

Brenner, Rachel Feldhay. *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust - Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

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Weighing the Pen against the Gas Chamber

This powerful Holocaust testament contains no images or statistics that have become traditional for Holocaust studies. The fact that the four protagonists eventually did succumb to the Final Solution is central to the book; but neither the Holocaust chronology nor the brutal deaths with each of them suffered, is detailed. The photographs are portraits. The book is about defiance and intellectual victory. The fact that their lives were cut short and their work acknowledged posthumously conveys a real sense of the Holocaust's horror, circumventing the need for statistics or photographs.

Useful for Holocaust- as well as feminism scholars, it would hold value for the lay reader, as a resistance document rather than one of Holocaust history. Not an easy book to read, it contains much detail, corroborating fact and evidence. It is however, a challenging and rewarding piece of work, giving the reader knowledge of these women, deeper than what a straight-forward monograph would give. The gist of this book overrides the negativity of most Holocaust literature.

It must, however, be considered in the comparative paradigm in which it is written. In constantly comparing elements, facts may be alluded to, or bypassed and taken as implicit. This does not hurt the reading of the book, which is smoothly written and elegantly evolved, but as a research text, it must remain within a comparative context.

Brenner positions her study before different theoretical frameworks. This is echoed in the book's division into four sections, each dealing with different psycho-social aspects of resistance, namely the humanist, the theological, the autobiographical and the feminist. In each, the women are grouped in different combinations because of how they relate to one another and to the issues embraced by the chapter. The areas dealt with in each section of the book intermingle cross-referentially throughout its text. Themes and images recur in different contexts. In some respects, this kind of repetition may serve to blur the clarity of the text, but if read carefully, it balances the writer's opinions with standpoints taken by others; and it knits the entire text together cohesively.

Brenner presents a reasoned evaluation of currents which made the Holocaust so terrible, such as psychological damage; witness reliability and the ways in which lived memory and religious practice felt treacherous.

This is exemplified in how Weil and Frank at fourteen, acknowledged their individuality, and how this became a dictum by which they led the remainder of their lives, which is sobering if one considers how little time Frank had left. Weil's decision was based on a

desire to discover truth through beauty, which later influenced her "Spiritual Autobiography". As she developed into adulthood, both physically and spiritually, Frank sort succour in her own strengths and hid herself within herself (25). Hillesum needed to be able to come to terms with pain, which she articulated by living deliberately. Stein's doctoral thesis conflates theoretical issues with personal observations of human behaviour in the face of trauma. She wrote her memoirs while awaiting acceptance into the Carmelite sisterhood.

An interesting element in Brenner's analysis of all four women is how their selfless love for humanity was only positively influenced by the Holocaust. Prior to their death sentence, and while serving it, they focused on generic suffering rather than their own.

Similarly, each articulated a notion of God conceptually close to a sympathetic understanding of Christ. In 1922, Stein converted to Catholicism and took vows in 1933. Weil remained an unbaptised Catholic. Hillesum aligned her beliefs with Catholic precepts. Frank considers the presence of a deity in nature (55). This affinity with Christian/pantheistic theology is common among European Enlightenment Jews but brings about a horrible theological contradiction in relation to Christian-based anti-Semitism which informed Holocaust developments.

Thus Brenner considers the choice of Christianity and the punishment for being born Jewish. Ultimately, each woman developed her own idiosyncratic idea of a godhead, away from any predetermined or taught dogma. While Weil negated all Jewish association, Stein, Hillesum and Frank willingly identified themselves as Jews. They articulated that their acquired Christian/non-affiliated European identities and their Jewish origins coalesced in sympathy with the Holocaust victims to form logical and theological wholes.

The fact that the Final Solution was a death sentence for an unacknowledged "crime", distinguishes this book from much contemporary Jewish Holocaust literature. The contradiction in which they thus found themselves is complex, entwining their beliefs with their unacknowledged ethnic roots.

All were of Western European origin and had had no Jewish affiliation. Integrated into the secular milieu which endorsed material and humanist values, they were made to confront their Nazi victimhood because of their "ethnoreligious origins" (8), at a time too late for them to have been able to see themselves collectively other than as persecuted.

For each, persecution was dealt with autobiographically. Brenner considers this platform as a manifestation of artistic expression as well as a psychological tool. In this respect, documenting one's experiences, however terrible, is positive. Each day transcribed is a creative testament of hope. It becomes a way of breaking the cycle of passive acceptance in the face of horror, to make sense of the world.

Frank used her diary to flesh out "Kitty", an imaginary confidante. This project is poignant because it was not an idle pastime for a young girl developing her expressive

abilities, but a life-line. Kitty was as real to Frank as any of the other surreal aspects of her life. Hillesum wrote letters to real people. Her message is sad and hopeless, and her belief in the apocalyptic destruction of the world as she knew it is implicit. In spite of her battles with translating desperate terror into human language, the gesture aggressively affirms hope.

Each woman dealt with consciousness of her gender in a characteristic manner, which ranges from self-assertion to self-hatred, and a growth from the latter to the former. Gender-based- and cultural-identity remain firmly interlinked. Each woman is aware of the connection between her sex, her religion and her persecution further complicating her predicament.

The writings of these four women form a core of thought in post-Holocaust awareness. It defines one of the ways how Nazism failed: not one lost her humanity in succumbing to her death. Above all, even in the face of inevitable destruction, they defied it by caring.

Brenner's analysis is stimulating and sympathetic. Areas in an interpretation of the text which may have been academically difficult because of their tendency to be sentimental have been dealt with clear-sightedly and objectively. Brenner reveals each woman as imperfect and desperately cleaving to absurd hope - and for this simple reason, as human. Conclusively, the courage to be human within this terrible reality, proves them to be unique and important for Holocaust-, Jewish-, feminist- and humanist scholars alike.

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