physical; then, with resentment and grudging respect, he admits that only the Covenant is metaphysically capacious enough to contain the storms of his imagination and the meaning of the Holocaust.

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10. Ibid., pp. 140, 142.
We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.—William Butler Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae