

Possessed by the past: agency, inauthentic testimony and Wilkomirski's *Fragments*

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The reader of the text of testimony is called to bear witness to the memory of traumatic historical events; what becomes of that experience and that reading when the status of the text *as* testimony is called into question? The controversy attending the publication and reception of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948*, a Holocaust testimony subsequently exposed as inauthentic, has centred on questions of authorship, historical authenticity and textual legitimacy.¹ In a context in which revisionist historians continue to attempt to dispute the historical reality of the Holocaust, such questions will remain urgent. However, this paper seeks to extend the terms of the debate prompted by this text by shifting critical attention from the culpability of the author to the responsibility of the reader. I will suggest that reflection on the scandal of *Fragments* can productively prompt a critical evaluation of issues of agency and power implicit in theories of trauma and testimony: that is, the ways in which these theories construct the traumatised subject as lacking agency - as a subject possessed by the past - while empowering the witnessing reader as an agent of meaning. More specifically, this scandal raises important questions regarding the investment of the reader in the role of witness and the complicity of the reader in the generation of an inauthentic testimony.

THE SCANDAL OF *FRAGMENTS*: A WITNESS WITHOUT AN EVENT?

In her book *Holocaust Fictions*, Sue Vice writes that:

Holocaust fictions are scandalous: that is, they invariably provoke controversy by inspiring revulsion and acclaim in equal measure. To judge by what many critics have to say, to write Holocaust fictions is tantamount to making a fiction of the Holocaust. (Vice 1)

The history of the critical reception of Benjamin Wilkomirski's book *Fragments* (first published in German in 1995) would seem to vindicate this assertion. *Fragments* is a first person narrative which recounts vivid and traumatic memories in disjointed and incomplete form; the memories it recounts are those of a child survivor of the Holocaust. The narrative attempts to recount these memories as they were / are experienced; that is, as disturbing and inexplicable:

My earliest memories are a rubble field of isolated images and events. Shards of memory with hard knife-sharp edges, which still cut flesh if touched today. Mostly a chaotic jumble, with very little chronological fit; shards that keep surfacing against the orderly grain of grown-up life and escaping the laws of logic. (Wilkomirski 4)

Notably, the child subject whose experiences return in the form of memory has no direct knowledge of his original name or identity. The name 'Benjamin Wilkomirski' is the name of an identity recovered later in life; the story of that recovery is not told in this text but its origins emerge in instances in which the child is addressed by this name by strangers. The Afterword of this text asserts that these memories survived

despite an injunction to forget and in defiance of the collective historical amnesia of the post war period:

I grew up and became an adult in a time and in a society that didn't want to listen, or perhaps was incapable of listening. 'Children have no memories, children forget quickly, you must forget it all, it was just a bad dream'. These were words endlessly repeated, that were used on me from my schooldays to erase my past and make me keep quiet. So for decades I was silent, but my memory could not be wiped clean.
(Wilkomirski 153)

The Afterword also refers to a 'new identity' given to the author in his childhood, one which concealed and implicitly denied the identity preserved in memory:

Several hundred children who survived the Shoah have come forward. They are 'children without identity,' lacking any certain information about their origins, with all traces carefully erased, furnished with false names and often with false papers too. . . . As a child, I also received a new identity . . . (Wilkomirski 154)

The widespread critical acclaim which met the publication of *Fragments* was overtaken by scandal, when journalists researching the author's history challenged the authenticity of his recovered identity *as* Wilkomirski. This research demonstrated that the author was born Bruno Grosjean, the illegitimate son of a socially disadvantaged mother, and that he had been adopted, and renamed, by the affluent Dössekker family: moreover, he was not Jewish and had spent his entire childhood in the country of his birth, Switzerland.² For Wilkomirski, the published author of this text, 'Bruno Dössekker' is the 'new identity' to which he refers in his

Afterword: that is, a false identity concealing his original identity. For Wilkomirski's critics, however, this 'new identity' was in fact his true identity and the recovered identity a false identity: hence, 'Wilkomirski' was exposed as an imposter and his memories revealed not to be his own. By all accounts, the writing and publication of *Fragments* was not an act of conscious and calculated deception on the part of its author; even Wilkomirski's critics recognise that his conviction that the memories he describes as his own appears genuine. It would seem, then, that while the text gives a subjectively authentic representation of memory as experienced by its subject, the narrator of these memories may not have directly experienced the events they depict: he is, in a sense, a witness without an event.³

