

MEMORY, AUTHORITY, AND IDENTITY: HOLOCAUST STUDIES IN LIGHT OF THE WILKOMIRSKI DEBATE

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My religious friend had told me that I survived so that I could bear witness. I have done so, as best I could, and I also could not have done so; and I am still doing so, whenever the opportunity presents itself; but the thought that this testifying of mine could by itself gain for me the privilege of surviving and living for many years without serious problems troubles me because I cannot see any proportion between the privilege and its outcome.

—Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (83)

"HIER IST KEIN WARUM"

During a well-known scene from early in *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi reports that while suffering from thirst he broke off an icicle outside a barracks window. When a nearby guard "snatched" it from him, Levi asked "Warum?" ("Why"). The guard responded, "*Hier ist kein warum*" ("Here there is no why") (29). This moment has come to stand for the arbitrariness and irrationality of the Nazi extermination program. Jews are "vermin," they get "deported" and worked to death or gassed, and there is no explanation offered; nor is it acceptable to ask for one. But for the last thirty or forty years, and for many of the most prominent Holocaust figures, there has also been no "why" in Holocaust studies. In well-known statements, such figures as Elie Wiesel and Claude Lanzmann have announced that the mere question of "why the Holocaust" is somehow obscene, because it suggests that some justification may actually exist for the Shoah. A "why" implies a "because," according to this argument, and "because" suggests the Nazis

might have had sufficient reasons, or the Jews might have given them sufficient cause, for creating ghettos and death camps.

In an essay entitled "*Hier Ist Kein Warum*," Claude Lanzmann uses the Levi incident to establish the authority of his own position regarding which questions about the Holocaust we might appropriately ask. "It is enough," he says,

to formulate the question in simplistic terms—Why have the Jews been killed?—for the question to reveal right away its obscenity. Not to understand was my iron law during all eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I had clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical attitude. . . . "Here there is no why," Primo Levi was abruptly told upon his arrival at the camp. This law is equally valid for whoever undertakes the responsibility of such a transmission. Because the act of transmitting . . . is the only thing that matters and no intelligibility, that is to say, no true knowledge pre-exists the process of transmission. (qtd. in Rosenbaum 265)

Aside from stating categorically that we must not ask "why," Lanzmann also valorizes "transmission," or, in the case of the Shoah, testimony, as the only source of "true knowledge."¹

What does it mean to say that "no true knowledge pre-exists the process of transmission"? Does it suggest that there is no way to validate the "authenticity" of testimony? Does authorship, then, confer unchallengeable authority upon the teller of the tale? It is our belief that Lanzmann's emphasis on authority over authenticity has become an accepted bias in Holocaust studies. It suggests not only that the testimony of survivors should not be challenged, but that because there is no morally responsible answer to the question "why," we should not ask it at all. The problem with Lanzmann's transformation of the guard's refusal into a representational standard is that it collapses authoritarianism and authority, dismissing dissent along with the possibility that "why" might lead to important insights. This dismissal and the consequent elevation of certain individuals and books to an untouchable status has been, in our view, damaging to Holocaust studies. If serious questions are neither asked nor accepted, then mystification is the frequent result. Unchallenged acceptance of Holocaust testimony has allowed us, to a great extent, to glorify survivors while mystifying their accounts.

Some dissatisfaction with this situation has arisen among prominent Holocaust scholars. The Yad Vashem historian Yehuda Bauer expressed concern in his essay "Is the Holocaust Explicable?" that "an increasing number of commentators—theologians, writers as well as historians—argue that ultimately the Holocaust is a mystery, an inexplicable event in human history.

. . . But the fact that in some ways . . . it's unprecedented, doesn't remove it from the realm of human nature or human comprehension" (Rosenbaum 281). A few years later, in *Reading the Holocaust*, Inga Clendinnen added her voice to Bauer's; and we are pleased to add our voices to both of theirs.² We believe that no arbitrary limits should be placed on any open inquiry into history, and no exception made with regard to the Holocaust. We also believe that asking questions is particularly important at the present juncture, when the various American Holocaust museums and testimonial projects have brought about a heightened awareness of the Holocaust among both Jews and non-Jews. The positive effects of these projects cannot be denied; however, we are concerned that they might also be turning survivors into secular saints and their memories into holy writ. This paper will study the connection between the foreclosure of "why" and the mystification of the Holocaust in relation to the recent scandal connected with Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, a fraudulent narrative that purported to be a survivor's memoir. It will also analyze what the history of the reception and subsequent rejection of *Fragments* tells us about the role of testimony in Jewish and American cultures. In our discussion we shall examine how the Holocaust has come to ground an increasingly secularized Jewish identity in a victim culture that seems to stand in for traditional worship, and how this victim culture manifests itself in national and international politics, as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

FRAGMENTS AND ITS TORTURED HISTORY

In 1995 a book titled *Bruchstücke*, or *Fragments*, was published in Germany. It was a memoir of a Jewish child's experiences in ghettos and Nazi death camps. The first-time Swiss author was Benjamin Wilkomirski—until then a musician and maker of clarinets—and the story indicated that he was a survivor. Holocaust survivors' narratives have become a major form of autobiographical writing in the past half century. Most such texts are the only books by their authors, and they are often written with the help of someone else. They tend not to be sophisticated narratives and are often crudely composed, but they compel the reader by the sheer weight of the events and circumstances they describe, because all survivors are escapees from a death sentence. Some of these autobiographical works, however, have become literary classics, and are therefore the standard against which other survivors' narratives are measured. Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, for instance, have become part of the university curriculum in modern literature and not just in courses on the Holocaust.

Wilkomirski's *Fragments* was immediately measured against the standard of Wiesel and Levi, and came out well.³ The narrative was unusual in that it was one of the few survivors' testimonies to be written deliberately from a child's perspective. It contains scenes of incredible vividness, and uses a fragmented structure that reminds readers of classic twentieth-century novels, as well as a self-conscious voice associated with postmodern forms of writing. The first reviews were almost uniformly ecstatic, and the book was eventually translated into a dozen languages.

Although not a huge bestseller, *Fragments* earned a number of prestigious awards. In England it won the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize, along with a stipend of 4,000 pounds. In the United States it received the National Jewish Book Award, being chosen over books by such competitors as Wiesel and Alfred Kazin. In France it was awarded La Prix de Memoire de la Shoah.⁴ As a result, Wilkomirski became something of a public media figure, being interviewed on television shows in more than one country, participating in public performances in which he played the clarinet while someone else recited from *Fragments*, and giving talks sponsored in the United States by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Response to Wilkomirski seemed especially strong from other Holocaust survivors, who saw in him a spokesman for their own painful experiences. The greatest sales occurred in the United States, which has a larger number of Holocaust survivors than any other country, and is a place where Holocaust remembrance has become a highly organized cultural phenomenon.

Although there were a few dissenting voices in the chorus of praise for *Fragments*, few people—Wilkomirski perhaps least of all—were prepared for the reversal of fortune that began during the summer of 1998. On August 27th of that year, a Swiss journalist named Daniel Ganzfried published “an article [in] . . . *Die Weltwoche* in which he accused Wilkomirski of having invented his autobiography” (Maechler vii).⁵ Ganzfried claimed that as a child Wilkomirski had never been in a concentration camp or in Poland, and that he had actually been born in Switzerland in 1941. Having carefully researched his subject, Ganzfried claimed that Wilkomirski was in fact born as Bruno Grosjean and wasn't even Jewish. Wilkomirski immediately denied these allegations, and a number of people associated with him came to his defense. Ganzfried's article was summarized by a number of newspapers in Europe and the United States, and these were followed in 1999 by two long, thoughtful essays—in *Granta* by Elena Lappin, and in the *New Yorker* by Philip Gourevitch. Both journalists added their own research as well as further interviews, and indicated their support for the substance of Ganzfried's claims. Gourevitch's tone, in particular, was stern and unforgiving. All of

Wilkomirski's publishers, including Schocken (the American publisher), eventually pulled the book out of circulation. He was thus quickly transformed from heroic Holocaust testifier to pariah, from sympathetic victim to betrayer. Wingate, for example, withdrew the prize it had awarded, although it did not try to reclaim the 4,000 pounds.

In April 1999 Wilkomirski's Swiss agent Liepman, in response to all the controversy, hired Swiss historian Stefan Maechler to pursue an independent investigation of the Wilkomirski matter in order to discover the validity of Ganzfried's claims. Wilkomirski maintained throughout this period that his critics were trying to steal his life; that he was, in effect, a singular victim of Holocaust denial (Maechler 149–50, 160). But by this time he had lost most of his credibility, and it was soon impossible to find *Fragments* anywhere but in a used-book store. The complaints from a variety of sources were frequently vituperative, with some critics retracting their earlier praise, prize-givers withdrawing recognition, and many journalists as well as survivors condemning Wilkomirski as a type of criminal who himself gave satisfaction to the Holocaust deniers. Wilkomirski retreated from public view, refusing to give interviews and continuing to proclaim his innocence. In October 1999, a Zurich attorney actually filed a formal suit against Wilkomirski. He called the book “a cold-blooded swindle,” saying that he had “been deprived of the book's price, since I would never have bought it had it been publicly offered as a novel. Moreover—beyond the strictures of the law—I have been cheated of a portion of my life and maliciously tricked into feeling sympathy for this topic” (Maechler 299).

Maechler's findings against Wilkomirski were made public in 2000—again accompanied by Wilkomirski's denials—and a book presenting Maechler's analytic narrative, which included *Fragments* as an appendix, was published in English by Schocken in 2001. For the first time in two years *Fragments* was back in print, although this time at the end of the volume. This solution allows the publishers to keep the book in circulation, but it makes it difficult for readers to experience *Fragments* as an independent narrative. It will thus be almost impossible for any reader from now on to respond to *Fragments* as anything other than a pathological document.

WHY DID WILKOMIRSKI DO IT?

The history of Wilkomirski's life, as established by Maechler, suggests that he was born out of wedlock to a twenty-six-year-old woman named Yvonne Grosjean who named him Bruno, and it is as Bruno Grosjean that Benjamin Wilkomirski appears on his Swiss birth certificate. The single mother struggled

to raise the child on her own, receiving minimal support from the father, who seems never to have seen her or his son after Bruno was born. Yvonne's mothering was supervised by an unsympathetic civil-service guardian, and because of her straitened circumstances, she had to move frequently. When Bruno was two years old he was placed in foster care for the first time. He lived thereafter in a series of such homes, a few of them apparently violent and abusive, and the records in the guardian's office indicate that he became increasingly difficult to manage.

When (in 1945) Bruno was four years old he became the foster child of Dr. and Mrs. Kurt Dössekker of Zurich, a childless older couple. The man was in his fifties, the woman in her forties. They were German-speaking Protestants. Although Wilkomirski continued living with the Dössekkers, the adoption was not finalized until 1957, when Bruno was sixteen. Why did the Dössekkers wait so long to formalize their relationship with this child, and what effect might the lingering uncertainty have had on young Bruno? It is clear from the records that Wilkomirski experienced a traumatic, frequently disrupted early childhood. In *Fragments* he describes the couple based on the Dössekkers as being almost emotionally frigid (a description both confirmed and disputed by others), and so he had to live—even in comfortable circumstances—without much in the way of what he felt as parental warmth and emotional support (Maechler 269–70).

Bruno Dössekker lived with his adoptive parents until he went to Geneva to study medicine at the University. But he left the University fairly quickly, and enrolled in the Geneva Conservatory to continue his musical studies. This decision caused a rift between him and the Dössekkers, who had apparently hoped that Bruno would continue his father's medical practice. Bruno was awarded his degree from the Conservatory, and then received a scholarship to attend the Vienna Academy of Music, before assuming a career as a musician and music teacher. Some time in the 1960s he began graduate historical studies in Zurich, in order, he claimed, to research his own origins. In the meantime he had married and become a father. This marriage ultimately ended in divorce.

In 1979 Wilkomirski met an Israeli psychologist named Elitsur Bernstein, who had been practicing in Zurich for almost twenty years. With Bernstein, Wilkomirski began to work on recovering his "repressed memories," this being Bernstein's area of expertise. This form of therapy has become extremely controversial in the United States, in great part because the evidence obtained has been used (some would say abused) in both criminal and civil litigation, and also because the methods used to retrieve the memories frequently involve a great deal of intervention on the part of the

therapist, sometimes in conjunction with hypnosis and psychotropic drugs.⁶ It is these “recovered” memories that allegedly make up the substance of *Fragments*—that of an utterly traumatized small child bereft of parents, who has witnessed the death of his father and experienced the abandonment, restoration, and death of his mother in a concentration camp barracks. The book is full of mother figures, all of whom fail the small, nameless boy in some way.

To support his obsessive historical studies, Wilkomirski has apparently amassed a library of more than two thousand books related to the Holocaust. He is expert on many aspects of that history, and has read more than his share of survivors’ autobiographical narratives. According to Maechler, what seems to have happened is that in creating his autobiographical narrative Wilkomirski retained the emotional traumas that lie at the heart of his emotional dissociation, but substituted for the actual events of his early childhood—which would at best be difficult to recall—events drawn from the history of the Jews in the Holocaust, a subject on which he has apparently brooded for more than thirty years (Maechler 269–73). This history, in Wilkomirski’s telling, is full of the deaths or disappearances of parents, the brutality and emotional aridity of parent figures, and the apparent nurturance and subsequent abandonment by surrogate mothers. All of this does not suggest someone maliciously setting out to deceive others as much as someone who, in adopting a level of traumatic autobiography that would fit the level of his own emotional disturbance, has succeeded in deluding himself into believing the “facts” of his own fictionalized account. It seems apparent, then, that this troubled man believes his own story, and has conveyed that belief so passionately and effectively that he has persuaded others to accept it as well. Geoffrey Hartman uses the term “memory-envy” to describe the feeling of those who, coming after the Holocaust, long to establish an identity with the survivors (111). Wilkomirski, by substituting a story of the Holocaust for his own life history, at once validates his personal trauma and becomes the honored member of a group whose contemporary identity is a function of historical persecution.

THE CONTEXT OF WILKOMIRSKI’S CAREER

Explaining the arc of Wilkomirski’s critical success and subsequent fall, Maechler points out that “The author of *Fragments* would not have unleashed such outrage if he had simply thought up any given biography.” The Holocaust is not off-limits per se; politicians and historians have “applied it as a metaphor to the Gulag, to Palestinian refugees, to the transatlantic

slave trade, to their own personal suffering, to endangered nature” (Maechler 294). Wilkomirski, however, appropriates the Holocaust not only as metaphor but as memory. This encourages readers, both survivors and those who have no direct relation to the Holocaust, to identify with his memories, and to treat them as a kind of historical evidence now approaching extinction: the survivor’s testimony.

Testimony and identification have become central to the way we remember the Holocaust in the West, and especially in America, so to understand the Wilkomirski affair, we must first explore the function of the Shoah in Western politics and culture. Towards this end, Maechler turns to the historian Peter Novick, whose recent book, *The Holocaust in American Life*, tackles the related questions of why the Holocaust has become central to Jewish-American identity, and why it has become important in the United States, a country that had no direct experience of the events (Maechler 310).

According to Novick, the Holocaust became an essential part of collective memory when the American Jewish community began to feel threatened by a “demographic crisis” of secularization and assimilation. In other words, the Holocaust emerged as the rallying point of a collective identity on the verge of disappearing, replacing ritual, belief, and traditional forms of community as the defining center of American Judaism (7). Though many commentators understand the resurgence of Holocaust memories fifty years after the event as the “return of the repressed,” Novick argues that the recent explosion of books and films about the Holocaust should be understood politically, not psychologically. Neither the Nuremberg trials nor the Eichmann trial produced as much American interest in the Holocaust as did the Six-Day War of 1967, when the state of Israel seemed threatened with extinction (10). The Holocaust helped explain that war as the resurgence of murderous anti-Semitism. Now the Shoah serves a different ideological function, justifying what the critics of Israel call “the occupation” as self-defense. Novick argues that though Israel’s difficulties since the 1970s stem from war and the struggle for land, it is easier to recruit support for Israel by claiming that the Palestinian uprising is the Holocaust in a new form (155).

The Holocaust serves another political function in a society which, in Novick’s view, is increasingly preoccupied with victimization. Novick says that in an age of identity politics, when being a victim is a mark of distinction, the Holocaust gives Jews a perverse preeminence, setting them apart as the secular equivalent of the “chosen people” (198). This preeminence among victims shows up most strongly in the debate over whether the Holocaust should be understood as a “unique” historical event, without equivalent or comparison, or as one particularly egregious example of genocide (9,

197). (Another variant of this debate is whether the Holocaust can be defined in terms of historical factors—modern technological developments, ancient anti-Semitism, bureaucratization—or whether it is something incomprehensible and unnamable, and therefore best approached through the memories of survivors.) Novick, who is extremely skeptical of Holocaust exceptionalism, argues that even non-Jewish Americans are apt to treat Jews as exemplary victims, both because it is easy to identify with an assimilated Jewish population, and because the consensus arrived at on the Holocaust allows us to ignore other victims who might be in need of immediate help (234–35). As Gourevitch puts it, we can all agree that the Holocaust was evil without coming to a consensus about sending troops to Bosnia or Rwanda. Novick says that given its historical and ideological baggage, we cannot expect to derive any moral from the Holocaust, or use it to teach anything other than itself (263). Linking this point to the debate over Wilkomirski, he suggests that we actually read Holocaust testimonies not for their historical insight, but for their emotive power.⁷ Like many recent students of the Holocaust, we find Novick’s political analysis astute, and are indebted to his insights in what follows.

Philip Gourevitch makes similar points about the emotional power of testimony in his *New Yorker* article “The Memory Thief,” the first sustained attempt in the United States to make sense of the conflicting stories in the Wilkomirski affair:

In a time when the invocation of the intolerable offense of genocide has become a staple of sermons on tolerance, and one has only to say the word “Holocaust” to set off a shudder of sympathetic moral righteousness, Wilkomirski’s fact-free fable of an irremediably and unforgettably victimized childhood is the ultimate rhetorical blunt object. It hardly seemed to matter that the solipsism of his memory allowed for no new understanding of the crimes he suffered. On the contrary, in the eyes of its admirers the supremacy of one individual’s woe seemed to be what gave “Fragments” its authority. (67)

Gourevitch, more explicitly than Novick, links the affect of testimony, its emotive power, to its authority. Later in this essay we will investigate what “authority” means in the Wilkomirski debate, and how it tends to replace “authenticity” as an evaluative term, especially for those who admit *Fragments* is probably a forgery, but nevertheless praise its ability to evoke powerful responses in readers. Using Gourevitch’s analysis as a guide, and recalling Lanzmann’s “*Hier Ist Kein Warum*,” we might provisionally define “authority” as a subject-position made unquestionable by virtue of its suffering, or as a voice granted immunity from the question “Why?” Authority,

in this sense, is the displaced and inverted form of authoritarianism. Thus Wilkomirski's suffering under authoritarianism is what grants him authority as a witness: to question him, as he repeatedly points out, would be to subject him to the horrors of the Holocaust again.

It is, of course, impossible to question suffering. (Those who still support Wilkomirski point out that his suffering is real even if the Holocaust isn't its immediate cause.) When authority is linked to affect, the prescribed reader response is sympathy or personal identification rather than criticism. Wilkomirski's initial success shows just how personal the Holocaust has become in recent years, how unwilling critics have become to question the authority of affect. Gourevitch suggests that most contemporary representations of the Holocaust emphasize the personal over the political and the historical, substituting "sympathetic moral righteousness" for a hard look at why genocide happens, both in the past and the present. He sees this preoccupation with the personal not only in the public's uncritical reception of *Fragments*, but, as he argues in a 1995 *New York Times Magazine* article, in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, which he says is designed to make visitors feel like witnesses: "As Americans observe the bloody unravelings of the post-cold-war world, the Holocaust Museum provides a rhetorical exercise in bearing witness to dehumanization and mass murder from a seemingly safe distance" (45).

The Holocaust museum, like Wilkomirski's book, provides a convenient point of entry into the debate over the uses and abuses of "bearing witness" in Holocaust studies. Not only does the museum privilege survivor testimony, giving videos from the Survivor's Project a central place in the exhibits, it also encourages visitors to experience the Holocaust on a personal level by assigning them identity cards bearing the names of victims. The prescribed itinerary takes visitors over actual cobblestones from the Lodz ghetto, and through a cattle car once used to transport Jews to concentration camps. The emphasis is on the visceral, the emotive, and the artifactual: the museum personalizes history, encouraging visitors to identify with and put themselves in the place of the victims. This is precisely what Wilkomirski has done, but to the point where he can presumably no longer distinguish between his personal trauma and historical events.⁸

It is easy to dismiss Wilkomirski as someone whose personal suffering has led him to over-identify with victims of the Holocaust, but in the victim culture described by Novick and Gourevitch, this is just what he is supposed to do. Institutions as influential as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum teach the Holocaust through transference and identification. In "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics

of Empathy,” Alison Landsberg praises the Holocaust Museum for offering a “transferential space” where “memory and affect get transferred from one person to another” (72). She argues that it is important for people who have no direct relationship to the Holocaust to remember it in a personal—even corporeal—way, precisely because those who do remember it, the last generation of survivors, are passing away, and because the traditional mechanisms for transmitting memory—community and ritual—were destroyed by the Holocaust (65, 72–73). Taking issue with Gourevitch, Landsberg argues that the traditional (detached and unemotional) way of studying history—she calls this the “cognitive mode”—is a poor substitute for the “experiential mode” of personal memory. She praises the US Holocaust Memorial Museum for encouraging visitors to experience what it was like to be a victim so they can remember, through their own experiences in the museum, how it must have felt: “these spaces [of transference] might actually install in us ‘symptoms’ or prosthetic memories through which we didn’t actually live, but to which we now, after a museum experience or a filmic experience, have a kind of experiential relationship” (82).

Wilkomirski poses a problem for Landsberg because he illustrates the impossibility of distinguishing prosthetic memory from memory-envy. In fact, he creates a problem for all those who view memory—testimony and autobiography—as a privileged or authoritative form of historical discourse, because he illustrates that affect is no guarantee of accuracy. What the theories of prosthetic memory and testimony have in common is their belief that subjective memories, no matter how erroneous, offer a necessary corrective to the cold, clinical way history is normally compiled.⁹ Theorists and psychologists like Landsberg, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub emphasize affect rather than fact; interviewers in the Survivor’s Project don’t correct inaccurate testimony, even when it is obviously incorrect. The problem is that while Wilkomirski’s trauma has nothing to do with the Holocaust, it is nevertheless real. It is worth noting that even Wilkomirski’s harshest critics don’t doubt the authenticity of his suffering per se. Daniel Ganzfried attributes Wilkomirski’s false memories to a methodologically flawed “interdisciplinary therapy” which “treat[s] people without an assured identity, as they bring scraps of memory to light, by attaching to those scraps the appropriate facts and locales out of actual history” (“Die geliehene”). Elena Lappin quotes Israel Gutman, a well-known Yad Vashem historian and Holocaust survivor, who says Wilkomirski’s story is “important” even if it is not true because he “experienced [it] deeply” (46). Gourevitch finds it plausible that Wilkomirski might be “a victim of his own sense of victimization” (“Memory Thief” 56). Maechler says Wilkomirski tries to make sense of his very

real childhood trauma, stemming from unfortunate foster-care experiences as well as an unhappy adoption, by tracing it back to larger historical events (269). Wilkomirski's memories straddle an irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of what testimony has come to mean in Holocaust studies: his trauma seems authentic, but his testimony doesn't.¹⁰

In his recent article, "Beyond the Question of Authenticity: Witness and Testimony in the *Fragments* Controversy," Michael Bernard-Donals detaches the question of authenticity from that of authority, arguing that *Fragments* has "authority" as testimony even though it is unreliable as history. Following psychologists and theorists who point out that victims are often unable to recall the specifics of traumatic experiences, Bernard-Donals defines testimony as a discourse that indicates, through gaps and inaccuracies, what is unspeakable or unknowable about the past:

We cannot view testimony as a window on the past; at its most extreme—in memories of trauma—testimony marks the absence of events, since they did not register on, let alone become integrated into, the victim's consciousness. (1302)

At the heart of any memory is forgetting, the loss of the original event and that loss's destructive force on any subsequent testimony; this is all the more true of traumatic memory. (1313)

