

Holocaust Poetry--Graduate Seminar--English 563
Room 123--crn # 39513
Fall 2011--Monday, 3-6 pm--Cary Nelson
crnelson@illinois.edu
office: 105 English Bldg.

In Survival in Auschwitz holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi describes an indicative incident during his first days at the camp. Desperately thirsty, he reached out a window to grasp an icicle. A beefy guard knocked it away. "Warum?" Levi asked. The succinct answer carried a certain uncanny ethical and philosophical depth: "Hier ist kein warum." Here there is no why. If the question could not be posed in the death camps, can it be posed in poetry instead? Can poetry put forth its humanity in the face of a world where all such values were extinguished?

In 1940 the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944) was drafted into a labor battalion along with thousands of his fellow Jews. As the war progressed and Hungary brought its policies into greater compliance with those of its German ally, these labor battalions, brutal from the outset, became increasingly lethal. Beaten and starved, the Jews were now randomly murdered. Radnóti nonetheless transformed the horror into poems and wrote them in a small notebook. On August 29, 1944, nearing the end, he wrote the first of four poems under the title "Razglednicas," Serbo-Croatian for "picture postcards." A month later he writes the last of the "Razglednicas" on the back of a cod-liver oil advertizing notice he found discarded. The poem predicts his death: "shot in the neck . . . blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear." On November 9th he met the fate he had anticipated, but nineteen months later, the war over, his body was disinterred and the blood stained poems recovered. Is it sufficient justification for poetry that his testimony now outlives his executioners?

There is no more severe challenge to the aspirations and social functions of poetry than that posed by the holocaust. Leo Haber calls it "pale consolation, dear God of poetry, of justice, of mercy, / of explanations, for the murder of little children." Adorno famously remarked that to write poetry after Auschwitz was obscene. Yet poetry was written both during the war and after, including anti-Semitic poems produced by the Nazis themselves. In that context we might conclude that the genre was so marked by its demonic uses that its myths of transcendence became a cruel joke. We will examine this whole history--poems written by wartime victims, witnesses, and perpetrators; poems written by later generations seeking to keep the historical memories alive and make the events more real. We will read poems from many different countries, using English language texts but comparing them to the original language texts whenever possible. In some cases multiple translations of individual poems exist. Again, we will compare them. Some translators feel one should find equivalents for Radnóti's rhymes; others feel that is the worst choice possible.

Among the poets we will study in detail are Paul Celan, Jacob Glatstein, William Heyen, Dan Pagis, Radnóti, Charles Reznikoff, Nelly Sachs, W. D. Snodgrass, and Abraham Sutzkever. We will also read poems by Brian Daldorph, Jorie Graham, Anthony Hecht, Denise Levertov, Primo Levi, Czesław Miłosz, János Pilinsky, Robert Pinsky, Sylvia Plath, Hilda Schiff, Anne Sexton, and many others, among them the Yiddish poets Aaron Kramer has translated. For general background we'll read War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust by Doris Bergen. In addition to a selection of poems, each week's readings will include essays from The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings, edited by Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg. Anthologies we will use include Marguerite Striar, ed. Beyond Lament: Poets of the World Bearing Witness to the Holocaust, Charles Fishman, ed. Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust, Hilda Schiff, ed. Holocaust Poetry, and Aaron Kramer, ed., The Last Lullaby. You may want to get discounted copies of these books in advance from amazon.com or abebooks.com. We will conduct the class as a collective, collaborative project of interpretation and analysis. The seminar

does not assume expertise on the holocaust, merely willingness to discuss the relevant issues. Please email me with any questions at crnelson@uiuc.edu

Class attendance is required. Each week you need to post by e-mail (to all seminar members and to me) a 2-page poetry analysis and commentary on the week's readings.

Date: Readings:

Aug. 31 Susan Gubar, Chapters 1 and 2, from Gubar, Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew (Indiana Univ Press, 2003).
Levi & Rothberg, The Holocaust, "General Introduction," pp. 1-19

Hilda Schiff, ed. Holocaust Poetry, including the introduction.

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We will read the whole of the Schiff collection to give us an overview of Holocaust poetry. You should send an email post this week to the class in two parts: 1) an analysis of two of the poems in the Schiff collection; 2) first thoughts on Holocaust poetry, consisting of questions and issues raised by the Schiff collection.

AUGUST 31—evening lecture, Michael Rothberg, "Multidirectional Memory,"
7:30 PM, Levis Faculty Center.

Sep. 14 from Levi & Rothberg:
Arthur Cohen, "Thinking the Tremendum," 233-36
Charlotte Delbo, "Days and Memory," 45-49
Jean Amery, "Resentments," 36-44.

Aaron Kramer, ed. The Last Lullaby: Poetry from the Holocaust

Sep. 21 Susan Gubar, Chapter 6, "The Dead Speak"
Jean Francois Lyotard, "The Differend," 257-62 (Levi & Rothberg)
Walter Kalaidjian, "The Holocaust at Home"

Jorie Graham, "Annunciation with a Bullet in It," Michael Hamburger, "Treblinka," Anthony Hecht, "The Book of Yolek," Randall Jarrell, "Protocols," Sharon Olds, "That Year," Alicia Ostriker, "The Eight and Thirteenth," Sylvia Plath, "Daddy," "Getting There," "Lady Lazarus," "Mary's Song," Adrienne Rich, "Eastern War Time," Charles Simac, "My mother was a braid of black smoke," W.D. Snodgrass, "A Visitation," Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Babii Yar."

Sep. 28 from Levi and Rothberg:
Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience," 192-98
Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 199-205
Maurice Blanchot, "The Writing of the Disaster, 299-305

Packet of poems by Abraham Sutzkever, Dan Pagis, Nelly Sachs,
plus Sutzkever poems in Marguerite Striar, ed.,
Beyond Lament and Sachs poems in Hilda Schiff, ed.

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Oct. 5 from Levi & Rothberg:
Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth," 306-12
Geoffrey Hartman, "Language and Culture After the Holocaust,"
313-317

Packet of poems by Paul Celan, Jacob Glatstein, Miklós Radnóti

Oct. 12 from Levi & Rothberg:
Intro, 273-4
Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism & Society," 280-81
Adorno, "Meditations on Metaphysics," 282-87
Irving Howe, "Writing and the Holocaust," 288-90
Marianne Hirsch, "Mourning and Postmemory," 416-422

William Heyen, Shoah Train, "Erika,"
[more to be added]

Oct. 19 from Levi & Rothberg:
Zygmunt Bauman, "The Uniqueness and Normality of the
Holocaust," 82-88
Omer Bartov, "The European Imagination in the Age of
Total War," 89-95
Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Camp?" 252-56

from Marguerite Striar, ed., Beyond Amazement: Poets of the
World Bearing Witness to the Holocaust: Lily Brett, etc.

Oct. 26 Comparative Trauma: packet of poems about,
witness, personal and political violence, modern trauma. This
will give us the opportunity to compare other extreme subjects
to the Holocaust. Is all apocalyptic violence the same? Are all
World War II poems also holocaust poems? Are all genocide poems
interchangeable? Are wartime and peacetime rape and other forms of
violence against women the same?
Readings will include:

World War I: Robert Graves, "Recalling War"; Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et
Decorum Est"
The Armenian Genocide: Siamanto, "The Dance"; Leo Hamalian, "Boghos
Sarkissian, a Watchmaker of Karpaz, Remembers the Turkish
Atrocities of 1915"
World War II: Ingeborg Bachmann, "Early Noon"; Alan Dugan, "Memorial
Service for the Invasion Beach Where the Vacation Flesh is
Over"; Charles Simac, "Begotten of the Spleen"
Hiroshima: Philip Levine, "The Horse"

Vietnam: W.S. Merwin, "The Asians Dying"; Robert Bly, "Counting Small-Boned Bodies"
Cambodia: James Fenton, "Cambodia"
Violence Against Women: Ai, "The Priest's Confession"; Bruce Weigel, "For the Wife Beater's Wife"; Adrienne Rich, "Rape"
Race: Claude McKay, "The Lynching"; Robert Hayden, "Night, Death, Mississippi"

To pursue this topic further see Carolyn Forché, ed. Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness,
Cynthia Edelberg, ed., Scars: American Poetry in the Face of Violence, and Cary Nelson, ed., Anthology of Modern American Poetry.

November 2 Susan Gubar, Chapter 5, "Documentary Verse Bears Witness"
MAPS: Charles Reznikoff

from Levi & Rothberg:
Hannah Arendt, "Eichman in Jerusalem," 246-51
Dan Diner, "Historical Understanding & Counterrationality,"
75-81
Saul Friedlander, "The 'Final Solution'" 69-74
Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Representing Auschwitz," 318-22
Berel Lang, "The Moral Space of Figurative Discourse,"
329-334
James E. Young, "Writing the Holocaust," 335-338

Charles Reznikoff, Holocaust (photocopy)

NOVEMBER 5-6 CONFERENCE-"Genocide, Memory, Justice: The Holocaust in Comparative Contexts"

November 9 from Levi & Rothberg:
Dan Diner, "Negative Symbiosis: Germans and Jews After Auschwitz," 423-30
Joan Miriam Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," 169-77
Pascale Rachel Bos, "Women and the Holocaust: Analyzing Gender Difference," 178-86

Susan Gubar, Chapter 7, "Could You Have Made an Elegy for Every One"

selections from Charles Fishman, ed. Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust

November 16 POEMS TO BE SELECTED BY SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

November 30: HOLOCAUST THEORY

from Levi & Rothberg:
UNIQUENESS, COMPARISON, AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY, 441-480:
Alan Milchman & Alan Rosenberg, "Two Kinds of Uniqueness: The Universal Aspects of the Holocaust," 444-50
Yehuda Bauer, "What Was the Holocaust," 451-54
Paul Gilroy, "The Black Atlantic," 455-60
Mahmood Mamdani, "Thinking about Genocide," 461-67
Lilian Friedberg, "Dare to Compare: Americanizing the Holocaust," 468-73
Peter Novick, "The Holocaust in American Life," 474-80

Dec. 7: TBA

PAPER: In addition to weekly posts, you will turn in a 25-page term paper at the end of the semester. It can focus on a single Holocaust poet, a comparison of two or more poets, or a theoretical or historical issue that cuts across a number of writers.

MAPS: If you click on, say Anthony Hecht, on MAPS, you will find a link to general Holocaust information, including photograph and graphic arts essays on the Holocaust, timelines, and a number of links to other resources. Holocaust information on the web is massive.

Over the course of the semester, we will try to agree on an ideal Holocaust poetry anthology, then post the results on MAPS.