

Shellie McCullough

The University of Texas

DECONSTRUCTION AS A PRAYER: CINDERS AND THE “WE” OF DERRIDA’S JEWISH SELF

Keywords: *always already, cendre, deconstruction, différance, dissemination, tout autre, trace, Volk.*

Abstract: *At first glance, neither Judaism nor the Holocaust would appear to have a rightful place in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. However, progressing through the chronology of Derridan texts, one quickly begins to find that issues of Jewish identity begin surfacing throughout his works, and as the philosopher aged, he began to increasingly examine both the Holocaust and his relation to it. In other words, Derrida’s later deconstructive writings regarding Jewishness and the Holocaust allow for an inner examination of his relationship to the Holocaust, and thereby his own Jewishness. In this context, both the word and the historical event of the “Holocaust” becomes a two-way mirror through which readers may attempt to view the inner workings of Derrida’s Jewish self. In his 1991 publication *Cinders*, Derrida openly aligns himself with a collective Jewish “we” by examining and deconstructing the Holocaust through the concept of ashes or cinders. Derrida both begins and ends *Cinders* with a prayer “Il y a là cendre” (Derrida, *Cinders* 21). This paper will trace the manner in which Derrida’s “prayer,” or call to the “other” suggests that cinders are both implicitly and explicitly in the world and bear witness to the Holocaust as the event that has scarred history across temporalities, in the same way the Holocaust has forced a reconfiguration of Derrida’s self in relation to Jewish others who perished in the Shoah.*

“...in spite of so many problems I have with my “Jewishness,” I will never deny it. I will always say “we Jews...” This so tormented “we” is at the heart of what is most worried in my thought of someone I once called, with just a bit of a smile, the “last of the Jews.” It would be in my thought like what Aristotle says of prayer: it is neither true nor false. It is, in fact, literally a prayer” (Derrida, *Learning to Live* 39).

According to the majority of Holocaust Critics, neither Judaism nor the Holocaust would appear to have a rightful place in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. However, in his 1991 publication *Cinders*, Derrida openly aligns himself with a collective Jewish “we” by examining and deconstructing the Holocaust through the concept of ashes or cinders. The decision to concentrate on the Jewish perspective in a discussion on *Cinders*, and to link this word to the Holocaust and a Jewish “I” or self through a “philosophical prayer” mirror how an inner Derridan metamorphosis manifests itself through an external text. Essentially, as he is reconstructing his Jewish self he is deconstructing his previous self, who had been a Heideggerian admirer. Alternating between first, second, and third person perspectives, Derrida indirectly picks apart Heidegger’s philosophy in *Cinders*, which suggests he is deconstructing a previous self, while reconstructing an “I” that aligns itself both personally and philosophically with the historical group identity of the Jews. As Derrida continues to Deconstruct this idea or concept, his voice splits into two personas: 1) The Jew who is on the inside of the ramifications of the historical event called the Holocaust and 2) A displaced, removed subject who uses an aesthetic scalpel to dissect these concepts as if they had no relation or meaning to himself, but only for another person. From this view, one may observe that Derrida’s Jewish identity only surfaces with the subversion of the other half of his self. This paper will trace the manner in which Derrida’s “prayer” suggests that there are cinders in philosophy and in the real world which bear witness to the Holocaust as the event that has scarred history across

temporalities, in the same way the Holocaust has forced a reconfiguration of Derrida's self in relation to Jewish others who perished in the Shoah.

Cinders is a textual, poetic invocation that is comprised of a written text and a recorded reading of a text. The written text then is split or divided into two parts: The left hand side contains a series of citations derived from previous Derridian texts which mention or allude to cinders, and the right hand side contains a poetic, prayer-like rumination woven around the phrase, "Il y a là cendre," or "the cinders are there" (Derrida 21). The entire piece comes to the reader as a polyphony of an indeterminate number of voices in uncertain genders. It is significant that these androgynous utterances are sometimes independent, and at other times speak through a collective codependency. They respond both through textual interaction and silence. The format here becomes a metaphor for Holocaust remembrance itself and Derrida's relation to it, as millions of silenced voices appear to speak through the writing of a single author. Returning the cinder trope to the realm of Holocaust representation suggests that this text is a way for Derrida to speak about the Shoah, while also allowing the Shoah victims to speak. In this way, the cinder itself may be seen as representing memory. In the beginning of this text, Derrida confesses¹ that the motivation for this book is derived from a sentence he had written 15 years prior in the dedication to *Dissemination*. He speaks, alternating between a second and first person voice, of being haunted by a self without presence, "...it was as though you had signed these words...I read them, reread them; it was so simple, and yet I knew I was not there..." (31).

Derrida's style and manner of speaking here suggest that the author is retrospectively looking back from a present tense perspective, but does not recognize himself in the past tense as an "other" who intended it. It is as if an "other" had penned his words, as if an "other" were haunting not only his texts, but also his inner self. Based on this finding, it becomes clear that temporality and history play a crucial part in the formation of a cohesive "I" and, by extension of the definition in this context, perhaps even the formation of Deconstruction itself. In his groundbreaking publication *Ecrits*, Jacques Lacan delineates a crucial point involving tense and subject that relates to Derrida and his Jewishness throughout his publication *Cinders*,

In order to be recognized (by myself or another), I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find myself (or another), I call a name I must refuse in order to reply to me....What is realized in my history (i.e. in that of the individual subject) is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming (Lacan 63).

In this context, Derrida becomes both the "you" of the signature, and the "I" or self that doubts its own presence. The past or memory of the incinerated ashes is encroaching on the present, but paradoxically, the present is revaluating the past. Temporality is blurred so that all voices and perspectives in time and space can be heard. This notion of "here" versus "there" is obscured even more by the intrinsic difficulties found in French between *là* and *là*. The latter designates a specific place or a "there," while the former is the singular feminine definite article. On paper, these distinctions are easily made, but when spoken, the "there" somehow becomes both present and not present, both male and female. The cinder in this context becomes representative of a disembodied, voiceless, genderless, Jewish "other." As Derrida says, "This morning, for the first time, 15 years later, I became aware to the point of being able to admit to myself that something about this reading is imprinted in me..." (Derrida, *Cinders* 33).

From this angle, the cinder becomes both the "other" and the "I", the speaker and the listener, the individual praying, and the others who hear it. Derrida is openly speaking about an inner caesura within

¹ For more on Derrida's relation to confession see, Scanlon, John D. Caputo and Michael J., ed. *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confession and Circumfession*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005.

himself that was “always already” there with his knowledge, but is also one that he was unable or unwilling to explore until he writes *Cinders*. It has taken 15 years for Derrida to admit to himself and an “other” that the mark of a Jewish identity is also his identity. He begins by stating he is writing “in the morning” about the manner in which the cinder has “always already” been imprinted within himself, but in truth he is also writing in “mourning” due to his recognition of the cinder being both inside and outside himself. The essence of the cinder, more specifically the Jewish cinder, is, only two paragraphs into the text, being mixed with Derrida’s. This is the future anterior of Derrida’s Jewish self coming into dialogue with what has “always already” been imprinted within him.

This splitting of the self is shown not only through the split voices, genders, and personas that speak throughout *Cinders*, but is also mirrored within the words that comprise the text as well. The French title *Feu La Cendre* indicates, by displacement of meanings, the doubleness of the word *feu* in French. The first connection is to “mourning,” but also implied are the connotations of “deceased” or “departed” (Lukacher 11). Other options that would render a more literal translation are “fire, bereaved, separated, or taken away” (Lukacher 11). It is also noteworthy that *feu* (the *le passé antérieur* of the verb “to be” in French) also echoes *fût*, or “fire burning” within the *passé défini* of *être* (Lukacher 11). There is no specific place, or homeland from which the cinder speaks except through language. The home is the voice itself in this example. In other words, the second person “you” Derrida began *Cinders* with is representative of everyone, every “other” of the Holocaust, *tout autre*. The home then, is to speak with a Jewish voice and to call to the “other,”

In every prayer there must be an address to the other as other, for example--I will say this for the risk of shocking-- God. The act of addressing oneself to the other must mean praying, that is, asking, supplicating, searching out...No matter what, for the pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, be the other (Caputo 296).

