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Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring
2014, pp. 43-62 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jlt.2014.0019>

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From the Position of the Victim to the Position of the Witness

Traumatic Testimony

DANA AMIR

Testimonial narratives transmit not only history but also historicity, thereby bearing witness not only to the actual events but also (and even mainly) to the subjective, idiosyncratic meaning of those facts for the individual narrator. Analyzing two diaries that were written by Holocaust victims, this article identifies a specific character that portrays their narrators' positions: the capacity to shift between "the position of the victim" and "the position of the witness."¹ This capacity turns this kind of testimonial narrative into one that enables not only the mere supplying of experiences but also a transformation that allows those experiences to absorb new meaning. The author's point of departure is the assumption that the more transformation the traumatic experiences undergo, the more chances the narrator will have to turn trauma from a "negative possession," which annihilates the traumatic experience along with the experiencing subject, into a "psychic possession" that enables recovery and growth.² This does not mean, of course, that being a "witness" is morally or in any other sense "superior" to being a "victim." On the contrary, the victim and the witness here are not only two characters (or two inner positions) of one and same person, but actually constitute two complementary forces that through the collapse and reconstruction of language enable the very act of testimony.

Trauma and Testimony

The psychological and psychoanalytic literature on trauma and working with trauma refers extensively to testimony and to the major role of the other in bearing witness to a trauma that the victim often has not, and could not have, witnessed him- or herself. Writers from various theoretical fields describe trauma as something that has taken place “over there, far away,” an event that does not belong to the experiencing “I.”³ Survivors of trauma claim that they live in two worlds: the world of their traumatic memories (a kind of everlasting present) and the real world (the concrete present). As a result, the traumatic memory is preserved frozen and timeless, and psychic movement becomes automatic, aimless and senseless. Cathy Caruth writes about the *traumatic paradox*, in which the most direct contact with the violent event may take place through the very inability to know it.⁴ Trauma is not only an experience, she claims, but also the failure to experience it: not the threat itself, but the fact that the threat was recognized as such only a moment too late. Since it was not experienced “in time,” the event is condemned from then on not to be “fully known.” Bessel van der Kolk argues that while terrifying events may be remembered extremely vividly, they may equally resist any kind of integration.⁵ These memories remain powerful but frozen, untransformable by either circumstantial processes or the passing of time. They are subject to neither assimilation nor developmental change since they are not integrated into the associative network. Traumatic experiences are not transformed into a personal narrative: they are primary impressions that lack a verbal representation. Dori Laub, in an article entitled “Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization,” quotes Richard Moore’s argument that we cannot know that the traumatic event has taken place until another supplies it with a narrative.⁶ A person can know his or her story only when he or she tells it to him- or herself, or indeed, to what Laub calls “his or her inner thou” (internal other). But since trauma is a critical injury to both the internal and external “other,” that is to say, to the addressee of any dialogical relationship, it ruins the possibility for an “empathic dyad” in the inner representation of the world, leaving the subject with nobody to address, either within or outside him- or herself. This catastrophic loss of the good object compels the victim to internalize the only available object, the aggressor him- or herself, as a *malignant self-object* with whom she

or he identifies.⁷ Shoshana Felman, in *Testimony* writes, “That ‘something happened’ in itself is history; that ‘someone is telling someone else that something happened’ is a narrative. In many respects, a narrative is also a historical proposition, much as history is also ‘the establishment of the facts of the past through their narrativization.’”⁸

As Felman and Laub claim, the traumatic event, although real, takes place outside the parameters of normal reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. Trauma is thus an event without a beginning, an ending, a before, a during, or an after. This fundamental absence of categories lends it a quality of “otherness,” a salience, a timelessness, and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting, and of mastery. To undo the entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told but can only be repeated, a recovery process involving the construction of a narrative, re-constructing history and, essentially, re-externalizing the event, has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again. Telling thus entails the reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim.⁹

Three Testimonial Modes

Testimonial narrative can be differentiated in terms of the presence and magnitude of the shift between “the (inner) position of the victim” and “the (inner) position of the witness.”¹⁰ Metaphor and metonymy are two forms of semantic shift, that is, two modes of transition from one semantic field to another. Metaphor is the use of a word or expression in a borrowed sense rather than in its simple original sense, or the use of the characteristics of one concept in order to illuminate another. Metaphor is based on analogy, on a relationship of similarity between two semantic fields. Metonymy, by contrast, is a figurative tool that illustrates something by replacing it with something else that is situated close to it in time or space, or that belongs in the same context. The result is not logical in the simple sense and can be understood only through the proximity between the two elements. As opposed to metaphor, in metonymy there is no transfer of characteristics between the two elements. The connection

between them is associative only in a way that allows us to perceive the one as representative of the other.