Scandal would seem an appropriate word with which to describe the repercussions of the exposure of the identity of the author of *Fragments*; it is a word which ambiguously refers both to a transgression and to the feeling which it occasions, conflating the two in a way that obscures the demarcation between cause and effect. The revelation that the author of this text was not a child survivor of the Holocaust prompts feelings of outrage and indignation; it also prompts a desire to apportion blame and to inflict punishment. *Fragments* is transformed by this scandal from a book which should be read--as an important addition to the literature of the Holocaust--to a book which should not be read: indeed which, perhaps, should be forgotten, even eliminated. A desire for the suppression and forgetting of *Fragments* is, at once, understandable, troubling and impossible. The scandal justifiably provokes an anxiety that the authenticity of Holocaust testimonies as a genre may be undermined and compromised by the publication of a 'false testimony' and hence that revisionist agendas might be lent spurious credibility. From this

perspective, the publication of *Fragments* would seem a deeply regrettable error which, if dwelt on further, will only continue to detract from those texts deserving of our attention. However, in a context in which the importance of remembering and preserving the past is deemed paramount, a compulsion to suppress and forget, on whatever grounds, is one which should always be cause for concern. Moreover, the text cannot be un-read; the experience of its reading has entered into culture and cannot be retrieved.

My interest in the scandal of *Fragments* is less in the transgression than in the feeling which it evokes. The question I wish to explore is: even if our reading of *Fragments* were to prove a misreading, would this misreading cease to be meaningful? The scandal of *Fragments* has focussed on the issue of its authenticity; I would suggest that a dynamic of displacement is at work in the movement to accuse, blame and denounce Wilkomirski (whose insistence on the authenticity of his memories complicates notions of authorial intention). I would propose the scandal as an event which has as its site not simply the province of authorial intention but also the province of critical reception and readership and, more acutely, the issue of the reader's desire for and investment in the text of testimony.

“ON STOLEN LEAVE”: THE REMEMBERING SUBJECT IN *FRAGMENTS*

The scandal of *Fragments* seems to consist of two revelations: a survivor is revealed to be an imposter and an autobiography is revealed to be a fiction. The scandalous effect of the latter revelation arguably proceeds from assumptions which have been

contested within auto/biography studies: that fiction and autobiography are mutually exclusive genres and that identity is self-evident. Linda Anderson has suggested that “one of the desires that is encoded by autobiography . . . is that of becoming, within the realm of the symbolic, one’s own progenitor, of assuming authorship of one’s life” (Anderson 67-8). Her comments encapsulate the sense that autobiography is less a genre than a discourse and that as a discourse autobiography *produces* the very identity which it claims to commemorate. What is striking about *Fragments* is that the text infers a remembering subject who is by no means in full possession of his past or of his identity; what emerges from this text is not the triumphal self of classic autobiography but the self-effacing affirmation that he is a “‘child without identity’ ” (Wilkomirski 154).

The experience of alienation from language is a recurring motif in *Fragments*; the author does not possess a “mother tongue, nor a father tongue” (Wilkomirski 3), has forgotten the hybrid language, or “Babel-babble” (Wilkomirski 4) of the camps and feels his later languages to be merely “imitations of other people’s speech” (Wilkomirski 5). Moreover, he recounts a series of crises of language; in moments of shock he is unable to speak whereas in a number of other instances his voice betrays him, such as when he hears his own voice giving advice to a new child inmate in the camp which indirectly leads to his death or when he is forced to address his foster parent as ‘mother’. At these moments there is a profound sense of the splitting of the subject, evident in an abject loss of agency within discourse. Indeed, there is an absence of agency throughout the narrative; the child experiences himself as a passive object, rather than active subject, which is lifted, dropped, yanked and thrown by disembodied adult hands whose purpose, whether persecuting or

