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# A Deconstruction of Elie Wiesel's *The Time of the Uprooted*

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A DECONSTRUCTION OF ELIE WIESEL'S THE TIME OF THE UPROOTED

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Cristina T. Carbonell

2014

To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Cristina T. Carbonell, and entitled A Deconstruction of Elie Wiesel's The Time of the Uprooted, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Asher Milbauer

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Heather Russell

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Ana Luszczynska, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 21, 2014

The thesis of Cristina T. Carbonell is approved.

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Dean Kenneth G. Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Florida International University, 2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A DECONSTRUCTION OF ELIE WIESEL'S THE TIME OF THE UPROOTED

by

Cristina T. Carbonell

Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor Ana Luszczynska, Major Professor

This thesis explores the implications of bearing witness as testimony, and the recuperation of community and identity in the wake of exile. Through a close reading of Elie Wiesel's *The Time of the Uprooted*, alongside the theories of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy (among others), I argue that a True Testimony cannot exist, and yet despite this fact, there is a necessity to bear witness in the face of the Other. The realization suggests an imperative of a different order—one that steps back from the very notion of truth, to instead accept the impossibility of truth in any act of witnessing. By comparing Wiesel's metaphysical framework to post-structural philosophies, I am able to blur the lines between an exile's metaphysical feelings of isolation and strangeness from both others and themselves to the effects of recognizing and accepting that all language is *différance*.

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## Introduction

In Michel Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*, historical analysis is examined by observing the vast change in approaches to the collection and organization of data. Foucault begins by transcribing "The old questions of the traditional analysis" which calls for historians to ask themselves: "What link should be made between disparate events? How can a casual succession be established between them? What continuity or overall significance do they possess? Is it possible to define a totality, or must one be content with reconstituting conceptions [sic]?" (4). He argues that "history, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*" (8). In other words, the change from history's traditional form, to a more "general history" has brought about several consequences resulting in a history that strays from its attempts to eradicate discontinuity to instead, embrace the rupture as "a basic element of historical analysis" (9-10). Furthermore, Foucault explores the effects of such a shift by discussing the role of the new historian as one which "discover[s] the limits of a process, the point of inflexion of a curve, the inversion of a regulatory movement, the boundaries of oscillation, the threshold of a function, the instant at which a circular causality breaks down," indicating that the most significant change to the new history is the inclusion of the discontinuous into the work itself (9).

Foucault's approach to history is complementary to the discussion of bearing witness as a means of acquiring historical "truths." Distant history, once dependent upon

mere artifacts and documents to transparently transcribe on behalf of first hand witnesses, was constructed by forcing various pieces of heterogeneous evidence into homogenous representations of the past. However, historiography has evolved significantly as a result of the role of the actual witness, able to tell the “truth” about their experiences in relation to monumental events. In spite of this, the multiplicity of representations that may be derived from a single event still proves problematic given the limitations of language, written or spoken, to ever consistently and completely re-present an experience or event. Historians are still therefore, left with the task of attempting to construct histories through the deconstructible and unstable event of language; even actual witnesses themselves struggle with the impossibility of harnessing language and words to communicate effectively on their behalf. That is to say, because of the limitations of language and words, events and experiences can never be precisely re-created, consequently witnessing becomes subjective to the witness. Therefore, no universal truth can ever prevail; truth continues to evade even the witness and that is a part of the struggle of reconstructing experiences and events through memory.

Witnessing, as a form of testimony is, questioned under the notion of language’s unreliability as well as the complications of a witness’ own perceptions and memories. Because the often incompleteness of memory and the potentiality for lapses in memory as a result of trauma or shock memory becomes a difficult medium to present as factual. Nevertheless, a witness bears the closest understanding of what may have occurred in a given event for the mere fact that they were “present.” However, looking at witnesses’ accounts from the Holocaust, the notion of being present at a historical event can again be seen as problematic. Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész often discusses his role as the



stranger; as witness he is simultaneously present and absent, and thus can never fully bear witness to his experiences. In the article, “Life, Writing, and Problems of Genre in Elie Wiesel and Imre Kertész,” Michael Bachmann paraphrases Kertész’s feelings of distance from his role as witness:

[I]t is impossible for a Holocaust witness—the one who has been “directly experiencing it”—to claim this experience without resorting to something which appears to be its opposite: imagination. The survivor who talks or writes about the Shoah is thus a stranger to him or herself, testifying on behalf of the “true witness”—the one who would *know* the experience directly—but is buried inside the survivor as an absence. (80)

Bachmann’s mention of the absence can be read as a reference to the distance between language and fully present meaning—an abyss that can never be fully breached turning all witnesses into strangers. The simultaneous presence and absence, which will be discussed at length in the scope of my thesis, is the basis of which witnessing fails to present truth. For Kertész, his role as witness is shadowed by the inability of fully present meaning to exist; he argues that the “true witness” is lost the moment a witness tries to translate to the Other. But, why then does one still continue to give testimony, when witnessing is so often scrutinized for its inability to transcribe truth?

To answer this question one must first understand that for the witness the act of giving testimony to horrific historical events is indeed an ethical imperative. To tell, becomes a means of not only commemorating the lives of those who did not survive, but also a way of re-creating events in an attempt for the memories of survivors to live on and never be forgotten. Another Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, touches upon this

imperative in *Evil and Exile*, identifying his purpose for writing about his experiences during the Holocaust by saying, “We have an obligation to the dead. Their memory must be kept alive...Indeed, to have survived only in order to forget would be blasphemy, a second catastrophe. To forget the dead would be to have them die a second time” (15). Wiesel emphasizes the need to bear witness by suggesting that it is the only way in which to pass on a witnesses’ memories of an experience and recollections of the dead. To *not* do so, would in fact, be an act of murder. This ethical imperative to bear witness emerges as a duty to incorporate the stories of the dead within history and to prevent them from being misappropriated or forgotten.

However, a witness’ imperative to *tell* and to narrate their experiences faces the paradoxical element which witnessing cannot escape, that is, its ability to conceal and reveal simultaneously. The paradoxical movement within all witnessing though, does not suggest that the witnesses’ account should be seen as less true, but instead unveils the event of language as a deconstructible medium that necessarily and simultaneously conceals and reveals. Although the paradox is often viewed as problematic, critical historian Hayden White argues, “So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report on the way things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent...” (1). White disqualifies the problem that arises when one event is burdened with an array of representations by saying, “Far from being a problem...narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely the problem of how to translate knowing into telling...” (1). Although White’s focus is on narrative witness accounts, it serves our purposes by illustrating the benefits that this type of witnessing reveals. Through the lens

of a narrative, witnessing may become further disconnected from “Truth,” yet allows for an understanding of events that ruptures the limited frame, which History can present. Capital “T” truth suggests that histories can be developed as a verifiable set of factual events, however, what my analysis aims to explore is that Truth is inaccessible through witnessing or by any other means for that matter, yet this revelation allows for a closer understanding of history than any “Truth” can. In other words, we need to rethink the meaning of Truth and History.

Despite the paradox of witnessing, the use of witness narratives in the collection and representation of histories allows for a more nuanced view of historical events from the perspectives of the victims. In considering how histories are acquired, transcribed, and taught to new generations, historical events are almost always taught in a way that dismisses the individual victim, instead focusing on the oppressors or the events that can summate the reasons for victimization. Historians and witnesses alike often allude to the disproportion of History. With regard to the fragmented history of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel states, “To know the real story of their [victims] deaths, we would need to know the individual death of each one of them. And we do not” (*Afterword* 160). Furthermore, Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” critiques the effect of historical generalization by discussing the archive of slavery and the presence of Venus as “an emblematic figure of the enslaved woman” to suggest that what is missing from history is the *story* of the victims (*Abstract*). She argues, “[T]he stories that exist are not about them [victims], but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes” (2). In other words, although History with a capital “H”

implies an unbiased account of the events that occurred during a specific time and place, Wiesel and Hartman's claims signify the flaw in Historical depictions and proves that individual witness accounts can lead to a better understanding of History, while simultaneously accepting the impossibility of a unified Historical Truth.

Additionally, analyzing the perceptions of historians and the changes in notions of history through time emphasizes the importance of integrating individual witness accounts of historical events into History. Jane Tompkins discusses the fallibility of History in her critical essay "Indians," in which she traces how cultural beliefs, values and opinions affect historical documentation of Native Americans. Tompkins concludes "The historian can never escape the limitations of his or her own position in history and so inevitably gives an account that is an extension of the circumstances from which it springs" (685). Tompkins' statement holds true for witnesses as well. Although presenting valuable insight into the minds of victims, witnesses too must contend with the limits of position, location and perception. However, the acceptance of these limits situates witnessing as a form of ethical initiative to re-present as re-telling and therein keep alive the experiences from the perspectives of the victims, as opposed to documenting and presenting facts to be used as History. Even though unable to fully bear witness, those who can tell the *stories* often left out of History feel obligated to do so, regardless of the difficulties, impossibilities, and limitations of language to give "true" testimony or a "real" re-presentation.

My thesis will explore the limitations, advantages, and ethical implications of witnessing as testimony through language. With a focus on the difficulties presented by language to translate experience and memory, we will look at the role of the historical

narrative, often disguised as fiction, as it attempts to bear witness to historical atrocities as an ethical imperative through the mind of a character acting as witness. Specifically, in looking at the writing of Elie Wiesel, who continually discusses the paradoxical qualities of witnessing in his memoirs and fiction, we will dissect the formidable medium of language as a limited means of transcribing Truth, while unveiling the complexities of the relationship between bearing witness and testimony.

The present thesis will primarily focus on Wiesel's fictional novel, *The Time of the Uprooted*, which grapples with the limitations of language in this sense. Although presented as fiction, the novel deals with historical events, and through his characters Wiesel continues to bear witness to *his* own memories and feelings of exile. The novel is organized through memories and flashbacks, and thematizes the impossibility of language to give "True testimony" as Jacques Derrida, in his seminal *Sovereignties in Question*, defines it. Although the novel's main character, Gamaliel, acknowledges the incapability of language to fully capture Truth, he continues to tell his story nevertheless. In so doing, Wiesel's character tells his stories as an obligation to remember, to construct his unique history in relation to History and to reveal and conceal simultaneously the horrors of his past. Contemporary continental philosopher David Wood describes this obligation as "our continuing debt to the unthematized" emphasizing the unspoken responsibility to acknowledge that which is radically impossible to explain (2). In an attempt to extend this debt, I will explore how Wiesel's novel acknowledges this obligation to bear witness while simultaneously and paradoxically presenting the silence found in language, the trace concealed in all witnessing and the unmistakable obligation

to the Other as a means of establishing a collective memory to an event that can never be fully explained, understood or re-presented.

Chapter one will discuss Elie Wiesel's acknowledgement of language's limitations in his writing by discussing the silence, or secret always present in language. Using Jacques Derrida's theory of the secret and Wiesel's own understanding of the silence found in language, chapter one will determine how Gamaliel, the main character in the novel, fulfills his obligation under the burden of silence. Wiesel defines silence as the loss of meaning through the medium of language, which the Other will never know, or understand. In an essay titled, "To Believe or Not to Believe" *From the Kingdom of Memory*, Wiesel explains, "Our [survivors] memories are those of madmen. How can we get the doors to open? What can we do to share our visions? Our words can only evoke the incomprehensible. Hunger, thirst, fear, humiliation, waiting, death; for us these words hold different realities. This is the ultimate tragedy of the victims" (33). The tragedy of language, or its impossibility to fully bear witness, plays a vital role in *The Time of the Uprooted*. In the wake of these difficulties presented by language, Gamaliel continues to narrate, to tell, to bear witness to his experiences and feelings in an effort to transcribe a history that should not be forgotten.

Chapter two will discuss Gamaliel's drive to recuperate a loss sense of "community" and "identity" through bearing witness. Community, in a metaphysical sense, will be hypothesized as false under the theories of Jean-Luc Nancy and Ian James who argue that community begins at the primordial level and thus cannot be lost as such. Gamaliel's imperative to bear witness and his acceptance of the incompleteness of testimony will be used to question the ethical imperative to tell and where the imperative

to do so comes from. Wiesel's belief that bearing witness is an obligation and a duty to those who did not survive the Holocaust will be analyzed alongside his feelings of language's incompleteness. These paradoxical elements (the need to bear witness, while understating the limitations of language) work to reveal the need for the Other, and the need for the acceptance of finitude. Chapter two will pay close attention to the role of storyteller, and the medium of language, which always conceals and reveals simultaneously. The acceptance of Derrida's term, *différance*, which implies that language is already differing and deferring from what it aims to explain, suggests that all language is finite. Thus, chapter two will analyze Gamaliel's act of bearing witness, which alludes to this lag of meaning, as an acceptance of language's finitude.

The final chapter and conclusion will explore the purpose of witnessing by posing various questions regarding the effects of bearing witness on history and the witnesses themselves. Wiesel often discusses his purpose for writing as his way of paying a debt to those victims who did not survive. He argues that by *telling*, he is fulfilling his obligation to History and to a community that needs to remember the past in order to avoid repeating it. Since witnessing cannot be seen as "True Testimony" because of language's limits and the multiplicity of accounts detailing the same event, one may ask what other purpose does bearing witness serve? In writing *The Time of the Uprooted*, Wiesel emphasizes how bearing witness helps both the witness and the collective to which that individual belongs, yielding a healing which constructs a shared identity and a collective memory of a historical event. However, through a demystification of the metaphysical sense of "identity" and "community," can bearing witness still serve a purpose, and if so can the use of testimony which can never be "true" still add to our understanding of

history? My concluding chapter will try to unravel these questions through an examination of how witnessing can serve as an expansion to historical “truths.” The extension beyond “truth,” explored in the novel through Gamaliel’s “responsible” witnessing, emphasizes that all language, and thus all witnessing read as a response to the Other, unveils the connection between all beings while adding to our understanding of a historical event.

Through a deconstructive reading of *The Time of the Uprooted*, Wiesel’s poetic language and secrets emerge as traces or *différance*, which “affirm[ing] the necessity of ambiguity, incompleteness, repetition, negotiation, and contingency,” arrive at a telling that is more than simply true and meaningful, but instead reveal the impossibility of language to exist without world, without being (Wood 4). Derrida asserts that “what matters is not what the...[text] means, or that it bear witness to this or that [...] what matters most is the strange limit between what can and cannot be determined or decided” (Derrida, *Poetics* 69-70). Derrida’s emphasis on the limit and excess of language explicates that however close one may come to articulating their memories or experiences, what matters is not the Truth, but the boundaries of language and the act of bearing witness; this does not however suggest a limitation, quite conversely it opens the possibility for myriad interpretations and subsequent reinterpretations, which the theory of deconstruction identifies as the inevitability of having to live in language. By acknowledging the limit and corresponding opening, and through close textual analysis, we can explore the nature of the secret to further understand the relationship between bearing witness and our obligation to that which we cannot reach or name; the unknowable, the unnameable, and the unthematizable.



## Chapter I: The Secret

*“We all knew that we could never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words—our experience of madness on an absolute scale...All words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless, whereas I wanted them to sear” (Wiesel “Why I Write” 14).*

In his essay, “The Poetics and Politics of Witnessing” from *Sovereignties in Question*, Jacques Derrida discusses the *secret* as the paradoxical aporetic experience of all witnessing. He argues that witnessing is bound by the impossibility of “truth,” because the *secret* is paradoxically present in all language. To unravel Derrida’s notion of witnessing we must first explore the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure who understood language as a “system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (*Course* 858). Saussure implies that a sign, which is composed of a signifier (the spoken or written word) and signified (the concept or idea that comes to mind), derives its accepted meaning from what it is not. Because the signifier and signified do not possess any natural connection to one another, Saussure argues that, “in language there are only differences *without positive terms*,” suggesting that prior to their association “neither ideas nor sounds ... existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system,” thus it is the sign’s difference to other signs that gives it its “meaning” (*Course* 862). Using the theory of signification as the basis of our understanding of language, Derrida argues that the lag between a sign and the signifier of that sign creates a gap within meaning itself. Derrida calls this lag *différance* and argues that the space carried in meaning is at the very basis of language. In her introduction to Derrida’s *Dissemination*, Barbara Johnson simplifies *différance* further, suggesting “[t]he very fact that a word is divided into a phonic *signifier* and a mental *signified*, and that, as Saussure pointed out,

language is a system of differences rather than a collection of independently meaningful units, indicates that language as such is already constituted by the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome” (ix). In other words, because language is divided as demonstrated by the concept of signification, a space between meaning and the word itself already exists. Each word along with its “meaning” carries a trace of what it is not. Therefore, “As soon as there is meaning, there is difference” (ix). In witnessing then (as in all forms of signification), it becomes radically impossible to create or reveal “truth” since all language is continually differing from its corresponding meaning. Derrida discusses witnessing as paradoxical by alluding to the radical impossibility for any act of communication to have a complete and certifiable meaning, because the *secret* (that which is undisclosed in the process of signification) is untranslatable, and thus always carried in language.

However, Derrida also asserts that what matters is not the “meaning” but “the limit between what can and cannot be determined or decided” (*Poetics* 70). In terms of bearing witness as testimony, Derrida disproves the possibility of a “True Testimony,” insofar as “True” signifies a verifiable and indisputable account of an event. Nevertheless, Derrida emphasizes that what is important is the interaction and movement between the teller and the listener and the ambiguous limits that the story creates. The realization that a “True Testimony” cannot exist, does not suggest a loss of value. Instead, Derrida argues that testimony “cannot, it must not, be absolutely certain in the order of knowing as such. This paradox of *as such* is the paradox we can experience” (*Poetics* 68). In other words, fully knowing, or ‘knowing *as such*’, is not in the order of witnessing because it is impossible to be absolutely certain due to *différance*. Although,

the secret carried as a trace in language confirms that a “True Testimony” cannot exist, it is the limit between what we can and cannot know which creates an opening and allows for a myriad of possibilities and interpretations.

Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel thematizes the silence and secrecy of language in many of his works. He, like so many others who bear witness to the events of the Holocaust, struggles with language’s ability to reveal the traumatic experiences of the victims in a way that will enlighten others to the brutal realities of the event. Wiesel comments often on the impossibility of this feat. For Wiesel, language is a barrier and not a vehicle to reveal truth. In an essay titled, “Why I Write” *From the Kingdom of Memory*, Wiesel explains, “No I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either. ‘You will not understand, you will never understand,’ were the words heard everywhere in the kingdom of night. I can only echo them” (18). For the purpose of my argument, admittedly rendered metaphorically, Wiesel’s suggestion that he and those who will become the addressees of his witnessing, can never and will never “understand” reveals the paradox of language: although language reveals, it simultaneously conceals. Wiesel believes language can never transcribe the events of the Holocaust, insofar as language fails to re-present an event in a way that can re-create the experience of the event. The realization of language’s incompleteness works to rupture the possibility of a True Testimony—a provable, and verifiable testimony—and instead suggests that all witnessing carries a secret that cannot be shared. The secret for Wiesel, the impossibility of re-creating a traumatic, destructive, and unbelievable event through words, begs the question: How can language ever explain or reveal the Holocaust? This question, a theme in many of Wiesel’s works, confirms his acknowledgment of the

incompleteness of testimony. By exposing the lack of fully present meaning in the act of bearing witness, especially when used as testimony to the events of the Holocaust and experiences of exile, Wiesel reveals the secret beneath all witnessing—there is silence in language.

To begin it is essential to distinguish between Wiesel's metaphysical framework and Jacques Derrida's who deconstructs the very notion of "meaning" and "ground," which is to say metaphysics itself. For Wiesel, the secret represents the tragedy of knowing, yet being unable to reveal all. He emphasizes the limitations of language and the obstacles that a witness who seeks to recreate and retell for the sake of history and for the sake of "truth" faces. Wiesel's desire for metaphysical "truth" and transparency still acknowledges the paradox of language, but for him, the impossibility of revealing the secret is a torment and hurdle to continue to strive to overcome. Furthermore, Wiesel primarily deals with bearing witness as testimony, and thus, his focus is on the absence of fully present meaning, and his inability to ever fully reveal his experiences for the sake of history. However, for Derrida, who does not seek truth but instead deconstructs the very possibility of truth, and for that matter, transparency, bearing witness is glorified in that it is unable to transcribe. Derrida understands that all language carries a trace of what it is not, which negates the possibility of there ever being a transcription of meaning or that which does not carry a secret. But Derrida does not see this as a problem; instead he identifies this lag in meaning as a necessity and a possibility at the heart of meaning and being. The secret then becomes an opening—an allowance of interpretation and different modes of perception—that must be accepted and embraced. In "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," Derrida traces the deconstruction of presence in a poem by Holocaust

survivor Paul Celan, that speaks about the “irreplaceability of the singular witness” and the untranslatable nature of language (67). In discussing the difficulty of translation, Derrida metaphorically unravels the first line of the poem, ‘*Aschenglorie*,’ to suggest how the secret should be revered:

Ash is the figure of annihilation without remainder, without memory, or without a readable or decipherable archive. Perhaps that would lead us to think of this fearful thing: the *possibility* of annihilation, the *virtual* disappearance of the witness, but... ashes are also of glory, they can still be renowned and renamed, sung, blessed, loved, if the glory of the renowned and renamed is not reducible either to fire or to the light of knowing. The brightness of glory is not only the light of knowing [*connaissance*] and not necessarily the clarity of knowledge [*savior*].  
(*Poetics* 68-69)

What Derrida implies here is that there is glory in *not* knowing, if only one embraces the impossibility of knowing while simultaneously accepting that there is no other way except to bear witness. Derrida argues “the brightness of glory” is being unable to know fully. With this understanding, bearing witness to the events of the Holocaust can work to glorify, and in a way, honor the memories and experiences that can never be shared completely. Although Wiesel’s metaphysical framework, which prompts his desire for “wholeness” and “transparency,” limits his views of the positive aspects of what cannot be transferred through the act of witnessing, for our purposes, his acceptance of the incompleteness of testimony works alongside the theories of Derrida to reveal the difficulties of the witness, and the complexities of language.

To delve even further into the problems of using a witness account as testimony, which claims to be “true,” it is vital to understand the layers of *différance*, which occur at the moment of witnessing. Derrida discusses the addressee of any given testimony, “the witness of the witness,” and asserts that because the addressee did not see what the witness (the first witness) saw, they will never be able to see it (*Poetics* 76). The “non-access of the addressee to the object of the testimony is what marks the ab-sence of the ‘witness of the witness’ to the thing itself” (76). In other words, another gap is created between the witness who testifies and the witness who is the addressee of the testimony because of their different access to the experiences. But, Derrida asserts, “This ab-sence is essential. It is connected to the speech or the mark of testimony to the extent that speech can be disassociated from what it is witness to...” (76). Derrida’s emphasis on the ab-sence indicates that even at the moment of witnessing, due to the individual, the witnesses themselves are not “present,” because a being is never “present” to their experiences. In other words, there is already a gap between the event and the witness who experienced the event. Although a witness may have been “present” at an event, when they bear witness to that event, they are no longer present and even when they are “present,” they are not “present.” Therefore, because memories are a product of language, our own are marked by an ab-sence or by *différance*, and thus can never be “present” as such.

Wiesel, who often discusses his move to fiction as a means of “protect[ing] the silent universe which is [his],” recognizes the ‘ab-sence’, which Derrida paradoxically reveals. For Wiesel, bearing witness to his personal experiences of the Holocaust is an ethical imperative derived from his desire to ensure that the event is not forgotten or

repeated, and that the lives lost were not completely in vain. Therefore, his “presence” is of great importance. However, Wiesel has distanced himself from memoir writing, to instead bear witness through the stories of others. His move stems from his realization that words “signify absence. And lack” (qtd. in Davis 28). Wiesel is significantly aware of the impossibility of providing a “True Testimony” and he associates this “problem” with language: “Sometimes I use words. Against my will. Words separate me from myself” (ibid.). Here, Wiesel acknowledges the space between the witness and the event witnessed by alluding to the separation intrinsic to language and being. Even at the moment of comprehension, when Wiesel attempts to translate what he saw into thoughts, constituted by words, to potentially brandish his memories with the horrific events, his “presence” is joined by an absence. In other words, because language creates difference and we are bound to world through language, we can never separate the two—leaving us always seeking for the right word, the right way to explain, yet knowing that there will never be one.

In *Elie Wiesel’s Secretive Text*, Colin Davis argues that “Wiesel, particularly in his later fiction, adopts an aesthetics of secrecy rather than revelation” and that “Wiesel’s texts are not the mystical silences that point to a truth beyond language, but the gaps that indicate the absence of fully retrievable meaning” (7). Here, Davis intones a reading of Wiesel’s fiction that goes beyond the search for metaphysical “truth” but instead identifies with Derrida’s theories of language. By suggesting that Wiesel “adopts an aesthetic of secrecy”, he alludes to Wiesel’s reluctance to claim that his writing can reveal the events of the Holocaust. Davis goes on to quote Wiesel who says, Auschwitz signifies “the defeat of the intellect that wants to find a Meaning—with a capital—to

history”” (qtd. in Davis 30). In other words, Wiesel argues that an event of such tragic proportions, such as the Holocaust, can have no clear “meaning.” Although Wiesel does not address the lack of meaning in all language, nor does he support the nonexistence of final signifiers that is necessary in a philosophical reading that surpasses the metaphysical, his commentary on the absence of meaning ties in well with my reading. Wiesel is particularly aware of the tension between the need to bear witness to the Holocaust, and the impossibility of re-vealing the event of the Holocaust. This is perhaps why Wiesel continues to tell his stories under the label of fiction. Davis clarifies Wiesel’s reluctance to engage in writing labeled as memoir or non-fiction:

The witness asks for belief, even if understanding is impossible; the storyteller encourages interpretation. In his fiction Wiesel establishes himself principally as storyteller rather than witness...Fiction offers Wiesel a medium through which he can avoid talking about his own experiences. In fact, the choice of literature as a means of expression is directly related to the refusal to describe Auschwitz, since Wiesel himself argues—Auschwitz can have no place in literature (48-49).

Davis proposes that although Wiesel continues to tell stories of imaginary lives, stories that could have happened, Wiesel is able to fulfill his obligation as a witness, yet avoid the scrutiny which non-fiction attracts. In his fiction, Wiesel addresses the many challenges of bearing witness as testimony. His characters often reflect the sorrow and emptiness that a witness cannot seem to project or explain through language, allowing for a reading that unveils the problematic nature of language to ever give “True Testimony,” and to ever create a verifiable History of the past.



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One such project of fiction is Wiesel's novel, *The Time of the Uprooted*. The novel is centered on the life of Gamaliel Friedman, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. When Gamaliel is just a boy, his mother entrusts a Christian cabaret singer, Ilonka, to protect him from the inevitable fate many Jewish men, women, and children suffered. His mother's efforts were not in vain. Although he suffered the loss of his parents, who he never saw again, he survived into adulthood. However, Gamaliel's life is marked by his feelings of displacement. He works as a ghostwriter, writing his stories under the names of others while simultaneously composing his own book, *The Book of Secrets*, a project titled to reflect Gamaliel's feelings of distance and isolation from his own existence. He surrounds himself with four stateless and displaced friends with whom he creates a fraternal community, yet he never feels at home anywhere. Throughout his life Gamaliel suffers three failed relationships: the first of which ends in mystery, the second, which makes him a widower and the father of twin girls who grow to despise him, and the last, which marks him a cuckold. When the novel opens Gamaliel has been called to a hospital to identify a Hungarian woman that may be his mother, or his long lost caretaker Ilonka. Through the course of two days, Gamaliel bears witness to his past torments in order to try to understand how he came to be an old man with so little, yet heavy with so much.

Wiesel's novel thematizes the struggle to arrive at Truth, and works to explicate the problems with using witnessing as a vehicle to "True Testimony." However, the novel is set in a metaphysical framework that glorifies "truth," and "wholeness." Gamaliel often complains of a desire to fill the void inside himself, a void caused by his separation from his family, his country, and even from his name which he had to change

temporarily to Peter in order to protect himself. In spite of these metaphysical longings, through the course of the novel, the reader becomes aware of Gamaliel's development and enlightenment. Although at the start of the novel Gamaliel's focus is on what he believes he has lost (his "identity" and "home"), his feelings of estrangement and displacement eventually lead him to the realization that "truth" is ambiguous. While Gamaliel is undoubtedly searching for "truth" and "meaning" in a metaphysical sense, he comes to understand that "he could no longer look at it [his past] with enough detachment to tell what was true and what wasn't" (*Time* 289). Through the realization of his uncertainty, Gamaliel arrives at the only "truth" he cannot escape, "everything that happens in our human universe is mysteriously linked to everything else," suggesting and acknowledging the need for Others and the connection between language and existence itself (32). Wiesel seems to use Gamaliel to suggest the complexities of witnessing. Gamaliel struggles with the paradoxical qualities of bearing witness—although language can never reveal truth, which is always simultaneously concealing and revealing, it is the only means to bear witness. For survivors of the Holocaust then, who feel an ethical imperative to bear witness for the honor of the victims and for the sake of history, the act of bearing witness as bearing witness is necessary, yet unable to provide truth. Therefore, the question becomes not, how can we find truth? But instead, how can we step away from the notion of truth?

This metaphysical framework which calls for "truth" is deconstructed in David Wood's *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction*. In his introduction,

Wood clarifies what he means by *the step back* by alluding to Keats'<sup>1</sup> letter, addressed to his brothers, where he declares, "Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1). In other words, 'Negative Capability' is the acceptance and lack of desire to change our ambiguous relationship to the world and existence. Wood's use of the phrase "the step back" therefore, aims to focus our attentions on "the space of possibility within which our practical engagement of world takes place" instead of becoming preoccupied with acquiring certainty (5). He argues that we must recognize "our continued debt to the unthematized" and *step back* from the notion of "truth" and metaphysics (2). Wood's concept of infinite debt allows for readers to deconstruct the concept of "truth," to reveal "further possibilities both of constructing meaning, and of acknowledging the incompleteness of the narratives with which we provide ourselves" (5). Wiesel's novel read through this lens dispels the notion of meaning and of testimony as "truth" and instead opens the possibilities of interpretation. Through a deconstructive reading of *The Time of the Uprooted*, Wiesel's poetic language "affirms the necessity of ambiguity, incompleteness, repetition, negotiation and contingency," to arrive at a telling that is more than simply "true" and "meaningful" but instead acknowledges the limits and possibilities of language to shape our understating of world (Wood 4).

To begin a deconstruction of Wiesel's novel it is essential to understand the motives of such a reading. To deconstruct does not imply destruction nor does it signify a radical loss of meaning. Barbara Johnson attempts to clarify the intention of deconstruction by suggesting that a close synonym to the word is "'analysis,' which

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<sup>1</sup> John Keats (1795-1821) English Romantic poet

etymologically means ‘to undo’” (xiv). Johnson goes on to say, “if anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another” (xiv). Therefore, in the process of deconstructing Wiesel’s *The Time of the Uprooted*, the goal is not to disqualify or destroy the text’s “meaning” or importance, but instead to reveal its theme of the ambiguity of memory and witnessing in order to open the possibilities of constructing meaning with the understanding of its incompleteness therein emphasizing the potential glory in this ambiguity.