Testimony, according to these formulations, emerges from and indicates a past trauma without communicating its specific content (which Bernard-Donals says is "forgotten") to "subsequent witnesses." In other words, testimony doesn't communicate fact, but it does transmit affect. That, according to Bernard-Donals, is why fictional "testimonies" can be just as powerful as firsthand accounts:

testimonies by those who were present at the events and by those who were not function similarly and have similar effects . . . in the way they disrupt the narrative of history and force the reader or the interviewer to see something horrible, perhaps a trace of the traumatic event. (1311)

Bernard-Donals gauges the "authority" of testimony not by its accuracy, but by its ability to "allow a reader to glimpse a trauma" (1303). This shifts the definition of the term from the legal-historical, where testimony is supposed to provide evidence, to the rhetorical, where it produces an effect on the reader. Such a rhetorical definition of testimony allows Bernard-Donals to reconcile *Fragments*'s initial success with its unreliability as narrative. It also allows him to stress the personal relation between author and reader—something

he calls “secondhand witnessing”—over the historical relation between narrative and facts.

Bernard-Donals’s “secondhand witnessing,” like Landsberg’s “prosthetic memory,” emphasizes transference, an experiential connection between people, over reference, the semantic connection between symbol and event. It is difficult for these authors to define what we get from secondhand witnessing and prosthetic memory, though they agree that it is not historical knowledge. Bernard-Donals argues that “The effect of testimony, in Doesseker’s case coded in the language of the Shoah and structured by a language that displaces the reader’s sense of the normal (or of history), opens a moment in which the reader of the testimony becomes a secondhand witness and sees not the experience described but something that stands beyond or before it, not history but history’s real” (1308). He says elsewhere that testimony’s “authority” is a function of its ability to help readers or listeners “see” what they don’t understand.¹¹ These formulations allow Bernard-Donals to recuperate Wilkomirski, but at the price, it seems to us, of historical ignorance. Wilkomirski’s testimony comes to signify what is unknowable in all testimonies precisely because of its inaccuracies. The danger of equating inaccuracy with unknowability is this: the Holocaust becomes a metaphor for that which stands outside of history (experience, memory, trauma), and conversely, false accounts like Wilkomirski’s become indistinguishable from real testimonies, since we can’t “know” the Holocaust anyway.¹²

Bernard-Donals’s conflation of authority with affect, and the Holocaust with the unknowable, allows us to call *Fragments* a testimony, but it also turns all powerful fictions into testimonies, and all testimonies into narratives of the Holocaust. While this move makes sense in a general way, it is about as useful as saying that all art is autobiography, or that all contemporary literature points back to the Shoah. If testimony is to mean anything, we must be able to assume a direct relation between a particular trauma and a specific narrative. Otherwise, any trauma could produce any narrative—and surely this is the *reductio ad absurdum* of testimony as a critical category.

Bernard-Donals does attempt to establish a connection between testimony and trauma, not through narrative content, but through formal irregularities, namely “stutters, breaks, and impossible juxtapositions of images” which represent a form of “metonymic substitution” (1308). The metonymic or formal connection between experience and language recapitulates the personal or affective connection of secondhand witnessing: both presuppose a kind of absolute proximity, a seismic or kinetic relation between teller/listener and experience/form that transmits the magnitude of experience without communicating a message. Wilkomirski’s narrative, of course, displays

the telltale stutters, breaks, and juxtapositions, and, as Elena Lappin points out, it probably emerges from some childhood trauma. However, the dislocations Bernard-Donals reads as an effect of trauma might also be nostalgia, or rationalization, or simply learned performance. (Ganzfried describes Wilkomirski as crying a lot during his presentations, and always at the right moment). Form and feeling are no more guarantee of authenticity—or authority—than is reference. Bernard-Donals's emphasis on form and feeling, like his shift to the register of authority, becomes an attempt to valorize the shape of a narrative or memory—its idiosyncratic contours—over its content. This occurs because the “content” of the Holocaust is by now so well known that it has come to serve as a metaphor for other catastrophes, as it clearly has for Wilkomirski. The stylistic tics and symptomatic inadequacies of particular Holocaust narratives are all that remain of individual expression. In stressing form over content, Bernard-Donals tries to exhume the subjects buried under the impersonal statistic of six million. It should be noted that while Bernard-Donals's emphasis on formal irregularities personalizes our understanding of the Holocaust, it does not revolutionize the study of history. He merely replaces the notion of historical accuracy with one of formal causality, which is, after all, merely the literary formulation of the most traditional sort of historiography: cause and effect, or in this case, trauma and affect.¹³

Rather than stretching the definition of testimony to include *Fragments*, we should ask why Wilkomirski feels compelled to encode his childhood trauma in the language of the Holocaust, and why people respond so strongly to this sort of narrative. Bernard-Donals begins to ask these sorts of questions:

We should not be surprised that [Doesseker] testifies to those experiences [his early childhood trauma] through the language of the most significant horror of the twentieth century, whose effect on the individuals and on a culture is unspeakable and perhaps unknowable and which may well take the place of and (mis)name the events to which he does not have access. (1310)

Instead of following up on this insight, however, Bernard-Donals equivocates, stating that the instability of testimony and memory leaves the authenticity of the account (though not its “authority”) an “open question,” thus effectively bracketing any further investigation into the politics of representation (1305, 1311).

Why privilege firsthand accounts, even if they turn out to be second-hand concoctions? The recent emphasis on testimony in Holocaust studies can be traced to Lawrence Langer's pioneering *Holocaust Testimonies: The*

Ruins of Memory, one of the first books to stress the importance of expanding our definition of history to include survivors' testimony.¹⁴ Langer argues that the experiences of Holocaust survivors don't fit the heroic model of traditional historiography—a model that assumes historical agents have complete control over the consequences of their actions (26). He says that to hear what the survivors have to say—and “hear” is the operative word, since he privileges oral testimonies over written memoirs—we should learn to sympathize with what he calls the “unheroic gesture” and the “choiceless choice” (26–27). Listening to testimony should encourage us to dispense with outdated models of heroism, and with the foundational myths and teleological models that go along with them:

Unlike primal episodes such as the Fall of Man or the Fall of Troy—which formed the basis for human morality or the founding of a people, creating a future and hence an entry into history and time—the Holocaust did not offer an opportunity for an evolutionary “afterward.” As testimonies constantly show, their progressive narrative collapses under the weight of died events [sic]. . . . Hearing it, we try to match our sense of authenticity against its logic, only to encounter a failure to connect. . . . The experience of nonrelation [of our sense of authenticity to the logic of testimony] is itself a form of relation, however tenuous; the sense of threatened identity accompanying it reenacts, on a smaller scale (though it does not duplicate), the fragmentation of self, family, community, and harmony with the universe that is the enduring legacy of the catastrophe. (72–73)

Langer argues that testimony's failure to conform to our expectations about history enacts for us, at a remove, the “threatened identity” experienced by survivors themselves. At the end of his book, he expands the notion of threatened identity into a general historical principle, arguing that we should reformulate theories of “human agency” to fit “our time of a diminished self” (199–205). Landsberg and Bernard-Donals both cite Langer, but they take his theory a step further, transforming a historical problem—the loss of agency—into a problem of history—the loss of meaning. Their theories suggest that testimony's failure to conform to history and agency should encourage us to dispense with these concepts altogether, rejecting the pursuit of knowledge for a sense of common victimhood through secondhand witnessing or prosthetic memory.

Landsberg and Bernard-Donals both argue that the Holocaust is something we are supposed to experience as trauma, not learn about as history. Embedded in this view is the assumption that testimony, in voicing trauma, communicates something left out of history: “A text's authority originates in its ability to indicate (though perhaps not produce) knowledge of what lies

beyond what can be logically understood, beyond what makes sense” (Bernard-Donals 1305). Trauma theory’s emphasis on what can’t be understood privileges the individual by thematizing his or her specific relation to chaotic events. The logic of the argument works in this way: since most victims of the Holocaust did not understand what was happening to them or why, contemporary students of the Holocaust should not try to understand either. Instead, we should try to empathize with the victims. This approach preserves the sanctity of individual memory, but at the expense of converting the Holocaust into the sublime, something that can be felt but not understood. The individual and the sublime converge in prosthetic memory and secondhand witnessing, in Landsberg’s “transferential spaces” and Bernard-Donals’s traumatic forms. Their theories counter the general destruction of meaning with what is essentially a Romantic concept of individual expression. The speaker’s authority lies in his or her experience of the unspeakable, and in the ability to transport listeners beyond critical distance, beyond even empathy, to a point where listeners somehow grasp the experiences behind the words. The result is not history or knowledge but a common—and transcendent—identification with the victims.

Landsberg and Bernard-Donals base their theories of trauma on a selective reading of Dominick LaCapra, who as Bernard-Donals says, warns against conflating memory with history (1302). Landsberg and Bernard-Donals tend to react to this injunction by privileging memory over history, experience over event. This, however, is not LaCapra’s point. In *Representing the Holocaust*, a book cited by both Landsberg and Bernard-Donals, LaCapra seems to contradict their position directly, arguing that experience is no guarantee of authenticity or authority:

Experience should not be hypostatized as the source of authenticity and authority. It certainly has a crucial role in defining a subject-position that is distinctive and in some cases (notably that of victims) worthy of the utmost respect and sustained attentiveness. Yet working-through, as it relates both to the rebuilding of lives and to the elaboration of a critical historiography, requires the effort to achieve critical distance on experience through a comparison of experiences and through a reconstruction of larger contexts that help to inform and perhaps to transform experience. (200)

What LaCapra calls “working-through” involves considering experience along with a host of other historical factors that often impact experience in unpredictable and unnoticed ways. It involves both “criticism and self-criticism,” as the historian must not only evaluate history, but be wary of acting it out in the way he or she describes it (72, 111, 193). Landsberg and

Bernard-Donals make the mistake of assuming that transference goes one way, as if it could be directed through the “transferential space” of a museum or the form of a narrative. They see transference as a heuristic device or a project, something that can pass on the experience of the Holocaust to the next generation. LaCapra, on the other hand, sees it as a problem of history. The difference between transference as problem and transference as project maps onto the distinction between empathy and identification made by LaCapra in his recent book, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Empathy is an affective relation to the other recognized as other, while identification involves acting out the problems of the other (38–40, 212). LaCapra suggests we should empathize with Wilkomirski but avoid the “disorientation” caused by the false memoir (207). We feel that this disorientation is only exacerbated by bracketing, as Bernard-Donals does, the question of authenticity in order to preserve the so-called authority of Wilkomirski’s account. Encouraging museum visitors to identify with Holocaust victims produces a similar kind of disorientation.

Imposing a direction on transference is like imposing a direction, or a purpose, on suffering—the assumption Levi questions in the passage that serves as the epigraph of this essay. This teleological construction is a way of conflating purpose and identity. It makes sense of suffering and reaffirms the authority of the victim, not in the traumatic event but in its articulation. Levi’s religious friend wants testimony to justify suffering. Landsberg and Bernard-Donals want testimony and suffering to justify the authority of a particular point of view. In advocating secondhand witnessing and prosthetic memory, they attempt to shore up the authority of the Holocaust and its witnesses, creating a common identity out of what—in the case of second-hand witnesses—amounts to extenuated or vicarious suffering. Memory is a figure of identity, and prosthetic memory a means of forging group identity by repeating the experience of disaster. This kind of repetition compulsion plays a role in transferring the authority of the camp guard, who says *Hier ist kein Warum*, to the authority of the unquestionable victim, in order to “prove” that there can be no total explanation of the Holocaust.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

So if Wilkomirski has come by his prosthetic memories in the prescribed way, through what Landsberg calls a “radical politics of empathy,” and if those memories are genuinely traumatic, what are we to do with his false testimony? This practical question actually involves two deeper epistemological ones: How do we determine the accuracy of testimony? What kind of knowledge

does testimony provide? The Wilkomirski affair proves beyond a doubt that the first question has no satisfactory answer. Many readers, including survivors, believed Wilkomirski's tale because it is so excruciating, but now that the details have turned out to be pornographic, not realistic, we know that affect is no guarantee of authenticity. Form is also no guarantee. Though the narrative looks like a survivor's testimony, with its fragmented narrative and damaged point-of-view, it is, as critics point out, merely a pastiche of testimonies (Maechler 269). Those who began by comparing *Fragments* to Eli Wiesel's *Night* now invoke Jerzy Kozinski's *The Painted Bird*, another discredited survivor's tale told from a child's point of view, which Wilkomirski admits to having read. Though it might be possible to define testimony as a genre, thereby determining where books like *Fragments* and *The Painted Bird* fall short, neither the form of a testimony nor its emotive power can establish its authenticity—or its “authority,” to use Bernard-Donals's term.