protecting, is equally objectifying. Repeatedly he is left behind, abandoned or forgotten; again, the meaning of these apparent desertions is uneasily ambiguous—has he been saved or betrayed? During his post-liberation journey from camp to orphanage, he, along with the other children, is given a bundle and identification tag as a token of identity but the contents of his bundle are unknown to him and the tag is blank. The motif of the bundle as a signifier of the fate of children recurs in flashbacks to his experiences in the camps; ‘bundles’ which are violently thrown, crushed or abandoned are revealed to have been swaddled infants when he discovers their corpses. His riven sense of self is most powerfully conveyed in the ways in which he denounces himself as a “traitor” and a “deserter” (Wilkomirski 14), and as a “criminal” and a “betrayor” (Wilkomirski 123); the crime of which he accuses himself is survival, implicitly at the expense of his fellow child inmates and it is significant that these self-accusations do not cease with liberation.

Indeed, *Fragments* is a narrative without beginnings or endings; neither familial origins nor historical causes are available to give form or meaning to memory. Moreover, history is not experienced in the form of events; neither the liberation of the camps nor the end of the war can be said to occur within the author’s memory. The child continues to live in the world of the camps, convinced that they have not ceased to exist but have merely been concealed: as the author asserts: “there was a world once, but it disappeared long ago . . .” (Wilkomirski 111) and again “The camp’s still there - just hidden and well disguised” (Wilkomirski 150). Consequently, ordinary objects assume sinister meanings; chimneys, furnaces, trains, even child-sized bunks in which fruit is stored in a cellar all testify to the readiness of the civilian world to convert itself into the world of the camp. Two scenes in

particular convey the transformation of the ordinary world into a terrorising space when seen through a traumatised perspective. Terror is evoked by the sight of machinery, concealed in woodlands, conveying children into a hole in a mountain; this sinister apparatus is revealed to be a ski-lift (Wilkomirski 141-45). Later, the child is pressed to admire a picture of a man aiming a weapon at a barefoot child during a school lesson; unable to identify the man as Swiss national hero William Tell, he responds with shocked incomprehension (Wilkomirski 128-33).

On being shown documentary footage of the liberation of the camps as a senior school student, the author encounters evidence which retrospectively both confirms and denies his understanding of his recovered memories. He recalls his reaction: “Nobody ever told me the war was over . . . somehow I seem to have missed my own liberation” (Wilkomirski 149-52). In *Fragments*, there is no ‘after Auschwitz’ in the sense of an era following the end of an event, but only an afterwardsness without end; the event has begun, but does not cease in that it lives on, beyond its historical demise, in memory. Indeed, the author conveys a sense of posthumous identity expressed by survivors who have, as Marianne Hirsch writes, “sur-vived . . . outlived [their] intended destruction” (Hirsch 19). They are:

Among the living, but as fake living people, struck off all the lists, because they were supposed to be dead . . . living among the living, yet [they] didn’t really belong with them – [they] were actually the dead, on stolen leave, accidental survivors who got left behind in life. (Wilkomirski 81-82)

While *Fragments* does not tell the story of Wilkomirski's ‘recovery’ of his identity it does relate memories to which that identity might be traced. The passage

in which 'Binjamin' is resurrected, however, serves only to underline the fragility of his identity:

Then suddenly the group comes to a halt. One of the women turns around, detaches herself from the knot of people, runs back along the path, and she's screaming. She throws her arms up in the air so wildly that her rags slip off and you can see her white breast. . .

'Binjamin,' she's screaming. 'Binjamin, oy Binjamin,' and she keeps running in my direction.

Spellbound, I stare at her. What's the matter with her ? She's quite close to me now.

'Binjamin - is it you?' she calls again, all excited, her whole voice like a question.

Suddenly it hits me - I'm the person she's calling, I *am* Binjamin, she means me. I'd almost forgotten that I have a name.

. . . What does it mean ? Who is she ? It doesn't make any sense to me, all I do know is that I *am* Binjamin, that she does mean me, but I have no idea who she is, I don't remember her at all.