Coincidentally, *The Time of the Uprooted* begins with a memory that emphasizes the estrangement between witnessing and “truth”. A stranger is at the door, and Gamaliel is four years old. The novel, which is narrated in non-chronological order, is framed by the presence of this stranger. The stranger is used both as a representation of the madness a witness feels when trying to transfer their experiences through language to oneself and to another other, and as a type of anchor, or mentor to Gamaliel in his struggle to let go of the possibility of ever finding “truth.” Gamaliel comments on his love of “madmen” by saying, “It’s not the madness itself I love, but those it possess...as if to show them the limits of their possibilities—and then makes them determined to go further, to push themselves beyond those limits” (*Time* 4). Here, Gamaliel seems to be embracing the limitations as well as the possibilities of going beyond the notion of “truth.” Additionally, this stranger who Gamaliel meets at four years old, can be read as a metaphorical representation of all witnesses, and for the sake of our argument, as Gamaliel himself because there is always strangeness when there is *différance* and Other. Although the novel is outlined by the presence of a stranger, a madman who shows up at various stages

of the fragmented story and appears specifically at the beginning and ending of the novel, the true stranger in the novel is Gamaliel (the witness); he who is a stranger to himself, and to all others. The strangeness Gamaliel feels implies the separation between an act of witnessing and the witness, as well as the separation between the witness and the addressee. This reading can be inferred when Gamaliel opens the door to the stranger who is thirsty and hungry not for food and drink, but for the telling and says “I want words and I want faces...I travel the world looking for people’s stories” (4). Read through a metaphorical lens, the stranger searches for the stories of others because he cannot find “truth” in his own story. Therefore, placing an emphasis on the telling and not the “truth” of the story, and further emphasizing the importance of the story over the “truth.” Similarly, Gamaliel who is a ghostwriter also writes the stories of others in the frame of the novel, as does Wiesel himself, who argues that, “In order to protect the silent universe which is mine, I recount that of others...” (Davis 27). The layering of storytelling reveals a constant deferral, which occurs at the moment of witnessing, and in the act of bearing witness. It also acknowledges the silence carried in language. Shortly after telling the reader of his encounter with the stranger, Gamaliel declares that man is “just the restless and mysterious shadow of a dream” (5). The shadow can be read as an indication of the secret and the cause of witnesses’ feelings of isolation from their own memories. In other words, the witness who is “present” is haunted by the shadow of an absence caused by language’s *différance*. The witness, then, can never reveal all, and thus, is always a stranger to his or her own witnessing.

As previously discussed, Derrida similarly describes the witness as a stranger, or an absent presence, suggesting “the witness is not *present* either, of course, presently

present, to what he recalls, he is not present to it in the mode of perception, to the extent that he bears witness, at the moment when he bears witness he is no longer present, now to what he says he was present to, to what he says he perceived..." (*Poetics* 76). What Derrida conveys here is that a witness can no longer be thought of as "present" to an event, which he is recalling at a later time, but rather because of the *différance* in language, the witness is simultaneously absent and present from the moment of witnessing. The moment a witness translates the visual image of his experience into words (which is the only way to have an experience), he carries an absence along with his presence. In other words, the "present" experience itself is both present and absent. Therefore, when Gamaliel experiences and bears witness to his memories, he himself is already absent from his own witnessing, first, by no longer being physically present to the event he hopes to re-present and second, through the *différance* in language which creates a gap in meaning that can never be closed and is always already present. In other words, from the moment of witnessing, Gamaliel is never fully present; to be fully present is impossible. Thus, as Gamaliel recounts various memories of his past, his memories of his uprootedness and his last encounter with his parents before their separation, the reader, or addressee, as well as he himself to some degree, is asked to *believe* that these events occurred and Gamaliel is recounting them as they "truly" happened. Derrida argues:

Whoever bears witness [in English in the original] does not provide proof; he is someone whose experience, in principle singular and irreplaceable (even if it can be cross-checked with others in order to become proof, in order to become probative in a verification process) attest, precisely, that

some “thing” has been present to him. This “thing” is no longer present to him, of course, in the mode of perception at the moment when the attestation takes place; but it is present to him, if he alleges this presence, as presently *re-presented* in memory. (*Poetics* 77)

For Derrida, the witness can never be fully present because of his or her own perception of an event, which through language, causes “truth” to be impossible. However, he also mentions a witnesses’ alleged witnessing as “present to him” indicating that for a witness, who by saying they were present at an event is in fact pleading for belief, bears witness as a way to re-present his memories as he understands them to be true. Therefore, although Gamaliel bears witness to his perception of truth, he is still, in some sense, a stranger to his own witnessing. Gamaliel’s story, which is told through flashbacks, can then be interpreted as re-presented memories that promise to be true. However, Gamaliel’s witnessing presents the “secret as secret” insofar as he addresses the absence he feels by continuously addressing the impossibility to find the right word (*Poetics* 68).

Consequently, Wiesel’s novel addresses the limits of language to reveal truth and the inevitable presentation of the secret as secret, or the absence that is simultaneously revealed when a witness claims they were present at an event.

The narrator of the novel describes Gamaliel as “the eternal stranger protecting his secret” and later proclaims, “Let us note here that Gamaliel [is] the stranger in the story” (11-12). However, the narrator is suggesting that Gamaliel is a stranger in a metaphysical sense because of his status as a refugee. He explains, “It is said that a man never recovers from torture, that a woman never recovers from rape. The same is true of those who have been uprooted: once a refugee, always a refugee. He escapes from one

place of exile only to find himself in another: Nowhere is he at home...his life is always provisional” (12). What is important to note here, is that in a Derridian sense, Gamaliel, like all witnesses and therefore all beings, is a stranger before he is a refugee. Because language is already differing and deferring at the moment of its inception, we too are differing and deferring, and thus are “strangers” or “refugees” from ourselves as well as to all others the moment we come into being. However, this does not suggest that Gamaliel’s feelings are any less valuable. After all, it is our perceptions that create our understanding of world. But for our purposes, Gamaliel’s role as “stranger” in the frame of the novel can be read beyond a metaphysical understanding to show the estrangement of all witnesses.

Furthermore, Gamaliel’s metaphorical role as stranger draws parallel with his profession as a ghostwriter within the novel. Writing the stories of others without much effort, yet struggling to write his own story, Gamaliel’s profession mirrors his own role as witness. When analyzed further as “the eternal stranger protecting his secret,” his profession as a ghostwriter becomes even more significant to explicate his role as witness (Wiesel, *Time* 11). As a ghostwriter, he is able to write leisurely, while keeping silent. That is, by writing the stories of others who pay him for his craft, he is able to detach himself from the very idea of “truth” to instead bear witness to his emotions and perceptions without the scrutiny or criticism which writers of non-fiction are subjected to. By embracing his role as stranger, his secret torments remain embedded in his writing, yet distant from what he discloses by means of using characters and the names of others as author. After being called dishonest by his girlfriend Eve, who questions “Aren’t you deceiving the reader when you write a book that has someone else’s name on it as author?”



Aren't you lying to him?" Gamaliel responds, "[I]n my heart of hearts, I'm still a refugee. And maybe my words are also refugees, and that's why they hide in other people's books" (217-218). Gamaliel's acknowledgement of words' capacity to be "refugees" recalls Wiesel's own description of language in Davis' *Secretive Texts*: "Sometimes it seems to me that I speak of other things in the sole aim of keeping silent about the essential: lived experience" (qtd. in *Secretive Texts* 27). Wiesel is metaphorically a ghostwriter himself. Although he continues to write, he avoids writing works labeled as "truth" to instead write stories. His fiction, juxtaposed to Gamaliel's stories published under the names of others, reminds readers that like Wiesel, Gamaliel accepts the secretive nature of language. In a metaphysical sense, Gamaliel's words have become displaced, unable to find a home, and ultimately unable to tell and produce a meaning that will sufficiently reveal all. However, Gamaliel's realization intones that language is *différance*, a deferral and a difference from what it desires to reveal. When Gamaliel recalls the words of a friend and mentor, Rebbe Zusya, who says "When words lose their way, when they wander off and lose their meaning, when they become lies...those who speak or write them are the most uprooted of people. And surely the most to be pitied" (Wiesel, *Time* 227), he reminds himself that language, like people, can be exiled, can be refugees. Beyond the metaphysical, the Rebbe's words can be read to show that language is always in exile from what it bears witness to. As such, language, which carries a secret, is always lost from fully present meaning. With this understanding, Gamaliel's role as ghostwriter suggests his acknowledgement of "exiled" language: always separated, differing and deferring from its intended meaning.

To further emphasize Gamaliel's relationship to language and his acceptance of the secret carried in language, Gamaliel names the book he is writing alongside his ghostwriting duties, *The Book of Secrets*. Although the narrator describes Gamaliel's *Book* as a place where "he would put everything he could draw from his memory and from his soul" the name suggests, that even when a witness desires to bear all, the secret still separates them from the meaning they wish to disclose even to themselves (24). However, what is at stake is not the "truth" of a story but the act of telling. For Gamaliel, writing *The Book of Secrets*, "made him forget all his frustrations" (24). Therefore, although Gamaliel is aware that his *Book* is cloaked in secrecy he still considers the act of telling, through writing, a positive experience. Gamaliel's *Book*, although not written as a memoir, can be juxtaposed to his ghostwriting stories to suggest that even when writing from "memory" and from the "soul," the secret still remains. However this does not suggest that the act of telling or bearing witness as testimony is useless. If the aim is not to reveal "truth" but instead to accept that arriving at "truth" is impossible, the act of bearing witness as testimony can be understood to exist beyond metaphysical restrictions, to instead create a multifaceted experience of memory, perception, and connection.

As such, excerpts from Gamaliel's personal narrative, *The Book of Secrets*, occasionally interrupt the novel. The first excerpt begins with an Archbishop's search for the right word: "Feverishly, he is searching for the first word he'll speak, the one crucial word that will convince the Pope of his humility and his obedience. He cannot find that word" (9). Like Gamaliel, the Archbishop acknowledges the complexities of language. He is hoping to be understood and to project his compassion in a single word that can personify "truth," but he cannot find it. The inability to find a word that can explain is a

reoccurring theme in the novel. For Gamaliel, who is described as being “fascinated by words, by the silence within a word, to which that word gives meaning,” language is already detached from the very notion of “truth” (226). Despite his metaphysical desire to overcome this fact, Gamaliel’s realization “that to read two words, two little words, was as serious an action as the joining of two people. For the distance that separates one word from another is, in the world of worlds, as great a distance from earth to a star,” indicates that he is already privy to the impossible relationship between witnessing and “truth” (226). Coincidentally, in the afterword to *Obligated by Memory*, Wiesel intones a similar opinion, “Have I sufficiently emphasized my doubts on our capacity to transmit what we have endured or received, memories of fear and fire, in words, just in words? [...] The duty to tell the tale is a powerful element in my life; but so is the realization that it cannot be told” (157). Here, Wiesel encapsulates the imperative and the paradox of witnessing. Although we know that words cannot reveal without concealing, we must continue to bear witness because it is all we can do. Wiesel seems to carry this belief to the character Gamaliel. Gamaliel’s constant identification of the impossibility of transparency does not deter him from telling, instead, he reveals “the secret as secret,” bearing witness while acknowledging the incompleteness of his testimony (ibid.). Thus, when the narrator concludes that Gamaliel’s novel which intended “to illustrate or even justify what he had truly intended to make of his life... would never be completed,” he suggests that Gamaliel has accepted the necessity for incompleteness and ambiguity (296). Therefore, by writing *The Book of Secrets*, Gamaliel proposes what Wiesel so often reminds his readers: “There is a secret in every work of art; there is a secret in every tale” (Cargas, Wiesel 85).