In "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Linguistic Disturbances," Roman Jakobson presents metaphor and metonymy as polar opposites.¹¹ He stresses the "similarity" that metaphor installs between its signifiers versus the "contiguity" typical of metonymy. Each of these modes of transposition, he argues, relies on different cognitive skills. While metaphor is based on the cognitive ability to convert, metonymy implies the cognitive ability to connect and contextualize, that is, the ability to create continuity and to identify something as part of, and following from, a context. Jakobson divides the aphasic patients with whom his article is concerned into those who suffer from impaired identification of similarities and those whose ability to combine and contextualize is affected. Lacan's distinction between metaphor and metonymy diverges from Jakobson's. Although, following Jakobson, he associates metaphor with the axis of linguistic selection and metonymy with that of combination, metaphor for him acts to constitute meaning while metonymy resists meaning: the metonymic drive is related to the desire to recover the lost "Real." Metaphor, by contrast, is associated with "the symptom," whose creation is a constructive process in which new meaning emerges. Following both Jakobson's and Lacan's ideas, I suggest a distinction between a metaphoric testimonial narrative mode and a metonymic testimonial narrative mode, adding to these two a third, "psychotic mode."¹²

The metaphoric testimonial mode is one in which there is a constant and flexible shift between the first person and the third person of experience. This in turn enables another imaginary shift, between "the position of the victim" and "the position of the witness." Since the shift between the position of the victim and the position of the witness demands the simultaneous holding of an experiential as well as a reflective mode, it constitutes a three-dimensional experiential space. This kind of testimonial narrative, which is the focus of this article, also enables in many cases (as will be further illustrated) the transformation of the personal narrative into a collective one, or the transformation of the personal traumatic biography into an attempt to formulate "the biography of trauma" itself.

As against this first testimonial mode, the second, metonymic mode remains a first-person mode of report. Unable to shift between the inner

position of the victim and the inner position of the witness, it produces a text that preserves and enacts the traumatic memories and the traumatic features and is thus characterized by the same isolation, fragmentation, disorientation, and lack of coherence that are typical of the traumatic experience itself. In this sense, the second testimonial mode illustrates the very materials to which it testifies. Thus, while the metaphoric testimonial mode enables the shift between the first person and the third person of experience, the metonymic testimonial mode is located in the first person. This does not mean that it is literally limited to the first person only, nor does it mean that it is characterized by an excessive use of "I." It rather means that this mode of testimony uses no distancing so that it maintains a living continuum with the traumatic memories and through it also with a sense of selfhood. The metonymic testimonial mode lacks any reflective attitude. It enacts the traumatic experience without being able to turn it into an integrated narrative, incorporating it without being capable of transcending it. Within the metonymic testimonial mode, any transcendence is experienced as a split between the person and his or her identity.

In addition to these two testimonial modes, which preserve a certain link with traumatic memories, the "psychotic mode" of testimony attacks every possible link with the trauma, dividing the subject and his or her memories as well as the subject and his or her own sense of selfhood. The psychotic testimonial mode annihilates the capacity to turn the traumatic events into any sort of narrative, and it does so by inhabiting the very creation and use of communicative language.

The three testimonial modes actually represent three levels of representation. Lacan's theory sees language as creating a split between the subject and the raw experience, on the one hand, and enabling representation, memory, and thinking, on the other hand. The paradox of language is related to the fact that it distances the subject from the traumatic Real, but simultaneously allows, as a result of this distancing, the creation of the inner realm. The three testimonial modes thus are in fact three modes of coping with the split that language creates between the subject and the traumatic Real: The metaphoric testimonial mode produces the highest degree of distancing from the traumatic experience but also the most subtle connection with it. The metonymic testimonial mode enables only a partial distancing, and therefore also a partial con-

nection. Finally, the psychotic testimonial mode, which enables no distance, does not enable any link either.