(Wilkomirski 109-10)

This memory is not a recollection of possessing or inhabiting an identity but of being called into being as that identity; his recognition of himself as Binjamin is entirely dependent on his identification as Binjamin by a stranger, an identification which may, of course, be mistaken. A desire to discover or be discovered, to find or be found, may be the unspoken impetus for this reunion, which is all the more poignant for the sheer incomprehension with which it is accompanied. His emphatic and

unequivocal assertion--'I am Benjamin'--is not so much a statement as an assertion of identity: a claim to an identity.

In its depiction of a past which is not over, of memories which are fractured and disjointed and which refuse to be assimilated into a coherent form, *Fragments* resembles the genre of texts which have been theorised as testimonies to traumatic history. In the Foreward to *Trauma: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that the historic trauma of the Second World War is:

a trauma we consider as the watershed of our times, and which the book will come to view not as an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially *not over*, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent (whether consciously or not) in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving* . . . (Felman and Laub xiv, italics in original)

The liberation which Wilkomirski discovers that he has 'missed' has, in a sense, *not* taken place; the traumatic past is a space which culture continues to inhabit, despite its temporal existence having come to an end. The 'rubble' and 'jumble' of Wilkomirski's memories, with their cutting 'edges' and erupting 'shards' which resist order and meaning, evoke the character of testimony as described by Felman:

as a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that had 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 frame of reference. (Felman 5)

By placing *Fragments* somewhat *improperly* (given that this text cannot properly be included into the generic category of testimony) within the critical paradigm of theories of trauma and testimony, it is possible to see how such theories offer insights into this text but also how this text poses important questions for this paradigm. However, I should first like to address the significance of this critical paradigm by attempting to situate it within a broader theoretical framework.

TRAUMA AND TESTIMONY: THEORISING SUBJECTIVITY, MEMORY AND HISTORY

Theories of trauma and testimony have had the effect of enabling an extensive and interdisciplinary body of critical and theoretical work on representations of traumatic historical memory.⁴ These theories have instituted a new field of academic study, characterised both by its subject matter and its theoretical approach. Theories of trauma and testimony can be understood as being articulated in response to the limitations of existing frames of reading; while recognising the original and innovative quality of this response, it might be useful to situate these theories within a wider theoretical project concerned with the investigation of the relationship between history and literature. This project is premised on a critical appreciation of the relationship between literature and history. However, it rejects as reductive reflectionist models of literary production. Rather it offers an understanding of this relationship as dynamic and dialogic; literature is to be understood as the product of historical and cultural forces and history as the effect of a network of discourses which include the literary. The aesthetic autonomy of

literature (above and beyond historical change) and the empirical irreducibility of history (immune to textual instability) are both radically challenged. This understanding of the relationship between literature and history is given persuasive articulation by Felman and Laub:

In order to gain insight into the significance and impact of the context on the text, the empirical context needs not just to be *known*, but to be *read* . . . We thus propose to show how the basic and legitimate critical demand for *contextualisation of the text* itself needs to be complemented, simultaneously, by the less familiar and yet necessary work of the *textualisation of the context* . . ." (Felman and Laub xv)

There would seem to be an affinity between this 'contextualisation of the text' and 'textualisation of the context' and the work undertaken in literary studies, perhaps most notably within the field of New Historicism, on the 'historicity of the text' and 'textuality of history'.⁵ The distinction between "the basic and legitimate critical demand" (Felman and Laub xv) for contextualisation of the text and the "less familiar and yet necessary work" (Felman and Laub xv) of the textualisation of the context conveys a sensitivity to the anxieties which have attended the latter: principally the concern that historical reality will be lost if history is reduced to the status of discourse and its claim to truth relativised. However, Felman and Laub see no conflict between the textualisation of context and the survival of history; on the contrary, the latter, especially with regard to traumatic historical memory, is to be achieved through the former. Cathy Caruth also acknowledges the concerns which have been expressed about post-structuralist approaches to history and introduces her theory of trauma as a response to these concerns:

Recent literary criticism has shown an increasing concern that the epistemological problems raised by poststructuralist criticism, in particular deconstruction, necessarily lead to political and ethical paralysis. . . . Through the notion of trauma, I will argue, we can understand that a re-thinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not. (Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience" 181-82)

Similarly, Felman and Laub assert that the "ultimate concern" of the work represented in *Testimony* is the "preservation . . . of the uniqueness of experience" and the "preservation . . . of reality itself":

