

Derrida's Holocaust

ABSTRACT

By way of an abstract, I will say that the paper I wanted to write would have been called something like "Sentiment and *Ressentiment* in the Memory of the Holocaust." After Sianne Ngai's brilliant neologism (and her discussion of Beckett, which strangely ignores the echoes of the Holocaust in *How It Is*), I might have called it "On the Holocaust and the Stuplime." But perhaps this (these?) is in fact the paper I have written. Not that Derrida, or deconstruction, would immediately come up as the go to venue for sentiments. Still, some clearing up had to occur, some inquisitiveness directed at the discipline that, Karyn Ball tells us, regulates Holocaust discourse, when considering the peculiar and particular nexus that formed around deconstruction as a "Jewish science" (remember that Habermas called Derrida a Jewish mystic) and deconstruction as promiscuous with Nazism (Nietzsche, Heidegger, de Man) and fostering negationism. Let us call the former "sentiment" and the second "ressentiment" (or vice versa) and leave it irreverently at that for now, in order to reflect, as I shall, on Derrida's Holocaust.

Consider that there are those who have described Derrida as a Holocaust survivor. He himself never did (though he told the story of his expulsion from school, under Vichy laws) but it would be easy to claim him, along with Adorno and Levinas, for post-Holocaust thought. Yet, unlike Lyotard or Agamben, say, Derrida did not write a treatise on the Holocaust. If anything, he seems to have spent more time wondering about Nazism ("I do not believe that we as yet know how to think what Nazism is," he wrote). Derrida certainly made clear his ethical, anti-racist commitments and devoted much effort to reading authors, who placed the Holocaust at the height of their concerns (Levinas, Jabes, Celan). But Derrida also seems to have sought after the uncanny and discomfiting contaminations that linger still between Heidegger and Husserl, between Schmitt and Benjamin.

I do not seek to disentangle those knots and threads. It seems important, however, to mark and follow them toward an examination of a sentimentality that exceeds the national (Berlant) and a resentment that may yet surprise us. What better guide than that Derrida?