It is undeniable that Wilkomirski's narrative moved a great number of people, encouraging them to think about the Holocaust in ways they might not have before. Reader-response theory and propaganda both teach all of us that narratives can be powerful even when they are not true. It seems plausible that people might still try to read *Fragments* for its emotional power in the same way that they read other fictional accounts of the Holocaust. Fiction, of course, can teach us much about fact. However, *Fragments* is not merely fiction, but fictionalized memory, and memory implies a specific relation of history to historical subjects. According to Walter Benn Michaels, we tend to transform history into memory as a way of constituting cultural identities. “We learn about other people's history,” he says, “we remember our own” (185, 183). This distinction gets at the heart of the Wilkomirski scandal, since it explains why Wilkomirski's supporters and his critics take the book so personally. Originally, we read *Fragments* to remember, or to learn, what it means to be Jewish, or more broadly, what it means to be a victim. Perhaps the indeterminacy of the narrative, the defenseless child's ability to be “everybody's victim,” aided in the process of identification, at least when we believed the book to be true. Now the same book reminds us that memories are metaphors and identities are constructed. The inaccuracy of these memories does not plunge us into a historical crisis for the same reason that any number of make-believe Napoleons do not discredit Waterloo. Rather, unstable memories plunge those who identify with those memories into a crisis of identity. Exposing Wilkomirski's testimony as memory-envy exposes at least some of our interest in Holocaust testimony as another form of memory-envy. If we identified with him as a victim, we are also implicated in his delusions of victimization.

There are at least two lessons to be drawn from the Wilkomirski affair about the role of testimony in Holocaust studies. First, Wilkomirski teaches us that we do not read testimonies to supplement our knowledge of the Holocaust, which, unlike other genocides, has been and continues to be extensively studied. The correlative is that we read testimony not to learn about a person, but to learn about a people. Testimonies are questionable sources of historical evidence, but they are paramount vehicles of identification. Second, we read Holocaust testimonies to identify with the victims. This has the effect of transforming Holocaust studies into a secular religion, with Auschwitz taking the place of the destruction of the Second Temple and the Diaspora. The Holocaust serves as a foundational story for Jewish identity by giving a common past to a diverse people no longer unified by custom or belief. The presence of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. suggests that it also founds some aspects of American identity. By honoring the victims and celebrating the American role in liberating the concentration camps, the United States figures itself as a democracy ready to punish the “evil ones”—to borrow President Bush’s recent memorable phrase—who practice genocide. Of course, as others have pointed out, Washington, D.C. does not yet have a memorial museum dedicated to the systematic decimation of Native Americans or to the slaughter of Black slaves during the Middle Passage, and we have to ask ourselves why. Still others have suggested that the presence of the Holocaust Memorial Museum has allowed many politically conservative American Jews, as well as their fundamentalist Christian allies, to remain indifferent to the fate of the Palestinian refugees and skeptical of a two-state solution. Representing Jews as victims reinforces the belief that Israel, no matter what it does, is acting in self-defense. In this context, we can understand why *Fragments* has become such a controversial book, namely because it exposes the politics of commemoration. It teaches us that a “people” is as contingent as its history, and that memory is a highly political metaphor. Wilkomirski might not be an actual victim of the Holocaust, but he is a fitting monument to victim culture.

NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: This article is part of our book in progress on the theme of “Holocaust tourism.”

1. Rosenbaum 265–66. Rosenbaum is extremely critical of Lanzmann’s argument: “A truly astonishing thing has happened here. Set aside the fact that he comes close to asserting the position that the Shoah did not exist until its ‘transmission’ by Lanzmann in *Shoah*. Even more bizarrely, Lanzmann has taken an SS death-camp guard’s ‘grotesque and sarcastic’ rebuke to a Jew asking why—and made that sneering mass

murderer's command into his own commandment. He's made an insulting description (here there is no why) of a policy designed to keep the gas chambers running on time (without any troublesome Jewish questions harraying the murderers) into a moral injunction: Here there should be no why."

2. Clendinnen argues that "What most disquiets about a too-shrill insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust is the danger that, if the Holocaust were indeed to be accepted as unique, it would risk falling out of history—the consultable record of the actions of our species, and the active interrogation of that record—altogether. That is something we cannot afford. We need to know both ourselves and the worlds we are capable of making if we can hope to change any part of either" (16; see also 20–21). In a recent piece in *The New York Times* entitled "Connections: Artists Seeking Their Inner Nazi," Edward Rothstein characterizes what he calls "The battle . . . over how the Holocaust (or in Hebrew, the Shoah) . . . is to be understood" in this way: "The oppositions are best stated starkly. On the one hand, the Holocaust is seen as a unique event, defying comparison. The villains are considered transcendently evil, barely human. The Holocaust remains so beyond understanding that it seems to possess a sacred quality. Analogies are to be shunned. On the other hand, the Holocaust is seen as one horrific event among others, an example of how racism and injustice have left millions in unmarked graves. Its villains are no different from any other people who are capable if not culpable of such crimes. Analogies are to be welcomed." Though Rothstein's remarks concern the way we view the perpetrators, they could also be extended to the victims. If it is not possible to understand the victims—to look for analogies or ask why—then the best we can hope to do is to empathize with their suffering. In this paper we shall argue that an overemphasis on empathy leads to facile identification. This in turn transforms the Holocaust into a quasi-mystical, but politically useful, event.
3. Our summary of the facts connected with Wilkomirski and the publishing history of *Fragments* draws upon Stefan Maechler's *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*.
4. La Prix de Memoire de la Shoah is presented by the Foundation du Judaïsme Français. *Fragments* shared its Spring 1997 award with Jean-François Forges's *Eduquer contre Auschwitz*, which Maechler calls a "finely differentiated pedagogical work." Interestingly enough, Forges "notes," according to Maechler, "that the real danger lies not only in the Shoah's being denied but also in its being sacralized" (114–15).
5. Daniel Ganzfried was the first to call the authenticity of *Fragments* into question in a series of articles in *Die Weltwoche*: "Die geliehene Holocaust-Biographie" (27 Aug. 1998), "Bruchstücke und Scherbenhaufen" (24 Sept. 1998), "Fakten gegen Erinnerung" (3 Sept. 1998), and "Binjamin Wilkomirski und die verwandelte Polin" (4 Nov. 1999).
6. Maechler however notes that "Bernstein explains that Wilkomirski's therapy did not include hypnosis, hallucinogenic drugs, or any other such methods" (89).
7. Novick 275. Others have followed Novick in critiquing the function of the Holocaust in contemporary American life. The most controversial account is Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry*, a sustained polemic against various Jewish organizations. Finkelstein argues that in America the "Jewish elite" instrumentalizes the Holocaust in order to extort money from German and Swiss industries. He attributes Wilkomirski's