In considering . . . literature and art as a precocious mode of witnessing - of accessing reality - when other modes of knowledge are precluded, our ultimate concern has been with the preservation, in this book, both of the uniqueness of experience in the face of its theorisation, and the shock of the unintelligible in the face of the attempt at its interpretation; with the preservation, that is, of reality itself in the midst of our own efforts at interpreting it and through the necessary process of its textualisation. (Felman and Laub xx)

Concepts such as 'experience' and 'reality' are often listed as casualties of post-structuralist approaches to history by its critics; it is an index of the significance of theories of trauma and testimony that these terms are given such prominence.⁶

Theories of trauma and testimony can, then, be understood as being informed by, and significantly contributing to, the problematising of the relationship

between history and literature. Moreover, the realm within which the contextualisation of the text and the textualisation of the context is undertaken is that of subjectivity; whereas much work within this field can be described as materialist or Foucauldian, the study of trauma and testimony has been crucially informed by a psychoanalytic framework. The unconscious, a concept dismissed by some historicists as irredeemably ahistorical and universalising, here becomes the site within which the historical past is uniquely captured. I wish to offer a critical evaluation of issues of power and agency in theories of trauma and testimony by acknowledging the complex implication of the unconscious in historical forces. I will suggest that the scandal of *Fragments* can best be understood only if the power and agency of the reader is fully addressed.

POSSESSED BY THE PAST: ISSUES OF AGENCY IN WITNESSING AND READING

The traumatised subject of testimony is depicted by theorists of trauma and testimony as in some sense emptied of agency. Felman refers to the witness as "the *vehicle* of an occurrence" (Felman 3, my italics); Felman and Laub describe survivors of the Holocaust as the "*bearers* of . . . the secrecy and the secret of contemporary history" (Felman and Laub xix, my italics). Caruth suggests that the traumatised person "*carries* an impossible history within them" (Caruth, "Introduction" 4, my italics); this subject is described as being "*possessed* by an image or event" (Caruth, "Introduction" 3, my italics) as "*becom[ing]* themselves the *symptom* of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, "Introduction" 4, my italics). This subject

is possessed by the past, by memory and history; he / she is spoken through rather than speaking, the 'vehicle', 'carrier' or 'bearer' of a knowledge which is not in his / her possession.

Both Felman and Caruth emphasise the significance of the listener who bears witness to the act of witnessing: testimony, they claim, can only occur in the presence of the listening other. It is through this listening--which is simultaneously a passive and an active role--that the testimony comes into being; the listener is the recipient not the originator of the testimony but nevertheless plays a crucial role in bringing the traumatised memories into narrative and into meaning. Dori Laub writes of the hearer as a "blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 57). This metaphor would seem to highlight the passivity of the hearer or listener as recipient but it also hints that in some way the listener is the destination for the testimony and that it is the listener who will 'frame' the testimony. The listener's role in the production of testimony is attributed with an agency which is both subtle and powerful; Felman and Laub assert that "the listening in fact *enables* the unfolding of the testimonial life accounts of Holocaust survivors" (Felman and Laub xvii, italics in original). Furthermore, Laub suggests that the listener to trauma "comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 57). To some extent, the listener seems to assume the agency of which the traumatised subject is divested. The way in which the listener is empowered by this assumption of agency is, however, problematic. Indeed, Felman and Laub detail the risks to the listener's subjectivity entailed by such witnessing; they refer to the "existential crisis" (Felman and Laub xvi) that the listener may share with the testifier and Laub explores the range of responses, from

over-identification to aversion, through which the listener may seek unconsciously to protect him or herself from the traumatising experience. Moreover, for Felman and Laub, as for Caruth and other theorists of trauma and testimony, listening is a profoundly ethical responsibility; a duty to which we are called by the testifying voice. And yet a complex and perhaps troubling power relationship is inferred in the way that the subject positions of testifier and listener are constructed: the former as without agency and knowledge and the latter as an agent of meaning.⁷