For Derrida, the prayer of cinders is a ceaseless invocation to call forth the “other,” the cindered others of the Holocaust, the millions of obliterated Jewish “I’s” into a dialogue of recognition, so they may again speak and not remain effaced. For the first time in Derrida’s canon, both the “other” (the you) and the “I” (or speaking self) have a Jewish identity as a result of acknowledging the loss of another’s Jewish identity. The “other” may or may not have a physical presence, but the cinder of that identity remains. Derrida goes on to critique and even rewrites his previous notions regarding the trace, or *différance* itself, to fit the newly formed model he has given of the Jewish cinder in relation to the Holocaust...the best paradigm for the trace, (the furrowing, the pharmakon)...is the cinder...it is what remains without remaining from the Holocaust, from the all burning, from the incineration of the incense (Derrida, *Cinders* 43). The “remains that no longer remain” due to their incineration have not only caused the philosopher to reexamine his own philosophy, but have also initiated a reconfiguration of his self.

Derrida has discernibly made a choice to defend, to speak for, the otherness of the cinder, but he also clearly feels that his identity is intertwined with that of the otherness of the Jewish cinder. And as Derrida continues to engage this philosophical prayer head on in *Cinders* by aligning himself with a Jewish “We,” he also begins to Deconstruct a previous self who had been a Heideggerian admirer. The “we” who represent Derrida’s “cinder as the house of being” are directly dichotomized against Heidegger’s “archaic politics (that) focused on the Volk as the metaphysical center of being” (Bambach 143). Heidegger’s philosophy did not embrace externality or “otherness” because he wanted more than anything else to “reveal the magnificence of National Socialism that he believed was rooted in the Pre-Socratic Greek question of Being” (138). The Derridian reconfiguration of Heideggerian Being in *Cinders* uncovers how temporal changes in Heidegger’s philosophy did not alter the underlying anti-Semitic sentiment.

Derrida’s response to the ramifications of Heidegger’s Being in relation to justice are manifested in *Cinders* as he addresses issues involving education and the University, which Heidegger previously laid out in his 1933 Rectoral address. So, while the “one” in the “many” concerned the initial part of

Heidegger's Pre-Socratic story, that second part takes place in Twentieth Century Germany, and concerns struggle, strife, and war. The fire of the "one", the same as the hearth or home, is to be rekindled in Deutschland. Instead of residing in the Greek Polis, the hearth is now the German homeland, and the work of sustaining this hearth of being requires all the conditions of war: discipline, danger, and struggle. In Heidegger's 1933 Rectoral address he laid out these terms as "labor service, military service, and knowledge" (Heidegger, *Rectoral* 34). Military service, for Heidegger, was intimately tied to the University. In this sense, Being needs to be engaged as an active confrontation which requires military discipline. Combat readiness was a crucial element to be taken up by the University,

The second bond (military service) bonds the people and the destiny of the nation in the mist of all other peoples...In future, this bond will encompass and penetrate the entire existence of the student as military service (35).

Knowledge and its place in the University must be viewed as an engagement, as a dangerous confrontation requiring hardship, and if necessary, bloodshed. For Heidegger, the proper place of the philosopher resides in the fire of Being, and the three bonds of reform must become the task of the university,

The ...University will only gain shape and power if the three services...collapse into one formative force...The teachers will to essence must awaken the breath of knowledge...The students will to essence must...engage knowledge...the two wills must confront each other ready for battle. All abilities of will and thought...must unfold through battle, be heightened in battle, and preserved as battle (37).

The battle to reclaim the fire, as Prometheus did, is for Heidegger the destiny of the *Volk*. Heidegger's rhetoric in this particular instance collapses ancient Greek civilization into a propagandist tool for Nazi politics. The Aryan bond of blood and soil morphs the "one" in the "many", or rather; it is the ultimate breakdown between subject/object distinctions. For Derrida, Heidegger's speech is misguided and contains fundamental flaws. Near the end of *Cinders*, Derrida addresses questions involving the use of the cinder itself as a new foundational thought that would replace the flawed type of thinking that sprang from the German Universities, and would later attempt to justify the Holocaust. He relates, "With these citations, these references, you authorize the cinder, you will construct a new university, perhaps..." (Derrida, *Cinders* 67).