Every actual testimonial narrative includes a specific interaction between these three testimonial modes, and this interaction has significant implications for recovery. When the metastructure of testimony is predominantly in the metaphoric mode—while the metonymic and psychotic modes feature in it as secondary modes—the resulting narrative will be capable of organizing itself around the traumatic experience, preserving the necessary distance in order to enable both reflection and symbolization. On the other hand, when the metastructure of testimony is predominantly in the metonymic mode, the resulting narrative's capacity of containing the traumatic materials is fragile. This type of testimony does not enable reflection and thus preserves the traumatic memories mainly through repetition. When the dominant mode is psychotic, trauma turns into what I call a "negative possession," a psychic condition that prevents both the representation of traumatic events as well as the ability to preserve meaningful contact with them.¹³ It is possible to identify a variety of manifestations of a dominant psychotic mode in the descriptions of survivor characters in the post-traumatic literature written by first-generation survivors of the Holocaust (for example, the character of Berta in Aharon Appelfeld's story "Berta"), characters who create within themselves as well as with their surroundings a type of discourse that is semipsychotic and semiautistic and that nullifies them as subjects, with the purpose of preventing any contact with the psychic reality and the unbearable pain it involves.

As said, when the metastructure of testimony is predominantly in the first mode, the resulting narrative enables not only the transmission of traumatic experiences but also the generation of new meaning. I will now illustrate this kind of testimonial narrative through a close reading of two written testimonies concerning the Holocaust: the diary of Etty Hillesum and the diary of Hélène Berr. Both diaries were written in more or less the same years. Etty Hillesum (January 15, 1914–November 30, 1943) was a Jewish woman whose letters and diaries, kept between 1941 and 1943 (and published posthumously in 1981), describe life in Amsterdam during the German occupation.¹⁴ Hélène Berr (March 27, 1921–April 1945) was a young French woman of the Jewish faith who documented her life in a diary during the Nazi occupation of France. Her diary has been stored

at Paris's Holocaust Memorial Museum since 2002 and was published in France and the United States in 2008.¹⁵ My comparative reading of these two diaries will trace the way in which these two extraordinary writers transcend the concrete description of the facts of their lives by employing a rich testimonial mode that extracts a private as well as a general meaning from the actual reality. The reading will be followed by a discussion of the transition from the position of the victim to the position of the witness in terms of "the inner witness" and "the lyrical dimension of mental space."¹⁶

Two Diaries, Two Testimonial Shifts

On one of the first pages of her diary, Etty Hillesum writes, "I'd just like to know *how* I did it, *how* I managed to break free" (IL, 30; emphasis in original). Written long before she began to be aware of the horror surrounding her, these words draw a point of view that will express itself repeatedly throughout her diary pages: it is the "how" and not the "what" that intrigues her. The "what," it could be said, belongs to the victim, while the "how" belongs to the witness: the "what" concerns the facts while the "how" concerns meaning. It is the "how" that endows the facts with meaning and thus enables her thinking to transcend them: "But you must continue to take yourself seriously, you must remain your own witness, marking well everything that happens in this world, never shutting your eyes to reality. You must come to grips with these terrible times and try to find answers to the many questions they pose" (IL, 41). Etty Hillesum chooses to position herself as one who takes an active role. Not only does she turn herself—as an inversion of her being so helpless—into the owner of these "terrible times," she stresses that this ownership can last only through a possible emotional as well as intellectual working through. Referring to the death of a close friend and to her own fear of death, she continues, "I am sometimes so distracted by all the appalling happenings round me that it's far from easy to find the way back to myself. And yet that's what I must do. I mustn't let myself be ground down by the misery outside" (IL, 41). Later she writes, "There is a really deep well inside me. And in it . . . dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again" (IL, 44). This is an inversion she creates again and again: it is not God who is the "force majeure" that must save her from catastrophe but rather she herself

who allows catastrophe to bury God beneath it, and therefore it is also she herself who has the power to dig him out:

I sometimes feel I am in some blazing purgatory and that I am being forged into something else. But into what? I can only be passive, allow it to happen to me. But then I also have the feeling that all the problems of our age and of mankind in general have to be battled out inside my little head. And that means being active. (*IL*, 45)

Here the shift from the passive position of the victim to the active position of the witness (though she might be said to consider passivity—"allow[ing] it to happen"—as a precondition, a first necessary step toward activity) is illustrated through the transition from being passively transformed to actively becoming the space within which transformation occurs. This is also an illustration of the transformation typical of the metaphoric testimonial mode, that is, the transformation of the personal catastrophe into a collective one, "the problems of our age and of mankind in general," which she feels she must deal with within her own head:

The perception, very strongly borne in, that despite all the suffering and injustice I cannot hate others. All the appalling things that happen are no mysterious threats from afar, but arise from fellow beings very close to us. That makes these happenings more familiar, then, and not so frightening. The terrifying thing is that systems grow too big for men and hold them in a satanic grip, the builders no less than the victims of the system, much as large edifices and spires, created by men's hands, tower high above us, dominate us, yet may collapse over our heads and bury us. (*IL*, 86)

Etty Hillesum metaphorically inhabits the insufferable and the unavoidable within her own mind, and there she investigates and treats it. She separates the system from the people who enact it, the elements that should be annihilated from the psyche in which they dwell, thus turning her helplessness into potency and responsibility: "To take what little space we are left with, to fathom its possibilities and use them to the full" (*IL*, 139), she later writes. Facing the constant shrinking of the space of real life under external restrictions, she insists on the importance of preserving an inner

space, claiming that the limitations of external space are nothing but an exercise meant to discover the unlimited possibilities of the inner one:

I should be preparing myself even now for physical handicaps so that I don't come to a complete standstill every time I encounter some unexpected obstacle. I shall have to adapt myself in advance, make incapacity part of my daily life, of my whole self, the better to control and then dismiss it. Rather than come up against it anew every time and use up all my time and strength in the process. (*IL*, 140)

By turning what is imposed from outside into a part of her inner life she neutralizes, in her own special way, its paralyzing influence, thus transforming the arbitrary reality not only into a sensible text but also into something that further emboldens the urge to make sense:

And everywhere signs barring Jews from the paths and the open country. But above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky, intact. . . . They can harass us, they can rob us of our material goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance. By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated, and oppressed. By our own hatred. By our swagger, which hides our fear. (*IL*, 144)

The real influence of the cruel persecution and oppression is related to the fact that something inside her responds to them and thus joins their arbitrariness. Giving up the effort to understand, to predict, to find meaning in these happenings means joining the external attack and turning it into an inner one: "What one does freely of one's own accord is always more soundly based and longer lasting than what has been forced upon one" (*IL*, 145), she writes while trying to abstain from luxury foods, recognizing that soon they will be unavailable. Here, too, she reverses cause and effect by insisting on choosing what is actually forced from outside and finding in this no-win situation not merely an advantage but a freedom of movement, thus turning her own suffering from an arbitrary disaster into a meaningful challenge:

And God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable to him! I have already died a thousand

deaths in a thousand concentration camps. I know about everything and am no more appalled by the latest reports. In one way or another I know it all. And yet I find life beautiful and meaningful. (*IL*, 150)

The more reality gets merciless, the more insistent she grows about being the owner of what happens to her. This is not a simple denial but rather her struggle to be the owner of her experience and of her life even when she loses all external freedom of choice. She puts herself to death in a thousand forms, in a thousand places, since this is her way of turning the external fate into an inner one, coercion into mission: "It is possible to suffer with dignity and without. . . . I am with the hungry, with the ill-treated and the dying, every day, but I am also with the jasmine and with that piece of sky beyond my window" (*IL*, 152). Further on she writes, "Suffering has always been with us, does it really matter in what form it comes? All that matters is how we bear it and how we fit it into our lives" (*IL*, 152). And then, "And that is why I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again." (*IL*, 154).

It is possible to suffer with or without dignity, Hillesum says. Even when suffering itself is a given, one still has the inner freedom of choice between suffering in a way that honors our singular being and suffering in a way that dishonors it. This illustrates Hillesum's way of transforming the movement forward into a movement inward, turning her suffering into something that empowers her experience instead of blocking, as often happen when one encounters a mortal anxiety, the capacity to experience at all: "By excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it," she continues (*IL*, 155). Then she says,

I knew at once: I shall have to pray for this German soldier. Out of all those uniforms one has been given a face now. There will be other faces, too, in which we shall be able to read something we understand: That German soldiers suffer as well. There are no frontiers between suffering people, and we must pray for them all. (*IL*, 156)