*The Time of the Uprooted* unveils Wiesel's acceptance of the secrecy of language. In discussing the imperative to tell, despite the non-transparency of witnessing, Wiesel says, "To tell the tale, the writer must after all, use words, but he writes against them, not with them; his goal is to convey 'not experience but at least a certain secret of the experience untouched by words'...I believe very much in the words you do not say...Sometimes I strike out a sentence if I believe in it too much; I am moving towards silence" (Lambert 186). Wiesel's acceptance of the importance and intransience of silence in language is what makes him a witness of value. Through his fiction, he bears witness while revealing the secret nature of text. His novels continue to reveal and conceal the tragedy that is war and exile. Although *The Time of the Uprooted* is a fictional account of exile and thus is not labeled as a "true" story, it is a story which explicates the complexities of testimony and "truth." The story reveals to the reader an opening: beyond a metaphysical reading of the novel as a story that bears witness to the uprooted, the stateless, and the displaced, the novel questions the need for truth and transparency in the telling of a story. Through Gamaliel's acceptance of the secret, the novel emphasizes the need to go beyond the desire for wholeness, to instead glorify the ashes of the untranslatable.

## Chapter II: Community, Identity, and Otherness

*“Before I am, I carry. Before being me, I carry the other. I carry you and must do so, I owe it to you...I must translate, transfer, transport...the untranslatable in another turn even where, translated, it remains untranslatable” (Derrida “Rams” 162).*

In Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*, he suggests, “it is impossible for us to lose community” (35). He goes on to discredit and dissect the metaphysical implications of community as a sharing of self-enclosed identities within society and instead argues, “community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us*—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society” (11). Ian James further comments in *The Fragmentary Demand*:

Community is not and never has been possible on the basis of an intimate and totalized sharing of an essence or identity, which might then be lost, ruptured, or dispersed and that we might long to regain. Rather community is possible, in the first instance and on a primordial level, only as a kind rupturing or dispersion, which is itself constitutive of the sharing of communication proper to the being-in-common of the communal. The experience of rupture or dispersal, that is, the *separation* of those entities which are “in-common” in community, would be, according to this account, precisely that which allows them to be exposed to each other, to communicate and to share an existence. (175-176)

In other words, community happens as an event of being and at the brink of otherness. Before we can understand what Nancy suggests when he says, “community...is what happens to us,” we must first comprehend the overlap of being, world, and language (ibid.). These three terms cannot be understood separately and cannot be divided, but

instead must be understood as combined—all three parts functioning equally together—in order for existence to happen. To simplify this further, before self-reflexivity can occur there is the overlap of language, world, and being. Considering the implication that without language our understanding of world cannot develop, and until we are able to understand world and communicate to an-other we cannot exist as human beings; the overlap indicates that a community happens through language and through our connection to the Other. Community in this regard is elemental to being; without the overlap of language, being, and world existence is impossible. It can also be argued that being, as such, is being-with. Since community (which indicates a connection to others through language) is a necessity for existence to occur, community, or being-with, can never be lost; in order for one to exist there must be community. Therefore, the community which Nancy and Ian James describes “happens to us,” cannot be lost in the scope of society, or from being uprooted from one country to the next, and cannot be understood in metaphysical terms such as “identity” and “society,” but instead indicates the inability to separate being, world, and language from the onset of our own existence.

To clarify a bit further, Nancy’s conception of community emphasizes a non-communing connection and exposure to the Other that is absolutely necessary for our perception of world and our existence to happen. His community differs greatly from the metaphysical concept of “community” which defines itself through the similarities and customs of certain types of people, necessarily “individuals.” Instead, the community which exists at the primordial level is that which connects all humans to one another, and without it, we cannot exist as human beings—develop our perceptions, our relationships, our understanding of similarities and differences, or our individual “identities.” For

Nancy, community exists as the basis of our existence. However, because community happens through and within language and as an ex-posure to the Other, (which is necessarily of difference and thus non-identity, non-unity, or oneness), it also carries a separation, a secret, or a gap in meaning which indicates that meaning can never be fully transferred to others and even to ourselves. Consequently, even our own thoughts are subjected to a separation or a difference from themselves. James argues that this “separation” is what allows for communication and a shared existence at the primordial level to exist. He suggests that community needs being as *différance* to happen. Therefore, Nancy’s description of community along with the necessity of difference works to illuminate the radical need for the Other and simultaneously the impossibility of ever losing community in this sense.

The importance of a connection with others is a prominent theme in the writings of Elie Wiesel. Like many writers of Holocaust Literature, Wiesel deals with these issues from a metaphysical standpoint. However, his consistent claim that the connection between people is essential can be argued to simultaneously and paradoxically emphasize the need for the Other in the non-metaphysical sense insofar as, Wiesel searches for his “identity” and desires “wholeness” while still accepting the need for the Other and acknowledging the non-transparency of language. In an interview with Harry James Cargas, Wiesel argues:

I formally believed that one must be totally alone to find oneself. I still believe so but I believe that even this loneliness, this solitude must be within the human condition: to be alone but faced with another person being alone. Then you can find out. If you face someone, your child or

your wife or your friend, then you can find out who you are; but the *other one* is essential, indispensable. (102)

Wiesel's statement "the *other one* is essential, indispensable," suggests the importance of the Other in order to know the self, and thus reinforces the validity of Nancy's perception of community. Additionally, it acknowledges the imperative of the sharing of testimony. As often as Wiesel's novels discuss an exile's search for "identity" and "meaning" they also reinforce the importance of language—regardless of its incompleteness—as a connection to others. Wiesel's novel, *The Time of the Uprooted*, read through this lens, unveils the impossibilities of isolation due to the primordial need for the Other, and the importance of giving testimony to build a community that fosters remembrance through narrative and storytelling.

The purpose of applying this concept to Wiesel's *The Time of the Uprooted* is not to discredit the feelings of exile, displacement, and homelessness of the characters and victims of the Holocaust, but to make apparent that community is still present regardless of these emotions. Nancy argues that although, "the concentration camp—and the extermination camp—is in essence the will to destroy community... undoubtedly, community never entirely ceases" (Nancy, *Inoperative* 35). Therefore, when Gamaliel discovers "everything happens in this world because of encounters," we witness that his feelings of indebtedness to the Other, and his search for meaning, allows him to discover, "There is no meaning if meaning is not shared...because meaning itself is a sharing of being" (Wiesel, *Time* 95; Nancy, *Being* 2).

In the novel, the narrator introduces Gamaliel as "the eternal stranger protecting his secret, as he heads toward a silent building for forgotten people" (10). Shortly after,



the narrator says, “Let’s note here that Gamaliel, the stranger in this story, isn’t really a stranger. Like everyone else, he has an identity: He has an address, friends, connections, habits, and yes, he has his quirks and whims. But the refugee in him is always on the alert, ready to speak the word that will upset all that he’s taken for granted about the way he lives” (11). As previously discussed in chapter one, Gamaliel’s role as “stranger” exemplifies his feelings of distance and isolation from himself and to others by alluding to the inability to ever fully relate or fully perceive through language. His metaphorical journey to a “silent building for forgotten people” indicates that Gamaliel is aware of the impossibility of recuperating metaphysical “wholeness.” The words “silent” and “forgotten” personify an un-recuperable, untranslatable destination and by saying he is travelling towards a community of silence, Gamaliel emphasizes the finitude of his search. His paradoxical longing, yet acknowledgement of the impossibility of reaching what he longs for establishes my primary contention; Gamaliel, who ultimately desires “community” in a metaphysical sense, simultaneously ruptures the possibility of such a community by accepting his role as “refugee” or “stranger.”

Although Gamaliel accepts the impossibility of reestablishing what he has lost, he does not stop searching. His longing for “wholeness,” or for what he remembers as “home” is ultimately that which Nancy considers a false idea of “community” and “identity,” and that which causes most of Gamaliel’s uncertainty and anxiety within the novel. For Nancy, “community” in a metaphysical sense cannot exist—it would mean death. To clarify this, metaphysical “community” is one which claims individuality and identity as immanence, and thus radically negates the finitude constitutive of community. Nancy argues:

Immanence, communal fusion, contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it... The fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person. In other words, death, in such a community, is not the unmasterable excess of finitude, but the infinite fulfillment of an immanent life. (*Inoperative* 12-13).

Death then comes to signify a denial of finitude and, instead, represents a “community” which longs for “pure immanence.” Incidentally, Nancy uses Nazi Germany as an example to suggest that the logic used to exterminate the “other” (those deemed as subhuman or those who did not “satisfy the criteria of pure immanence”) emphasizes the impossibility of a community which is *pure* and proves that “The German nation itself...represent[s] a plausible extrapolation of the process” (12). The process here signifies the outcome of a community of death (one that seeks the fulfillment of immanence) as ultimately attempting suicide. Gamaliel, through his search for “wholeness” then, can be argued as searching for a non-existent identity based upon a metaphysical world of final signifiers. To simplify, “wholeness” which indicates the ability to be complete, denies the “separation” which James’ argues is a necessity for “the sharing of existence” that is Nancian community (*ibid.*). However, although the novel emphasizes Gamaliel’s metaphysical desire for “wholeness,” that is, a recuperation of his allegedly lost “identity” and sense of “community,” it also thematizes his realization of the incompleteness and impossibility of ever reaching this “wholeness.” For my purposes, Gamaliel’s paradoxical search for wholeness alongside his slow acceptance of

the inability of re-cuperation exposes the separation intrinsic to language and being, and suggests the indestructible movement of the communal at the primordial level.

Gamaliel's initial acceptance of the impossibility of finding his lost identity is presented through a reflection of his statelessness: "a refugee is a different kind of being, one from whom all that defines a normal person has been amputated. He belongs to no nation, is welcome at no one's table. A leper. He can achieve nothing unless others help him" (Wiesel, *Time* 170). Gamaliel's realization, based on the metaphysical assumption that "normal people" or those who have not experienced traumatic events (of uprootedness or exile) are indeed "whole" (rather than amputated), suggests that he is indeed feeling a loss of "community" and "identity" in a metaphysical sense. However, within his longings for the metaphysical, simultaneously coexisting, are Gamaliel's feelings of strangeness or isolation (such as a leper would feel), signifying his acknowledgement of his otherness, or finitude. Furthermore, Gamaliel admits that without "others [to] help him" he can "achieve nothing," suggesting that not only is he aware of his finitude, but of the need for the Other, or being-with, which is necessary for existence (ibid.) Through a philosophical discourse these longings suggest the acknowledgement of a more profound connection and simultaneous separation at the basis of existence.