Felman's account of the 'crisis' engendered in a graduate seminar group who witnessed videotaped Holocaust testimony from the Yale archive is a powerful testament to the way in which traumatic experience transgresses the borders and boundaries of individual subjectivity. Felman's students, both individually and as a group, experience a fragmentation, even disintegration, of identity; the meticulous pedagogical framework within which their learning has been placed proves inadequate to contain their subjective responses. Felman consults her colleague (and co-author of the book in which this account is given) Dori Laub and they agree on a course of action: "we concluded that what was called for was for me to reassume authority as the teacher of the class and bring the students back into significance" (Felman 48). While recognising that the 'authority' of a teacher is always contingent on a particular context and in a profound sense provisional (rather than innate), it is notable that authority is here given as being within the possession of Felman as a teacher; it is within her power to assume or to withhold at will. The resemblance here between teacher and listener and between student and testifier is significant; the teacher / listener brings into significance the unmediated experience of the student / testifier. All the more striking is the forceful way in which the role of

the listener is represented; an acknowledgement of responsibility is evident in the 'bringing *back*' (in that the students's distress was the effect of a learning experience staged by the teacher) but the role of listener / teacher in rescuing her subjects in undeniably powerful. The teacher returns the students to the realm of meaning; this act of recovery is an entirely appropriate response to a teaching situation in which the teacher is mindful of the affective impact of the subject and in which the teacher arguably has a duty to access the position of power prepared for her. However, the parallel between teacher and listener remains revealing of the extent to which the listener is empowered by her role just as the testifier is experiencing the evacuation of power and agency. Felman writes of the teacher's "task" as to "recontextualise," to put "back into perspective", to "reintegrate the crisis is a *transformed* frame of meaning" (Felman 54). The screen may be blank but it provides the frame which makes the traumatic content of testimony meaningful.

Theories of trauma and testimony explore the ways in which traumatised subjects are not the author--in the sense of being the owner and originator--of their testimony; that is, testimonies are not made by subjects in possession of their past and its meaning but by subjects possessed *by* their past and estranged from its meaning. I would suggest that the issues attending the publication and reception of Wilkomirski's *Fragments* cannot be resolved simply by expelling the text from the generic category of testimony on the grounds that it is not authentic. Theories of testimony are valuable and insightful--not only for the study of representations for trauma but for the study of the relationship between subjectivity, memory and history more broadly--precisely because they privilege the autobiographical without exclusive recourse to notions of authenticity. The autobiographical character of

testimony is not assumed to grant unmediated access to lived experience and reality; on the contrary, testimony is approached as a discourse within which the complexities and contradictions of life writing are exemplified. Wilkomirski, the remembering narrator of *Fragments*, is very much a subject possessed by an event; his experience is offered as symptomatic of a traumatic history which he cannot fully recover or reclaim. His book is an attempt to bear witness to an impossible history, of which he deems himself the bearer. If Wilkomirski did not experience the events he claims to have witnessed firsthand, his text remains meaningful, nevertheless, as a testament to the powers of traumatic history to possess.

I have stated that the controversy surrounding Wilkomirski's *Fragments* has centred on the issue of authenticity; its legitimacy, as testimony, being dependent on whether it can be empirically proved that Wilkomirski was a child survivor of the Holocaust as his text claims. However, theorists of trauma and testimony suggest that the text of testimony is not singly authored by the subject who experienced the trauma; rather testimony is brought into being through a context of listening. As a text of testimony, *Fragments* invokes the reader to witness the author's witnessing: the reader, like the listener, "enables the unfolding" (Felman and Laub xvii) of the testimony, becomes a "participant and co-owner of the traumatic event" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 57), acts as a "blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 57). The call to witness is a call which the reader of testimony is unlikely to refuse; the reader of testimony perhaps understands their reading as a response to an ethical injunction to bear witness. Scepticism, doubt, a withholding of empathy are the more likely characteristics, it might be supposed, of the revisionist reader: a reader for whom textual ambiguity and uncertainty are