But right after this conjecture, Derrida begins to deconstruct his own line of thinking, his own voice, and the dangers of a new foundation that can be misconstrued into the same type of rhetoric utilized by Heidegger and other Nazi supporters. Derrida quotes Virginia Woolf to make his point,

But listen to Virginia Woolf in "Three Guineas": "No guinea of earned money should go to rebuilding a college on the old plan; just as certainly none could be spent on building a college upon a new plan, therefore the guinea shall be marked "rags, petrol, matches." And this note should be attached to it, "Take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incarnadine the willows. And let the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of leaves onto the flame. And let their mother's lean from upper windows and cry "Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done this with education!" (67).

Derrida is openly mocking Heidegger's Rectoral address here, as well as Heidegger's actions during the Second World War. By utilizing the epistolary rhetorical style of Woolf's *Three Guineas*, in which the speaker of the story writes to an elder statesman about ways to prevent another world war, Derrida splits again his voice into dichotomized genders (which mirrors the structural format of *Cinders*) who engage in a dialogue over the ethics of war. It is also significant that Woolf's speaker is writing to an absent, elderly male professor figure, and chastising him for placing "war in the university" (Woolf 1). Both the "we" of Derrida's Jewish self and "we" the readers and listeners of this text/audio cassette tape

overhear Woolf's narrator speaking to herself and another, while being quoted from inside *Cinders*, which is already engaged in a self reflexive dialogue with former quotations by Derrida, and more recently formed poetic, and specifically Jewish, ruminations on the cinder, so that we become twice removed eavesdroppers twisting our necks to hear what was said, because we are never quite certain "we" aren't being addressed as well. Woolf's narrator begins by addressing the absent professor through the notion of justice, and ends by suggesting that even if the letter remains "doomed to failure," that the speaker is writing ultimately for (and to) themselves,

...Years (are) a long time to leave a letter unanswered,—How ... are we to prevent war?—still unanswered. A whole page could be filled with excuses and apologies; declarations of unfitness, incompetence, lack of knowledge, and experience: and they would be true. But one does not like to leave so remarkable a letter as yours... unanswered. Therefore let us make the attempt; even if it is doomed to failure (Woolf 1-2).

By using Woolf's letter, Derrida makes it seem as if he is speaking both to a previous self who questions motives and justifications for war, but also the elder "Nazi statesman" Martin Heidegger who also was filled with "excuses" as to why he supported Hitler. For both Woolf and Derrida the "open letter" to the elder men in the universities who had supported the Nazi regime cannot remain unanswered: they must account for their behavior and answer to justice. Heidegger claimed in his Rectoral speech that it was the job, the destiny, of the *Volk* to engage Being at the university, and to treat this engagement with the combat readiness of war. Heidegger, based on Derrida's parodied citation him, sold out his philosophy (hence the guinea metaphor) for the false glimmer of the Nazi party. In this context, setting fire to "old hypocrisies" does not make them disappear, nor does it clear amoral and unethical deeds that claim their roots in the linear progression of philosophy beginning with the Greeks. In reality, this philosophical march towards so-called "progress" led to the mass extermination of European Jews, and a rhetorical justification rooted in the German educational system that effaced the cinder of the "other." By aligning himself with Woolf's letter writer, Derrida not only condemns the role of war propaganda's place in the university, but also aligns himself with a collective "we," both absent and present, within and outside of himself, that is diametrically opposed to Heidegger's. In order to accomplish the placement of war in the university, Heidegger's pro-war advocacy led directly to the burning of the books of Jews, but also their physical bodies, their presence in the world. But as Derrida notes, the actions undertaken in the name of education, undermine the very essence of the education they profess. In complete opposition to Heidegger's stance, Derrida aligns himself with the very name of the cinder or the "other" by alternating between first and second person perspectives,

No matter how much you resist it, you have mass and volume only when covered with cinders, as one covers one's head with ashes in a sign of mourning. There is a rebellion against the Phoenix and also the affirmation of the fire without place or mourning...it's (the cinders) in my memory, is imprinted in the plural: cinders are there. A...version to be buried, as do the Jews when a manuscript has wounded the name of God (Derrida, *Cinders* 59).