Etty Hillesum uses, in more than one sense, her own private suffering as a channel through which she can learn something about the essence

of global, universal suffering. By endowing death with meaning, by understanding that pain will teach her a lesson that no happiness ever will, she turns the journey toward her own extinction into a journey of self-consciousness and self-investigation. It can be said that she creates a psychic movement *through suffering* instead of *against suffering*, thus turning her own traumatic experience into a form of psychic holding: "I don't feel in anybody's clutches; I feel safe in God's arms." (IL, 176). Instead of feeling trapped in her fate, she feels contained in it. God, to whom she turns here, is an inner force toward which and through which she transcends her unbearable concrete present: "I hold a silly, naïve, or deadly serious dialogue with what is deepest inside me, which for the sake of convenience I call God" (IL, 183). She turns to God as to an inner creator of meaning: "Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last" (IL, 178). This is her consistent choice: instead of holding God responsible, she holds herself responsible to defend God's inner representation and keep it intact: "For while everyone tries to save himself, vast numbers are nevertheless disappearing and the funny thing is I don't feel I am in their clutches anyway, whether I stay or am sent away" (IL, 176). Refusing to be homeless, she turns the entire world into her home. In that sense, her choice not to run away even when she had the choice is not the tragic result of her innocence but rather related to her true belief that the horror she experiences is an experience that was meant for her and with which she must cope in the gravest sense. On one of the last pages of her diary she writes, "God, make me less eager to be understood by others but make me understand them" (IL, 227). These last words, as many others before, can be read as her wish to transcend and transform the narcissistic pain, which she sees as connected to the victim's passivity, into a much-superior mode of being that she sees as connected to the witness's responsibility.

Hélène Berr's diary illustrates the shift from the position of the victim to the position of the witness in a very different manner, but somehow with no less intensity. When the Nazi law forcing Jews to wear a yellow star is declared, she writes, "At that point I was determined not to wear it. I considered it degrading to do so, proof of one's submission to the Germans' laws" (JHB, 50). But immediately after this she bethinks herself: "This evening I've changed my mind: I now think it is cowardly not to

wear it, vis-à-vis people who will" (*JHB*, 50). The shift here is one between two addressees: while the refusal to wear the star relates to the German addressees, the decision to wear it relates to her fellows in fate. This shift concerns her inner motivation: does she act for a reason or for a purpose? If she acts for a reason, that will justify her refusal to wear the yellow star: she declines to wear it since wearing it testifies to her submission to the Germans' rules. But if she acts for a purpose, this actually justifies wearing the star: she wears it in solidarity with her fellows in fate. The shift from acting out of a reason to acting for a purpose is equivalent, I believe, to the shift from the position of the victim to the position of the witness. In the same way that Etty Hillesum's "what" belongs to the victim while "how" belongs to the witness, here one can say that while the position of the victim will always stick to the reason, the position of the witness sticks to the purpose. In that sense, Hélène Berr's engaging with the two possible meanings of the same act predicts the transformation she will undergo through her writing.

One morning the family receives a message informing them that Berr's father has been arrested. He has left a note, a very practical one; the one sentence that escapes its businesslike tone is "I do not know why" (*JHB*, 70). This is the beginning of Berr's coping with the arbitrariness of her new reality. The habit of asking why, of searching for a reason, is a habit that assumes justice or at least a coherent relation between cause and effect. The word "why" assumes order, logic, that events can be predicted and explained. But what is going to take place from now on challenges her aesthetic values as well as her ability to think within a causal continuum: "The weather was splendid. I could no longer quite understand why the whole of Paris looked so beautiful on this radiant morning in June. The sun always shines on disasters" (*JHB*, 70). This paragraph, which connects beauty and horror, seeks to create a continuum. If the sun "always shines on disasters" then there is a link between tragedy and beauty, attended by a kind of consolation concerning the fact that beauty is not indifferent to disaster or completely alien to it. Instead, it seems somehow to react to it (for example, by shining).

Berr's insistence on this fictitious connection reflects her need to cling to causality and logic. Her mother, on the other hand, reacts to her father's arrest in a completely different manner, by repeating over and over, "I've

gone numb, I've gone numb." Berr writes, "The difference is that she has now realized, and I still have not" (*JHB*, 71). What Berr does realize at this point is that the fragmentation and numbness that characterize her mother's reaction suit the incident much better than her own response. The mother's reaction articulates the experience that the world has split into two and that what has happened is an attack not only on concrete physical existence but also on the capacity to represent this existence in words.