suggestive of historical misrepresentation and for whom an appeal for empathy might be interpreted as rhetorical manipulation. A certain ferocity in the denunciation of *Fragments* and in the discrediting of its author can be very understandably attributed to a feeling of betrayal: a sense that one's sympathies have been exploited. The seeming passivity of the reader of testimony, as the trusting and open recipient of disturbing knowledge, constructs the reader as peculiarly vulnerable to such exploitation. However, as the 'enabler' and 'co-owner' of the text of testimony, the reader should acknowledge his / her role in the production of the text and its meanings.⁸ If the act of testimony cannot take place in the absence of a listener / reader, then the reader of testimony must recognise both her duty to listen and her accountability for what is produced. I have argued that for all the apparent passivity entailed in the reading of testimony, the reader is also, as theorised by Felman and Laub, empowered: empowered, that is, to bring meaning into being, to offer a frame within which it can reside. It is this power which is disturbed when the text of testimony is revealed to be inauthentic. Once empowered, the reader now occupies a very different position. No longer in possession of meaning, but unknowingly possessed by images and events, it is the reader who experiences the profound alienation from agency which is attributed to the traumatised subject or testifier.

In answer to the question “ ‘What happens to the memory of history when it ceases to be testimony ?’ ” James E. Young suggests that “[I]t becomes memory of the witness’s memory, a vicarious past” (Young 1). Readers of *Fragments* have had to confront the possibility that the memories it depicts do not belong, so to speak, to

its author.⁹ *Fragments* nevertheless remains meaningful in the way that it is indicative of the passage of private memories--preserved, archived and circulated--into public consciousness; it demonstrates the way in which our understanding of the past, as it recedes beyond the reach of direct memory, is inevitably informed by unexperienced memory. What seems to be required is a more critical interrogation of the reader's investment *in* the text of testimony, such that we might be able to comprehend how the desire *for* testimony in some sense *produces* a text like *Fragments* and the scandal which has consumed it.

NOTES

¹ For reflection on the exposure of Wilkomirski's text as inauthentic, see Geller (2002); for discussion of genre, memory and the Holocaust memoir see Hungerford (2001) and Suleiman (2000); Murphy (2004) interrogates the relationship between history and trauma theory; Whitehead (2004) considers *Fragments* in the context of Swiss cultural memory.

² See Elena Lappin, "The Man With Two Heads" *Granta* 66 (Summer 1999) 7-65.

³ For a discussion of the Holocaust as an 'event without a witness' see Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth Testimony and Survival."

⁴ I am referring here principally to the work of Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman as having had a founding influence. By 'theories of trauma and testimony' I wish to indicate a distinctive field of inquiry but do not intend to suggest that the critical positions it includes are identical in approach and emphasis.

⁵ Louis Montrose delineates the relationship between literature and history as follows: "By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing . . . By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question . . . and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are constructed as the 'documents' upon which historians ground their own texts, called 'histories' (Montrose 20).

⁶ The extent to which these theories achieve their stated objectives is, of course, subject to debate. Dominick LaCapra has offered necessary and cogent critical evaluations of work on trauma and testimony, expressing a concern that "so great has been the preoccupation with testimony and witnessing that they have in some quarters almost displaced or been equated with history" (LaCapra 11). However, perhaps especially in the context of such critiques, it is important to recognise the theoretical context within which this emphasis emerges.

⁷ LaCapra has offered a powerful critique of Felman's work on testimony on the grounds that it is implicated in a problematic transference relationship; this concern is most uncompromisingly expressed in LaCapra's assertion that Felman's reading of Lanzmann's *Shoah* is "one of celebratory participation based on empathy or positive transference undisturbed by critical judgement" (LaCapra 112). My interest is in the way the listener to or reader of testimony may retain a degree of agency even (and perhaps especially) when appearing to abdicate such agency through over-identification with the testifier.

⁸ With regard to *Fragments* as a contested testimony, we might ask what desires might be invested in a wish to suppress Wilkomirski's text, to deny it a readership and to erase the memory of its reading? Equally, what desires might be invested in a wish to recover or preserve the experience of reading *Fragments* as meaningful in the face of its discrediting? Indeed, to what extent might the intellectual energy invested in the production of *this* paper represent an unconscious attempt on the part of the author to recuperate and redeem an 'innocent' initial reading of *Fragments*?

⁹ Amy Hungerford suggests that the author of *Fragments* "absorbed the accounts of camp life, the stories of extreme violence, the testimonies and histories and photographs, and they finally became him, finally made him Benjamin Wilkomirski" (Hungerford 88).

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