As Derrida notes here in this passage, it is not only the name of the cinder the Nazis tried to exterminate, they also targeted the name of Judaism itself. By relating to the cinder in first and second person perspectives, Derrida reveals that he rebels against the notion of the Phoenix, of a resurrection, because that alleviates the mourning of a true loss of an "other". In this way, Derrida is in direct alignment, instead of being opposed against, the majority of Holocaust criticism. Lawrence Langer would certainly agree with Derrida's anti-Phoenix comment since he also felt that there was nothing to be learned from the Holocaust,² and there should not be any kind of redemption affiliated with it since that

² This is perhaps an oversimplification I have made for the sake of condensation. For Langer, a "responsible reading" of Holocaust testimony would tie the historical accuracy of the Holocaust to each testimony, thereby transmuting an individual testimony into the collective realm. I do not think Derrida would agree with this. Throughout his work, Derrida was very concerned with the individual, and would not want to rewrite or amend a

takes away from the true nature of its tragedy. According to Langer “We cannot plant a life sustaining seed in the barren soil that conceals the remnants of two thirds of European Jewry” (Langer 58). Like the difference between the la and the là, Derrida’s Jewishness in this context is both spoken and written. Derrida is both the “you” and the “he,” but also the otherness of the Jew who buries the desecrated manuscript. As Derrida engages Heidegger’s concept of Being, his own concept of self is being Deconstructed, since his newly formed ideas regarding the cinder of Jewishness and the Holocaust directly oppose his newer philosophy concerning the cinder within the structure of the book itself.³ The cinders of Derrida’s memory are plural because the murdered of the Holocaust are inscribed within his very memory. He “has power” only through aligning himself with the cinder, and telling others about the massive loss of otherness caused by the Shoah. The “other” is within and outside himself, and is presented as disembodied innumerable individuals that could just have easily been Derrida himself.

It is with *Cinders* that Jacques Derrida begins to address not only Holocaust representation through literature, but also reexamines his own stance as an outsider or an “other” in the very language that he wrote in⁴. Clearly, Derrida struggled his entire life to come to terms with his Judaism, but also with the Holocaust and the massive loss of Jewish existence in Europe. In this way, Derrida questions traditional religion, but still continues to pray to the “other.” Indeed, Derrida does not lack a life of prayer simply because he passes for an atheist. In fact, one might argue that his atheism provokes prayer, because for Derrida prayer is memory itself,

“Well I am remembering God this morning, the name, a quotation my mother said, not that I am looking for you, My God, in a determinable place, but where do you dwell in my memory, O Lord?” (Caputo 292).

Works Cited

- Bambach, Charles. *Heidegger's Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism and the Greeks*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida : Religion without Religion*. Ed. Merold Westphal. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Cinders*. Feu la Cendre. Trans. Ned Lukacher. 1st ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Learning to Live Finally*. 2004. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Nass. 1st ed. Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2007. 2007.

single individual’s Holocaust testimony for the sake of achieving a “true” historical accuracy. Both Derrida and Langer would agree that the Holocaust should be looked at as more than an epistemological interest, but on the other hand, should also not be moralized, Christianized, or manipulated in such a way that would alleviate the true tragedy of the Shoah.

³ i.e., the left side of Derrida’s older texts opposes the right side speaking of the Holocaust and the cinder, in the same manner as the la faces (and effaces) the là.

⁴ Before 1991 when *Cinders* was published, notions of Judaism come out via autobiographical confession in several texts; such as the revelation that his middle name was Elie and he was named after the prophet Elijah (*Ulysse Gramophone*, 1987), his father’s name was Haim Aimé (*Mal d’archive*, 1995), and his mother’s middle name was Ester (*La Carte Postale* 1980), and that his Algerian grandfathers were named Moise and Abraham (*Circonfession* 1991). Also, according to Gideon Offrat’s book concerning Derrida’s Judaism, Derrida’s father officiated funeral ceremonies for the Algerian Jewish community on a regular basis. His father died in 1970, and Offrat speculates that Derrida’s “death of metaphysics or the heavenly father” in his work results from the death of Derrida’s own father (Offrat 19). Offrat, Gideon. The Jewish Derrida. Trans. Pertez Kidron. The Library of Jewish Philosophy. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

- Heidegger, Martin. "Heidegger's Rectoral Address: The Self Assertion of the German University." *The Heidegger Controversy*. Ed. Richard Wolin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1933. 29-39.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W W Norton & Company INC, 1977.
- Langer, Lawrence. *Preempting the Holocaust*. Yale University Press, 2000.
- Lukacher, Ned. "Translator's Notes and Introduction." Derrida, Jacques. *Cinders*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991. 1-18.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas*. Orlando: Harvest Books, 1963.