After visiting her father in his detention cell Berr writes, "Thinking back, that was a blessing. We saw Papa again after the first phase of the tragedy, after his arrest. He told us about it. We saw him smile" (*JHB*, 74). Until she saw his smile she was shifting between a denial of the tragedy and the feeling that the end of the world was near. Her father's smile gives concrete, real outlines to what has happened but also situates it in reality: this isn't the end of the world (yet), but the encounter also confirms that this is really happening; that it is not a creation of her imagination, and that her imagination will not fix it. "It was a rather comical scene. . . . You might have wondered what we were all doing there. But that was because there were no Germans present. The full meaning, the sinister meaning, of it all was not apparent because we were among French people" (*JHB*, 75). Being among French people helps her preserve the experience of a common language and therefore enables her to deny the fact that the terms of reality have completely changed:

Yet as I looked at the postcard, I still could not grasp the reality: Papa's handwriting reminded me of the letters he used to write when he was away from home. . . . I could not manage to reconcile the handwriting with what it said, with the meaning of the words. And now I've lost it again. No, I've got it now, suddenly, in the dark: between the Papa at home and the one out there who wrote this postcard, a gap is yawning open. (*JHB*, 78–79)

Like Etty Hillesum, Hélène Berr tries to figure out the terms of humiliation:

I awake with a single clear idea in my head: what they are trying to make us do is an act of abominable cowardice. . . . They are swapping Papa for what we value most: our pride, our dignity, our sense of resis-

tance. . . . They don't want heroes. They want to make their victims despicable, not arouse admiration for them. (JHB, 86–87)

Berr tries to understand the Germans' motivation in order to resist their power. It is as if she were saying, "They want us to be weak but we won't let them have the pleasure." Hillesum, approaching the same topic in her diary, highlights the inner cause: "We ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance. By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated, and oppressed. By our own hatred. By our swagger, which hides our fear" (IL, 144). While Berr reacts (albeit in the form of powerful resistance) to the Germans' deeds, Hillesum expropriates the Germans from any monopoly on evil and seeks the answers in human nature itself. Berr writes,

I have two feelings that come to much the same thing, though they are of different kinds: the first is the feeling that leaving would be an act of cowardice, it would be cowardly toward the other internees, and the wretched poor; the second is that it would mean sacrificing the joy of struggle, which is a sacrifice of happiness, because—apart from the joy of heroic action—there are also the compensations of friendships and of community in resisting. (JHB, 87)

Similar to Hillesum's response, Berr gains power from sharing one fate with other people. Yet the power Hillesum gains from this solidarity is different from Berr's: while Berr feels strengthened as a result of being part of the "community in resisting," Hillesum takes succor from her understanding that sharing one fate with others gives her own private experience a global meaning. Berr gains her strength from being part of an alliance of "real men and real women" (JHB, 100), an alliance made *against suffering*. Hillesum, by contrast, does not create an alliance *against* suffering but *with suffering*. Her intention is not to stop the pain but to learn through it something about human limits and nature. In that sense she does not resist suffering but joins it.

Jews are no longer entitled to cross the Champs-Élysées. Theaters and restaurants are off-limits. The news has been couched in normal and hypocritical terms, as if it was an established fact that Jews are persecuted in France, as if it was a given, accepted as a necessity and a right. (JHB, 96)

Berr is aware of the distortion created by the fact that the new rules are announced in a seemingly natural tone and form: the warrants are distributed in the name of the law, while the law itself has broken the law. Moreover, the general frame of reference, the context that endows every text with meaning has become in which the usual chain of cause and effect is no longer relevant for its comprehension. At this point in the diary, the tone of her testimony becomes much more collective, exceeding her private experience and seeking a general truth:

For how will humanity ever be healed unless all its rottenness is exposed? How will the world be cleansed unless it is made to understand the full extent of the evil it is doing? . . . War will not avenge the suffering: blood calls for blood, men dig their heels into their own wickedness and blindness. (*JHB*, 157)

Shifting from a testimonial narrative whose focus was on her own life and thoughts, Berr's testimonial narrative now seeks repair not only for her own soul but for the entirety of humankind. It is no longer the Germans against the Jews but the malignancy of human nature that is at the center of her writing: "It's a frightful machine; now all we can see are its results. On one side, a rational, organized, considered evil, and on the other side, frightful suffering. No one can see the monstrous painlessness of it, no one can see where it all began, the first cog in the infernal machine" (*JHB* 160).