Therein, what must be addressed once more is the vast difference between Gamaliel's metaphysical understanding of "community" and "identity," which relies on social relations and cultural similarities, from Nancian community, which cannot be lost because it coincides with being itself. Nancy articulates:

Nothing...has been lost, and for this reason nothing is lost. We alone are lost, we upon whom the 'social bond' (relations, communication), our own invention, now descends heavily like the net of an economic, technical, political, and cultural snare. Entangled in its meshes, we have wrung for ourselves the phantasms of the lost community. (*Inoperative* 11-12)

Nancy suggests metaphysical longings such as that of a "lost community" are in fact caused by our own invention, and thus it is us who are truly lost, not community. In the novel, Gamaliel spends much time recounting his three failed relationships and his lack of communication with his twin daughters to suggest that his loss of self, his loss of "community" is the cause of his inability to form lasting ties with these women. But accepting the impossibility of a metaphysical "community" leaves us to question: If Gamaliel's loss of "identity" is not the cause of his failure to build relationships, what is? If we accept metaphysical community is death, we can argue that Gamaliel is mistaking or misreading his trauma (his statelessness, uprootedness and feelings of exile) as a loss of "community," when in fact, the impossibility of transparency is what causes his feelings of "loss." Nancy suggest, "What this community has "lost"—the immanence and the intimacy of a communion—is lost only in the sense that such a "loss" is constitutive of "community" itself" (12). His argument implies that "loss" is inherent to community. Therefore, Gamaliel has not truly "lost" community, but instead is feeling the effects of his realization that there is always a "loss" in community. Gamaliel does not succeed in relating to others or to himself because he is trying to find his "identity." His search for a "real self," which he believes is necessary in order to connect with others, is ultimately what causes his stagnation. What Gamaliel is feeling—isolation from his daughters, his

ex-wives, and even to a certain extent from himself—are not in fact caused by his desire for a metaphysical “wholeness,” but instead indicates Gamaliel’s slow realization that there can never be transparency; in order for community, or for a relation to the Other to exist, there must be separation.

Gamaliel’s “community” within the novel is described as comprised of four friends with similar stories of exile and past struggles. He tells us there is “Bolek with his secret, Diego with his stories of the Spanish Civil War, Yasha with his cat, [and] Gad with his adventures” (*Time* 15). These four friends, often the addressees of Gamaliel’s witnessing, support him in times of melancholy and confusion, becoming pillars of communal, shared experiences. Early in the novel, the narrator discloses that Gamaliel seeks the company of these four in times of worry, wishing he could be “listening to their voices, proving himself worthy of their confidences but never judging them, adding his exile’s testimony to theirs” (15). Gamaliel’s desire for a strong relationship with these four friends uncovers his desire to build “community” and redefine his loss of “identity” in the wake of exile. However, at the same time, Gamaliel understands the impossibility of reaching his goal. He emphasizes the need “for others to help him” which indicates that he is already aware that community cannot be lost (because he needs or depends on the Other), and by accepting his metaphorical and literal role as “refugee” he alludes to the separation or otherness, which in a metaphysical sense is problematic, but non-metaphysically, is necessary (*ibid.*). Although within the novel it seems as if Gamaliel searches for a metaphysical sense of connection among fellow exiles, his quest to “add his testimony to theirs” and his continual struggle with language as a medium for

transparency, reveals a dual imperative—both metaphysical and non-metaphysical—simultaneously, paradoxically coexisting.

Furthermore, because language is a response to the Other, and all language is bound by *différance*, there is always an imperative to tell. In other words, despite the incompleteness of language, our infinite need to tell bounds us to the Other, and thus we are always in community. Gamaliel's imperative to tell can be understood in two ways: The first being a “provable” imperative—one that can be explained by Gamaliel's desire for social acceptance and empathy from those he believes can *fully* understand his struggles. The second is a “non-provable” imperative that recognizes the impossibility of the first, but also understands the need for it. Let us step back a moment and recall Derrida's theory of *différance*. Because of the constant deferral of meaning in language, it is impossible to present a “provable” testimony or a “truth.” We have already seen that Gamaliel understands the limits of language (“limited” because he is thinking metaphysically) as he is often depicted as struggling with finding the words to tell and to create a testimony which can fully transcribe his own witnessing. Furthermore, Gamaliel is portrayed as a ghostwriter, both metaphorically and literally—he writes under the names of others, and when he writes his own stories they are labeled as *Secrets*. Through this layering of authorship, the reader can identify Gamaliel's imperative to tell as being more accurately “non-provable”—he bears witness attempting to re-build community, knowing that he must, yet knowing that he can never fully reveal all, even to himself. Thus, Gamaliel's imperative to create a community and add “his testimony to theirs [Bolek, Yasha, Gad and Diego]” becomes a duty that is essentially finite, or one, which simultaneously denies the possibility of ever being fulfilled (*ibid.*). As such, the

imperative, instead of proving, shows; it acknowledges an unknowable, improvable secret—a separation.

The necessity or imperative of building testimonies alongside one another, functions through *différance*. In Nancy's essay, "The Free Voice of Man," he argues, "Duty belongs, in effect, to the structure of finitude," and thus "difference brings forth duty by itself" (40-46). In other words, because *différance* is finite (we are never able to overcome the gaps within meaning and the thing itself), the duty to tell, or the imperative to do so, is equally finite—never can the act of telling and bearing witness fully transcribe an event or experience—yet we must continue to tell because there is no other way. Wiesel discusses his duty to give testimony while knowing that it cannot provide proof by saying, "What matters is to struggle against silence with words... What matters is to gather a smile here and there, a tear here and there, a word here and there..." (*Why I Write* 21). Wiesel's "struggle against silence" indicates that although he recognizes that language is finite, he understands the duty and imperative described by Nancy. Wiesel, like all beings, has an "un-reasonable necessity without reason, a demonstration without proof, an *Il faut*' an 'It is necessary'" to tell (*Free-Voice* 37). He, like so many, tells stories to pass on memories, as well as to share and listen to the stories of others—to build community, because he must, because it is necessary to do so.

Within the novel, Gamaliel continually draws attention to the necessity of telling. He quotes the words of a Rebbe, "you and I are here only to bear witness" as a way to glorify the act of telling, despite its non-transparency (151). In one such scene, Gamaliel stresses the importance of bearing witness to Bolek, who is described previously as having a "secret" because of his unwillingness to share or tell of his own experiences

until now. To fully understand the importance of this scene it is necessary to review what Bolek bears witness to: After going into hiding with his family, Bolek would occasionally leave at night to acquire food just outside the ghettos. One night while out in search of something to eat, Bolek returns to see the ghetto surrounded by German soldiers and Polish police. His parents and siblings were discovered, as Bolek, on the outskirts of the ghetto, watched plagued with guilt and shame. Years later after discovering the culprit who betrayed his parents and so many others, Bolek sought vengeance upon him. The traitor was a son of a very proud Jewish father who dedicated himself to the resistance. Although the father pled mercy for his son, Bolek, along with other officials, sentenced the son to death. Although Bolek bears witness to these memories, perhaps to clear his conscience, he knows full well that the past cannot be resolved and that his act of telling can never fully reveal the experiences that he witnessed. However, Bolek's response to Gamaliel's question, "Why don't you write about what you went through back then? Don't you think it's your duty to pay homage to what your comrades did? For the sake of history..." suggests Bolek is much less willing to accept the limitations of language than Gamaliel (200). Bolek responds with a lengthy diatribe against history:

Don't talk to me about history. Some believe in it, and others will go so far as to sacrifice their conscience to make it say what they want, for lack of the truth. As for me, I don't believe in it. History is murderous, and as set as the blank face you'd see on a hardened killer. I've heard it said that now we know everything about the Holocaust, that it's been picked apart, analyzed, demystified, that all its parts have been dismantled. Such is the arrogance of ignorance! They accumulate data drawn from the official



German archives without realizing that the truth isn't found only in numbers, dates, and orders. Who knows about my father's heroic dying, my mother's silent tears? Where is their truth? (Wiesel, *Time* 200)

Bolek's dislike for history is further explained by his contempt at the supposed demystification of the Holocaust. He argues that "They," or historians, miss the truth of the victims, "We seem to know the murderers better than the victims. And they call that serving history. Well, Their history isn't my history, because my truth isn't their truth!" (200). Gamaliel uses Bolek's argument against history to further suggest that Bolek's apprehension to bear witness is, in fact, the reason he should tell, to add his story to the "truth" presented in History.

Bolek's act of bearing witness exemplifies two important aspects of the act of witnessing that he fails to understand. First, Bolek, who thinks solely in metaphysical terms, misunderstands the need to tell to an Other and the effects such a witnessing can have on history. Bolek falsely assumes that the only purpose bearing witness serves is to bridge the gaps in society found between victims and historians, or more acutely, between the witness and addressee. However, Bolek overlooks the necessity of the gap. He wants his witnessing to fully explicate his experiences and because he knows this is impossible, he argues against writing, against bearing witness. He overlooks the unbridgeable distance that is necessary and irrevocable in communication and community. Derrida argues, "I can address the Other only to the extent that there is a separation, a dissociation, so that I cannot replace the other and vice versa... I cannot reach the other. I cannot know the other from the inside and so on. That is not an obstacle but the condition of love, friendship, and of war, too, a condition of the relation to the

other” (Caputo, Derrida 14). Derrida further suggests that this disassociation is the “condition of community” and without it community is not possible (ibid.). Secondly, Bolek’s reaction to Gamaliel’s questions suggests that he has not accepted the imperative that derives from *différance*—the difference that creates our obligation to tell. Nancy argues, “*différance* (if it has anything) has the structure and nature of an obligation...” and thus, “... still remains within the sphere of finitude” (*Free Voice* 46-47). In other words, finitude creates the imperative and compels us to bear witness. Every word spoken is a response to the Other and thus becomes a testimony—never fully translatable, always separated from “truth,” yet this is all we can do: bear witness and communicate to the Other. So, although Bolek describes his problems with capital H- History, which suggest that History is Truth and can be proven through “facts,” Gamaliel reminds Bolek of the importance of “adding testimony” to a growing collective.