initial success to his usefulness as a poster boy, and he even finds fault with those who criticized him for “stealing” Holocaust memories: “*The New Yorker* titled its expose of the Wilkomirski fraud ‘Stealing the Holocaust.’ Yesterday Wilkomirski was feted for his tales of Gentile evil; today he is chastised as yet another evil Gentile. It’s always the Gentile’s fault. True, Wilkomirski fabricated his Holocaust past, but the larger truth is that the Holocaust industry, built on a fraudulent misappropriation of history for ideological purposes, was primed to celebrate the Wilkomirski fabrication. He was a Holocaust ‘survivor’ waiting to be discovered” (61). This argument, which seems like the inversion of the traditional anti-Semitic strategy to blame the Jews for everything, amply illustrates the tone of Finkelstein’s work. His point that an autobiography, fabricated or not, can serve “ideological purposes” is well taken; however, he transforms ideology theory into conspiracy theory by pointing the finger at a “Jewish elite,” which he claims is bent on blaming the Gentiles for everything.

8. Ganzfried makes the argument that Wilkomirski cannot distinguish between personal trauma and historical events in the August 27, 1998, article in *Die Weltwoche* that exposed Wilkomirski as a fraud: “We tried to understand his writing process, which clearly went so far that the author completely incorporated himself into the figure in his novel. Somewhere on the borderline between fiction and historical research, the distance from his written ego must have collapsed, so that ‘he’ became ‘I.’ Wilkomirski, alias Doessekker, is no writer. His report does not move in the sphere of literature. It is probably the internalized collection of pictures of a man whose imagination has burned through, completely apart from whether or not a Wilkomirski could have existed, from whom Doessekker borrowed the story of his life in the concentration camps.” This English translation can be found at <<http://www.stopbadtherapy.com/experts/fragments/ganzfried.html>>.
9. See, for instance, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony*: “As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. . . . What testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events” (5). Felman and Laub do not tackle the problem of the relation of testimony to actual events, since they assume that those compelled to testify have suffered some sort of trauma. Truth is personal and subjective and has to do with the relation of the speaker to the listener, not the relation of the narrative to an actual series of events. See, for instance, p. 91.
10. Wilkomirski might also be seen to represent a contradiction at the heart of testimony in general. He speaks with passion about his pain, but the facts he offers to substantiate his trauma cannot be verified in relation to his own life’s events. This linkage back to large events in the past is not unlike some of the testimony in the repressed-memory literature in which patients speak of abuse by parents or near relatives thirty years earlier, or “recall” Satanic rituals to which they were subjected as children. That testimony can be false is nothing new, and we are not suggesting that it somehow be “dismissed” from the historical record. This is especially important because many cases of genocide are not as well documented as the Holocaust, and survivors’ accounts are necessary to create a historical record in the first place. Rather, we see the Wilkomirski case as a cautionary

tale about the dangers of linking authority to affect. Feeling something strongly does not make it “true,” at least not in a historical sense.

11. “The extent to which a discourse has authority depends on its ability to move an audience to ‘see’ an issue or an event that exceeds language’s ability to narrate it. A text’s authority originates in its ability to indicate (though perhaps not produce) knowledge of what lies beyond what can be logically understood, beyond what makes sense” (Bernard-Donals 1305).
12. In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway*, Slavoj Žižek both criticizes and, it seems to us, dramatizes how the Holocaust gets converted into a metaphor for that which stands outside of history, i.e. “the Real.” Speaking of what he calls Wilkomirski’s “False Memory Syndrome,” he makes the following point: “usually, we generate fantasies as a kind of shield to protect us from the unbearable trauma; here, however, the very ultimate traumatic experience, that of the Holocaust, is fantasized as a shield—from what? Such monstrous apparitions are ‘returns in the Real’ of the failed symbolic authority: the reverse of the decline of paternal authority, of the father as the embodiment of the symbolic Law, is the emergence of the rape-enjoying father of the False Memory Syndrome.” In the following sentence, Žižek goes on to say that this version of the father is itself a “shield” against our fear of “unconstrained enjoyment” (31). Leaving aside the psychoanalytic implications of Žižek’s argument, it seems clear that he objects to using the Holocaust as a “shield” or “screen memory,” only to transform it into a metaphor for that which memory can never fully recall. In this respect, his theory is similar to Bernard-Donals’s.
13. “Testimonial narratives do not disclose history; instead they disclose—where the narrative most clearly shows its seams—the effect of events on witnesses” (Bernard-Donals 1308).
14. Langer claims that “A major source of despair for humiliated memory [the traumatic memory of the victim] is the almost totally excluding effect of its revelations, on the witness’s own present consciousness, as well as the audience’s, at least as the witness perceives it. Thus this is not history as we ordinarily understand it; and though we have the option of rejecting such testimony as a form of history, we also face the challenge of enlarging our notion of what history may be, what the Holocaust has made of it, and how it urges us to reconsider the relation of past to present (in a less hopeful way, to be sure), and of both to the tentative future” (109). When Bernard-Donals bases Wilkomirski’s “authority” as a witness on the supposed unreliability of history, he transforms what Langer calls the “excluding effect of . . . revelations” into a general metaphysical principle, arguing that we are all excluded from history’s “real.”
15. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra links identification with the victim to cognitive impasse: “a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity. And a post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox, or impasse” (47).

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