What Berr seeks to understand is the point of departure of evil. She transcends her private, individual point of view into a collective position, one that seeks to save not merely the memory of the facts, but their meaning. Later she writes, "I had a word with a recently promoted agrégée. . . . For a moment I fell back into the magic kingdom. But I am no longer my whole self in that kingdom. I feel as if I am betraying the new kingdom to which I belong" (*JHB*, 164). In other words, she has undergone a transformation that cannot be reversed. The meaning of that transformation is that she now includes everything that she has gone through—pain as well—as a part of her self: an organ that she cannot—and will not—cut off. With this change, she takes on the role of informing "people who do not know" about what is going on: "Horried, I see that the person I am talking to pities me (pity is much easier to get than understanding, for that requires the gift of one's whole being and a complete reconsideration

of oneself)" (*JHB*, 166). In order to become a witness, Berr claims, the listener has to let the horror pass through him- or herself and be willing to undergo a deep transformation. If this transformation is real it will create understanding, not pity. Pity maintains the listeners' patronizing stance and allows them to stay only partially involved. Understanding, on the other hand, demands the listeners' recognition that they are part of everything, whether or not they know about it, whether or not they agree with it. They are part of it because this horror machine is a creation of human nature, the very nature they themselves share:

Will I rise up in protest against my fate someday? Fatalism is not what enables me to put up with it but rather a vague sense that every new trial has a meaning, that it was intended for me and that it will make me more pure, more worthy in respect of my conscience and, probably, in the eyes of God. (*JHB*, 172)

In a manner very similar to Hillesum's at about the same stage, Berr believes that what she is going through has a purpose and not merely a reason, and that this purpose not only turns her private experience into a nonarbitrary one but also causes the private experience to transform into a global one:

Yet if I suddenly abandoned my "official" life, it would feel like I am defecting. Not from other people but from myself. I would have become too accustomed to suffering, struggle, and misery to be able to acclimatize to another life. Because the trial leads to greater purification. (*JHB*, 230)

At this point, much like Hillesum, Berr declares that what she calls "the trial" is a part of a psychological as well as a spiritual development that she wouldn't give up even if she had the choice:

Isn't all the above just like a newspaper article? Is it not an insult to unspeakable suffering of all these individual souls, each person with his or hers, to speak of them as if for a news article? Who can ever say what each person's suffering has been? The only truthful report worthy of being written down would be one that included the full stories of every individual deportee. (*JHB*, 259–60)

Further on she writes,

Because we are so isolated, our special suffering creates a barrier between us and everyone else, and as a result our experience has become incommunicable, without precedent and without connection to any other experience of the world. Afterward this impression will fade and vanish, because people will know. But it must never be forgotten that while it was happening, the human beings who suffered all these tortures were completely separated from people who did not know about them, that the great law of Christ saying that all men are brothers and all should share and relieve the suffering of their fellow men was ignored. (*JHB*, 261)

In these last paragraphs of her diary Berr touches on the huge question of one's ability to represent trauma while lacking a common language with those who have not experienced the same fate (and maybe even with those who have). She touches on the fact that suffering isolates those who suffer, leaving them not only outside human solidarity but also outside themselves.

From the Inner Witness to the Lyricism of the Mind

Survivors of trauma live through complex relations between “being a victim” and “becoming a witness.” While it may seem obvious that a victim constitutes the most reliable witness, since he or she has the most vivid proximity to the event at stake, this is far from the truth. In fact, not only are the interrelations between being a victim and becoming a witness far from self-evident but being a victim often annihilates the ability to actually bear witness. The concept of the “inner witness” relates to an inner mechanism that develops early in childhood in response to a reasonable experience of helplessness and in the face of a sufficient experience of a third, whether concrete or imaginary, who is internalized as an inner observer. This is the mechanism that enables to simultaneously experience and reflect on one's experience and, in the context of adult trauma, it is what makes possible the simultaneous documentation of facts and extraction of meaning. The function of the inner witness, which is based on the crucial integration of the “experiencing I” and the “narrating I,” or of “the position of the victim” and “the position of the witness,” is actually a spe-

cific derivative of another inner mechanism—that of the “lyrical dimension of mental space.”