Wiesel often argues that the role of the witness is not to distinguish truth from falsity, but to add to an ever-growing multiplicity of accounts that together form a community of remembrance. Using Wiesel’s argument, Bolek’s previous silence, until his act of witnessing to Gamaliel, can be read as a struggle to accept finitude and thus, accept that the duty to tell exists in the realm of the finite, insofar as Bolek’s fear that his testimony would be misunderstood and the “truth” would not be communicated causes him to refrain from telling, despite his desire to do so. Bolek is purposefully juxtaposed to Gamaliel who, like Wiesel, knows the problems a witness faces, “[Gamaliel] often wondered what means of speech would be decent, honorable, and effective enough for him to testify on behalf of his dead parents. A prayer, or a Howl? Or perhaps silence?” (Wiesel, *Time* 201). However, Gamaliel’s reluctance to use words alone to communicate

the horrors of his loss does not stop him from telling stories; he continues to write, to tell, because there is no other recourse. For that reason, the reader can infer that through Bolek's act of telling, unwillingly though it might have been, he finally accepts his obligation to tell despite, and to a certain extent, "because of" its limits.

Ironically, despite Bolek's apprehensions to accept his obligations, it is he who introduces Gamaliel to Georges Lebrun and encourages Gamaliel to accept Lebrun's offer of becoming his ghostwriter. When Gamaliel declares, "I'll never write for someone who's such an imbecile and a bad-mannered one besides," Bolek responds assertively, "What if by accident you were to write a good book... Then either no one reads your masterpiece, in which case it doesn't exist, or else it's published, not under your name, but it exists" (Wiesel, *Time* 23). Bolek's logic convinces Gamaliel to take the job. Wiesel, who often speaks of the fight against silence, would agree with Bolek that the story must be told; it must exist, and not be forgotten. Therefore, Gamaliel's role as ghostwriter, read metaphorically, illuminates the role of the witness within community. The witness in seeking an "identity" will soon realize that identity must and can only exist if it is shared (and thus not an "identity" at all). And although Gamaliel writes under the names of others, he continues to write. Through accepting the impossibility of finding the right word to explain (and to identify him), his search for an individual "identity" becomes null. Instead, Gamaliel begins to understand how his finitude is that which connects him to others.

For a moment let us return to Nancy's idea of community, which suggests "Death is indissociable from community" (*Inoperative* 14). To further explain how community and death are connected Nancy suggests, "Community is revealed in the death of others"

(15). What this means exactly is that community is ultimately a presentation of finitude, or mortal truth. However, this does not suggest that death can be seen as a link to a communal essence or principle of identity. Nancy argues:

Community...is calibrated on the death of those whom we call, perhaps wrongly, its “members” (inasmuch as it is not a question of an organism). But it does not make a work of this calibration. The death upon which community is calibrated does not operate the dead being’s passage into some communal intimacy, nor does community, for its part, *operate* the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject...community is calibrated on death as that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work*. (*Inoperative* 14-15)

The inoperable nature of death and thus community can be further understood by considering how death is the only place wherein one can be fully realized. However, the dead cannot know they are dead, only the community left behind can acknowledge the death of the “I” or the “individual.” This cycle indicates a radical rupture of the possibility for the “individual” to exist *within* community. Instead, as Ian James clarifies, “It is seeing others die, and in our participation in that same potentiality for (or being-toward) death, that we encounter our own finitude...it is on the basis of the fact that our mortality or finitude is always already shared that something like community can exist” (James 180). Therefore, in the scene previously described, when Bolek witnesses the young Jewish traitor’s death, it can be argued that he recognizes his own finitude and in sharing this experience through bearing witness to Gamaliel, he is emphasizing the connection further between death and community. Moreover, James explains “Since

death, as the annihilation of subjectivity, is only ever encountered indirectly in the death of others, it is not something that is assimilable to the principle of identity, or, in Nancy's words, to the 'resources of a metaphysics of the subject'" (James 181). In other words, because death can never be experienced directly (because the only one who can experience death directly is the departed), and because death is the only instance where full realization can occur, a self-actualized "identity" *within* community is impossible. Through his witnessing of the traitor's death and his desire to share this experience with Gamaliel, we can argue that Bolek acknowledges that death cannot be isolated from community because it is our finitude or mortality (which is always shared) that allows for a community to exist.

Gamaliel emphasizes the impossibility for an individual identity within community when he reveals his own feelings on death's looming presence. For Gamaliel, "death was once a stranger to him, then it became a neutral onlooker" (Wiesel, *Time* 91). His relationship to death, or as he personifies it, "The Angel of Death," is described as gaining control of him, and saying, "You say 'I'? Don't you know that in a blink of an eye I can erase that word from your vocabulary forever?" (91). This metaphorical relationship to Death mirrors what Nancy argues in *The Inoperative Community*. The mention of "I" here can be used to indicate death as the only instance of full self-actualization, or self-identity and thus, when death argues that "He" can erase the word "I" forever, Death is instructing Gamaliel to recognize his own finitude (ibid.). Simultaneously, Gamaliel comes to acknowledge that a metaphysical community that claims "I's" or individuals can exist in isolation is actually a community working in cahoots with death, insofar as community, which seeks and claims immanence, is death.

Nancy states, “Death itself is the true community of *I*’s that are not *egos*. It is not a communion that fuses the *egos* into an *Ego* or a higher *We*. It is the community of others” (*Inoperative* 15). What he means here is that death is the only place where the ‘I’ can exist, thus community, which is dependent on the relation to the Other, “is the presentation of the finitude and the irredeemable excess that make up finite being” (15).

Later in the novel, when Gamaliel ponders death and discusses it with his mentor Rebbe Zusya, Gamaliel argues that he does not fear the loss of ‘I’ for he has lost his “nationality” and “identity” already as a refugee (*Time* 91). Gamaliel’s fearlessness indicates that although he acknowledges that death is the only event that can present and simultaneously extinguish an “individual” within community, he feels partially “lost” already. This scene exemplifies the paradoxical coexistence of the metaphysical and non-metaphysical at play in the novel. Although Gamaliel describes a loss of “identity” and “nationality” (both metaphysical concepts), the Rebbe’s response, “In a sense, but in one sense only, we are all men without a country,” reminds us of the impossibility of such metaphysical terms (Wiesel, *Time* 91). The conversation with the Rebbe, read through a philosophical lens, suggests the impossibility of a metaphysical identity. The Rebbe’s phrase “we are all men without a country” reminds Gamaliel that whether one has been exiled or uprooted from their “homes” there is still a community “unified” by finitude, the quality that makes us all strangers even to ourselves (*ibid.*). These two paradoxical themes, the desire for the recuperation of a metaphysical community alongside the acceptance of our inherent otherness, which connects us to all other beings, are simultaneously presented through Gamaliel’s internal struggles. However, through the course of the novel, Gamaliel slowly acknowledges and embraces his own otherness and

the necessity of the Other, realizing that his own desire for metaphysical “wholeness” is in fact the cause of his inability to accept and recover from his traumatic experiences.

*The Time of the Uprooted*, read along side the theories of Jean Luc Nancy, Ian James and Jacques Derrida, should not be considered an attack on the longing for a metaphysical sense of identity and the ethical imperative to build a “community” based on shared experiences, but should instead create an opening of perception and interpretation that creates a larger understanding of our unbreakable ties to the Other, along with our obligation or imperative to bear witness in spite of the incompleteness of all testimony. Being is ultimately being-*with* and this rationalization should prompt a reading of Wiesel’s novel that reveals the levels of existence present (those at the primordial level, and those of the material world of metaphysics). Although Gamaliel will never find all that he has lost (primarily his sense of “home” and “belonging”), he resolves, on the final pages of the novel, to “Begin again” and reminds us that community is a presentation of “its death, but also of its birth” (Wiesel, *Time* 300; *Inoperative* 15). Gamaliel must accept that it is impossible to cross over to death (insofar as there can be no ‘I’ in death), but instead he must “begin again” in the wake of his otherness, and his acceptance of finitude (ibid.).

### Chapter III: Conclusion--Bearing Witness and History

Nancy Goodman, psychoanalyst of Holocaust trauma suggests, “Without witnessing, the most terrible of events can remain untold, leaving a place of negation and ‘nothing’ in the mind and in the historic record” (3). She goes on to describe the density of trauma as an impenetrable space, a “dead space,” a “place of nonexistence” which she argues, through witnessing can become “an opening, a new space” where “growth and fertilization of mind with narrative” can take place (5-6). Although the “space” which Goodman discusses may differ from the space caused by *différance*, she nevertheless acknowledges “a space within the mind and [a] space between people” during the process of witnessing (4). This space, which for our purposes has more to do with language and less to do with trauma, emphasizes the distance a witness feels from their memories. For Holocaust survivors, this space is indicative of their complete inability to describe the horrors they witnessed to those who were not there, and therefore could not possibly understand. However, underneath the trauma of such a witnessing lies the peculiar movement of language—always positing while simultaneously withdrawing meaning. How then do we use language to find meaning and lessen “the dead space” without dishonoring the dead?

Goodman sees “the type of space created by witnessing to be where description, metaphor, and reflection arise” and goes on to agree that, “we need to resort to metaphor when attempting to knit together meaning” (5). Here Goodman conveys a Derridian sense of responsibility. In “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” Derrida asserts, “all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language” (66). What Derrida means here is that through the use of the poetic (figurative language) the witness can avoid claiming



that something “is” and instead is able to suggest what something is “like” or similar to. This seemingly small detail allows for a more responsible witnessing insofar as the witness is never claiming to *know*, in certitude, but to *think*. Thus, the use of the poetic acknowledges that it is impossible to ever re-present fully. As such, despite the demystification of the metaphysical concepts of community and identity, can a “responsible” bearing witness be viewed as cathartic and recuperative? And if so, can a witness account, which has been “proven” to be “un-provable,” still create a fuller understanding of a historical event?

*The Time of the Uprooted* touches upon these questions through a *responsible* poetic. Although Wiesel does not use poetry per-se his use of metaphor and his unveiling of, as Derrida describes, “the mask as mask” is beneficial in unraveling our posed questions (*Poetics* 68). The *mask* here refers to the novel’s constant questioning of the effectiveness of bearing witness through language, which of course is the only possible way to do so. When the narrator in the novel recalls Gamaliel’s conversation with an old man who shares his concerns with language, the old man says, “Every word has its double, as does man: This double accompanies man, or denies him; it is always the aggressor. It distorts the reality that the word transmits. But where is truth...If that word is telling a lie, is man up to the task of discovering the truth...But then again, what is a lie? The opposite of the truth? But then what is truth?” (Wiesel, *Time* 69). These ponderous questions reveal the *mask*, or for the sake of clarity, the unknowable, unanswerable secret in language. As the man suggests, a word’s “double...distorts the reality that the word transmits” causing “truth” to be read as a perception (ibid.). Revealing (bearing witness),

while simultaneously concealing (suggesting the incompleteness of testimony) creates a poetic, and thus a responsible witnessing.