The lyrical dimension of mental space is the mental apparatus in charge of the integration of two experiential/perceptual modes: the continuous mode, which perceives the world as predictable, explainable, and logical, and the emergent mode, which experiences the world as unpredictable, inexplicable, and constantly changing. The integration of these two modes of experience, which Wilfred Bion originally identified as constituting the container/contained interaction within every personality, yields the capacity to presuppose constancy and continuity on the one hand and to tolerate severe deviations from that constancy and continuity without losing one’s sense of identity on the other hand.¹⁷ Although the original definition of the lyrical dimension of the mind had nothing to do with trauma and its derivatives, it is easy to trace the crucial role of the integration it is in charge of in the capacity to cope with traumatic deviations from constancy and logic. One of the lyrical dimension’s expressions is the ability to transcend the actual biography to reach a possible one.¹⁸ Such a capacity to transcend one’s actual existence and reach a spiritual one manifests itself throughout the diaries of both Etty Hillesum and Hélène Berr. In what way, then, is the function of the inner witness a derivative of the lyricism of the mind? Both the lyrical dimension of the mind and the inner function of the witness are based on the capacity to shift between psychic states. In the case of the lyrical dimension the shift is between the continuous state (in which the world is perceived as constant and predictable) and the emergent state (in which the world is experienced as constantly changing), while in the case of the inner function of the witness the shift is from the position of the victim (which joins the traumatic Real) to the position of the witness (which adopts a reflective point of view). Bearing witness is not merely about the creation of a historical and biographical continuum. It rather concerns the capacity to extract meaning from those biographical facts, using them to reach an understanding that is beyond the actual catastrophe. A rich testimonial narrative not only traces the traumatic personal biography but through it also establishes a sort of “biography of trauma” in general. In Hélène Berr’s words, testimony is an attempt to create a narrative that “includes the full story of every individual” (*JHB*, 260), not in the sense of supplying a historically exhaustive re-

port but in the sense of creating a narrative that can transmit the general essence of suffering without losing its singular expressions.

In “On Not Being Able to Dream” Thomas Ogden quotes Wilfred Bion, who claimed that the opposite of a bad dream (a nightmare) is not a good dream but an undreamable dream, a dream that cannot be digested, remembered or forgotten, kept secret or communicated; a dream that can be evacuated only through psychotic fragmentation or suicide.¹⁹ In a different but complementary context, James Grotstein divides the function of dreaming (symbolizing thinking in general) into three interrelated elements: “the dreamer who dreams the dream,” “the dreamer who understands the dream,” and “the dreamer who makes the dream understandable.”²⁰ If “the dreamer who dreams the dream” is equivalent to the “experiencing I” that joins the traumatic Real, then “the dreamer who understands the dream” is the inner container of catastrophe. But the most important function in the context of this article is the third function, “the dreamer who makes the dream understandable.” This is the inner faculty that actually makes the dream (the raw experience) available for containment and narration. This is the inner analyst, the inner “Joseph,” the only inner force that can make the catastrophic experience available for memory and representation. Etty Hillesum’s and Hélène Berr’s diaries illustrate the lyrical dimension of the mind by manifesting an impressive testimonial movement between the position of the victim and the position of the witness as well as between private and collective meaning. As such, they constitute two singular attempts at turning trauma, the undreamable dream, into a dream that can be both dreamt and remembered.

Notes

1. Dana Amir, “The Inner Witness,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 93 (2012): 879–96.

2. Amir, “Inner Witness.”

3. Dori Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn, “Knowing and Not Knowing Massive Psychic Trauma: Forms of Traumatic Memory,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 74 (1993): 287–302; Marion Olinier, “External Reality: The Elusive Dimensions of Psychoanalysis,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 65 (1996): 267–300.

4. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

5. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, *Traumatic*

Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society (New York: Guilford Press, 1996).

6. Richard Moore quoted in Dori Laub, "Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 41 (2005): 307–26.

7. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

8. Soshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 93.

9. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 69.

10. Amir, "Inner Witness."

11. Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, *Word and Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 239–59.

12. Dana Amir, *Cleft Tongue: The Language of Psychic Structures* (London: Karnac Books, 2014).

13. Amir, "Inner Witness."

14. Etty Hillesum, "An Interrupted Life" and "Letters from Westerbork" (New York: Holt, 1996). Further references will be given in the text as *IL*.

15. Hélène Berr, *The Journal of Hélène Berr*, trans. David Bellos (New York: Weinstein Books, 2008). Further references will be given in the text as *JHB*.

16. Amir, "Inner Witness"; Dana Amir, *On the Lyricism of the Mind* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

17. Wilfred R. Bion, "Container and Contained Transformed," in *Attention and Interpretation* (London: Karnac Books, 1984).

18. Amihud Gilead, *Saving Possibilities: A Study in Philosophical Psychology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

19. Wilfred R. Bion quoted in Thomas H. Ogden, "On Not Being Able to Dream," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 84 (2003): 17–30.

20. James S. Grotstein, *Who Is the Dreamer, Who Dreams the Dream?* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 2000).