The unveiling of the mask is a common motif in Wiesel's writing. In his essay, "Why I Write," Wiesel ponders, "What does exiled language mean? It refers to the distance between words and what they mask. It signifies the tension between language and its subject" (31). For our purposes, Wiesel's use of the word "mask" emphasizes his acceptance of the necessary "limits" of bearing witness. These "limits" can be understood as the witness' realization of the impossibility of fully explaining, or proving the events of the Holocaust. Wiesel understands language, always in exile, is masked from what it intends to mean; language can never *fully* present an event to an Other or even to the witness themselves (because an event can only be experienced through language and thus always carries *différance*). However, his constant emphasis on bearing witness regardless of these "limitations" is his most well known quality as a writer of Holocaust literature. Wiesel frequently uses the predicament of the witness in the characters of his novels. Gamaliel for instance, often remembers the words of mentors, madmen, and sage's. In one such scene he remembers the words of a Rebbe who says, "to be silent is forbidden; to speak is impossible" (*Time* 130). In other words, although speaking or bearing witness to the Holocaust is impossible, insofar as the witness can never find the words to transcribe the event to an outsider (or to themselves), silence must be forbidden. To not speak would be a crime against history and humanity. Wiesel's emphasis is to encourage the act of bearing witness as an obligation to history, for those who did not survive the camps. However, this obligation leaves us to contemplate: can we bear witness for the dead?

This question is explored within the novel as well. In the same scene as that noted above, the old man asks: “How about the conquered? Who speaks for them, for those who learned only to howl?” echoing the question so many who survived the Holocaust are prone to ask (*Time* 69). Who bears witness for the dead? Derrida emphasizes this through his reading of Celan’s poem which contains a line that translates loosely to: “No one/ bears witness for the /witness” (*Poetics* 75). In other words, only the witness of an event can bear witness to that particular experience, no one can take his or her place as witness. If this is so, how can we ever gain a fully articulated truth about an event plagued with “conquered” witnesses? Those who remain, those who survived and bear witness to the deaths of so many “conquered” victims then, can only bear witness *to* (their own experiences), and not *for* (the experiences of the dead). Even Wiesel in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech agrees, “No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions” (1986). Therefore, should we consider the testimony of survivors, which is incomplete, valuable to history? Derrida responds to this by saying, “We should ask for what necessary—not accidental—reasons the sense of ‘proof’ regularly comes to contaminate or divert the sense of ‘bearing witness’” (*Poetics* 75). Derrida’s distaste for the word “proof” signifies an understanding of language as an un-provable medium. If all words carry a *trace* or a *secret*, which can never be shared, then all witnessing, by definition, carries a space as well. And it is this space, which defies the possibility of certitude or proof in any testimony. But what Derrida stresses by suggesting proof is a contaminate to bearing witness is that although un-provable, witnessing should not be subjected to such absolutes and it is no accident that it is. If we agree with this understanding, bearing witness is not proof but, instead, an unmistakably

unique account of an event, then yes, a “non-provable” witnessing can indeed enhance our understanding and add to our historical perspective of an event. After all, no one can bear witness in place of the survivors of the Holocaust, their accounts, although not able to encompass the witnessing of the dead, are singular.

The question then is how a collective of witness accounts which are “non-provable” can be added to History, which claims to be True. Although the possibility of capital “T” Truth has already been discussed and disproved within the scope of this thesis, traditional historians continue to label History as such. Thus, we are left with a fragmented falsely labeled History, alongside a collection of Holocaust literature. In the introduction to *A Double Dying Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Alvin Rosenfeld discusses the forces working against the witness such as, linguistic incapacity, and reader reluctance. He argues the literature that “develop[s] against such extreme countervailing forces,” is:

A literature of fragments, or partial and provisional forms, no one of which by itself can suffice to express the Holocaust, but the totality of which begins to accumulate and register a coherent and powerful effect...the shards and fragments that reveal, in their separateness and brokenness, the uncountable small tragedies that together add up to something larger than the tragic sense implies. (Rosenfeld 33)

Although Rosenfeld is not discussing the same problematic qualities of language that we discuss, that being the impossibility of meaning to ever be fully shared due to *différance*, he does stress the incompleteness of one witness account, and emphasizes the need for multiple accounts of the same event that together build a more comprehensive

recollection of a historical event. Thus it is up to readers, or the addressees, to collect these witness accounts and build their understanding of an event or experience, which History fails to fully transcribe. In speaking of the Holocaust specifically, Wiesel says, “in a deeper sense it is beyond history. That means it’s an Event, as we always say with a capital *e*, where whatever happened went beyond whatever happened” (Cargas 119). To go beyond history, this is why we read stories about the Holocaust, study testimonies, and memoirs, not to disvalue History as such, but to add to it and to surpass the limits that History as such creates.

Let us return for a moment to Goodman’s theory of “the place of non-existence” which the act of witnessing can open, creating “pathways to the edge of the silent or actively volcanic abyss” (ibid.). Her metaphor for the impact of trauma on survivors of the Holocaust can help to determine the possibilities for recuperation through bearing witness. Goodman believes that this metaphoric hole, or dead space, “can breathe just a little bit once it has been witnessed and in many ways must also remain as a monument to the horror that has transpired” (7). For our purposes, her metaphor works well with Derrida’s theory of *différance*. Goodman asserts that although this hole can “breathe” it must “remain” (ibid.). Indicating that a witness can perhaps gain a sense of relief from giving testimony, but the deferral and difference that separates all language from meaning, and ultimately plagues the witness with an incomplete testimony, can never fully alleviate the hole, or space that will always remain. Therefore, can the act of bearing witness, on an emotional level, bring solace to the witness? This question cannot be answered, but only speculated. For most witnesses, the fulfillment of an obligation is enough.

Wiesel's obligation to bear witness stems from his desire to prevent the Holocaust from being forgotten, or even worse, argued to be a fabrication. For Wiesel, "to forget would be the enemies final triumph" (Wiesel, *From the Kingdom* 187). He believes, "No one who has not experienced the event will ever be able to understand it. And yet, the survivor is conscious of his duty to bear witness. To tell the tale. To protest every time any 'revisionist,' morally perverse as he may be, dares deny the death of those who died" (ibid.). His acceptance of his obligation to tell, while still understanding the limitations of bearing witness, illuminates the paradox of all witnessing. In Alan Berger essay "Transfusing Memory," featured in *Obligated by Memory*, Wiesel describes the paradox of memory as "our [survivors'] real kingdom" and "a graveyard" indicating that for survivors, memory brings a sense of comfort, yet it is a graveyard of translation (119). It cannot translate the dead, and even less the experience of the Holocaust. Yet, Wiesel argues that his task is to bring his readers and listeners "closer to the gate of memory" (120). Wiesel here emphasizes the impossibility of bringing an addressee to the gate of memory; they can only be brought "closer," yet he believes it is the obligation of the witness to do so. The theme of remembrance, despite its ineptitude, is present in all of Wiesel's writing, especially his fictional accounts of exile.

In Colin Davis' *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts*, he suggests that Wiesel commonly uses the motif of "illusions and the telling of lies" in many of his novels to alleviate the burden of knowing and yet never being able to explain (64). In *The Time of the Uprooted*, Gamaliel's persistence of bearing witness is the central theme of the novel. However, Gamaliel is not deceived by language's ability to tell. Known as a storyteller among his friends and lovers, Gamaliel often puts forth his own fears and trepidations with language

through his invented characters, his own “lies.” In one story, an acrobat named Jeremy is “convinced he could never break out of the silence that enveloped him inside and out,” and later learns, “that life depends on others. If one of them is absentminded, it is you who will die” (Wiesel, *Time* 270). The stories embedded within the pages of the novel create a crucial parallel to Wiesel’s use of characters to suggest his own torments. Thus, Gamaliel’s stories become parables, which as readers, we should infer a great deal more than what the words claim to mean. In Jeremy’s case, his silence, which he cannot break away from, is suggestive of Gamaliel’s own struggles with bearing witness through language. Like Wiesel, Gamaliel’s characters seek the stories of others to alleviate the incompleteness of witnessing. Therefore, Jeremy’s lesson, “life depends on others,” is also useful to understand Gamaliel, who must realize that we bear witness to the other, as an obligation, to not allow our stories be absentmindedly forgotten (ibid.).

Gamaliel bears witness to another story, one told to him by his friend Bolek. Bolek’s story tells the tale of a poet and chronicler named Asher Baumgarten. Bolek and others in the resistance movement would inform Asher of what was taking place in the ghettos in the hopes that he would “bear witness to [their]...suffering and...struggle, for History’s sake” (Wiesel, *Time* 283). Bolek depended on Asher to be “the carrier of memory”, but after the Germans collected the last of the children, Asher committed suicide (ibid.). The note he left asked for forgiveness for giving up, and said, “I saw the children; I witnessed their cries and their tears. And I no longer have the words to tell it” (283). This scene in the novel is vital in understanding Wiesel’s motives for bearing witness. Throughout the course of the novel, Gamaliel also considers suicide as an escape from memory, but what is more important to understand is that Gamaliel does not give

up, nor does he stop telling. By including Asher's defeat, Wiesel juxtaposes the words of a Rebbe, who on his deathbed suggests, "I'm not beaten! I'm still alive. With my last gasp, I can change the course of events. Don't you know that yet? Haven't I taught you anything?" (258). These contrasting ideas suggest that the act of bearing witness for Wiesel is crucial and the only means to change the future and prevent it from repeating the past. He argues, "It is quite simple: a witness who does not give his or her testimony may be considered a false witness" (Wiesel, *Obliged*, 158). Therefore, Gamaliel's continual attempts to bear witness in the novel, comes to suggest that even if the witness claims to "no longer have the words to tell," the witness must continue attempting to bring the listener as close as possible, it is the obligation of the witness (ibid.).

Through his fiction, Wiesel tells stories layered in narrative voices and poetic style to bridge the gap between memory and history, between the survivor and the next generation, and although he will never close the gap, he continues to tell, and to try to explain. By analyzing Wiesel's experience with literature and memoir, bearing witness surpasses the "individual" and instead cultivates a collective, which adds to history, and perhaps exceeds the limitations of it. Through this rationalization, an "un-provable" witness account can add to our understanding of a historical event. Furthermore, despite the unraveling of the metaphysical aspects of "identity" and "community," the act of bearing witness can come to represent an act of showing, which when combined with other acts of witnessing, reveals the impossibility of a loss of community, the misconceptions of "unity" (as a sense of collective sharing of beliefs and culture), and instead reveals the need for the Other as a basis for being. Nancy reminds us, "Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of



this singularly plural coexistence” (Nancy, *Being 3*). For Gamaliel and Wiesel, the Other is proven to be a necessity, and thus *The Time of the Uprooted* responsibly bears witness to the Other, creating a testimony that does not prove, but reveals that “no one can bear witness for the witness” (ibid.).

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