

At the origins of rhetoric (even in Cicero's work), there is a hatred and a politics of exclusion that troubles "our" rhetorical tradition. Indeed, the concept of ethos is even more "troubled" and evocative than Bernard-Donals' thoroughgoing analysis indicates—the "elusiveness of the traumatic experience," in his words, embracing as well the complex elusiveness of the otherwise brave tradition that we in rhetoric call our own.¹

*Governor's State University
University Park, Illinois*

Notes

1. I want to thank Roger W. Gilman, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Northeastern Illinois University, for his comments on this essay, which are based, in part, on his manuscript in progress concerning the moral theory of Abraham. My thanks as well to Rabbi Gary Gerson of Oak Park Temple B'nai Abraham Zion in Oak Park, Illinois, for several useful telephone conversations.

Works Cited

- Alter, Robert, and Frank Kermode. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987.
- Bernard-Donals, Michael. "Ethos, Witness, and Holocaust 'Testimony': The Rhetoric of *Fragments*." *JAC* 20 (2000): 565-82.
- Boman, Thorleif. *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*. New York: Norton, 1970.
- Elsom, Helen. "The New Testament and Greco-Roman Writing." Alter and Kermode, 561-78.
- Ozick, Cynthia. "Who Owns Anne Frank?" *Quarrel and Quandary*. New York: Knopf, 2000. 74-102.
- Tcherikover, Victor. *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1959.

* * *

Rhetorical Criticism, Holocaust Studies, and the Problem of Ethos

David Beard

In "Ethos, Witness, and Holocaust 'Testimony'" (hereafter "Ethos"), Michael Bernard-Donals makes moves that are both critical and theoretical. As a rhetorical critic, Bernard-Donals reevaluates the contested Holocaust document *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, written by Binjamin Wilkomirski. (As readers may recall, Wilkomirski's memoir has been called into question by critics who claim that he did not witness the Holocaust atrocities he claims to have witnessed.) As a rhetorical theorist, Bernard-Donals advances a redefinition of the concept of ethos that he hopes will allow a new critical approach to both *Fragments* and to the larger body of Holocaust literature. In my view, Bernard-Donals' concept of ethos has troubling implications both for Holocaust studies and for rhetorical studies. I will address these implications here and offer what I think is a more productive avenue for the rhetorical criticism of Holocaust literature.

Implications for Rhetorical Studies and Holocaust Studies

In my view, Bernard-Donals' indicative concept of ethos does not make a substantial contribution to rhetorical criticism of the Holocaust. In fact, I believe it restricts rhetorical criticism by circumventing some avenues of research. Bernard-Donals' reconception of ethos suffers from an unfortunate inflation of the term beyond its role as one of several available means of persuasion. He advances an argument that defines ethos as the overriding source of the rhetorical force of arguments in Holocaust studies. Ethos, as a key term, is insufficient to carry such epistemic weight.

Bernard-Donals begins with a standard account of ethos in the rhetorical tradition, claiming that ethos "has traditionally been understood as deriving from the text itself and, to some degree, from external factors such as the speaker's history or character" ("Ethos" 565). From this account, Bernard-Donals establishes an intrinsic/extrinsic split in the ways that we understand ethos, developed in part from James Baumlin's "rhetorical" and "philosophical" definitions of ethos. In Bernard-Donals' view, neither is adequate to fully theorize Holocaust testimony, specifically Wilkomirski's testimony.

Bernard-Donals traces the specific inadequacies of both concepts of ethos in analyzing Wilkomirski's Holocaust testimony. He claims that, measured in terms of extrinsic conceptions of ethos, Wilkomirski's work is susceptible to our ability to "impeach the character or the veracity of the speaker." He wants us to appraise his work independently of assaults on Wilkomirski's character. When judging *Fragments* by intrinsic criteria, Bernard-Donals worries that we are led astray by a text that "seems to agree with or at least corroborate" other Holocaust accounts ("Ethos" 565, 566). He wants an appraisal of *Fragments* that does not depend only on its consonance with other Holocaust accounts. Thus, Bernard-Donals offers us an alternative to the account of ethos that he has crafted around the split between "intrinsic/philosophical" and "extrinsic/rhetorical," advancing what he calls an "indicative" concept of ethos. He wants to shift ethos to some ground "behind the language of the discourse." In this new, indicative concept of ethos, the ethical or moral authority of the discourse "depends on the discourse's ability to move an audience to 'see' an issue or an event that exceeds language's ability to narrate it" ("Ethos" 566). Typically, that issue or event is trauma, and in an article related to his essay in *JAC*, Bernard-Donals and his coauthor Richard Glejzer describe texts like Wilkomirski's in terms of "language destroyed by trauma" ("Between" 13). The audience is to attend not to the historical events represented in the text, but to "the trauma that destroys it" ("Between" 19). In this understanding of language and trauma, the "indicative ethos" of a text resides in the text's ability to indicate the trauma that the text cannot represent. But if we understand ethos as deriving from the text's ability to indicate an event rather than its ability to reproduce it in the name of history—if we see ethos as originating with a speaker on whose soul the event is written (if not one who can articulate it mimetically)—then we have to look at the excessive effect of the testimony in order to understand its authority. ("Ethos" 571) Bernard-Donals links this indicative notion of ethos to a complicated set of theoretical discourses, ranging from Plato's *Phaedrus* to Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. It is in the link to Caruth's work that Bernard-Donals makes the strongest contribution to rhetorical studies.

While Bernard-Donals' effort is a worthwhile attempt to bring rhetorical studies and trauma studies into productive dialogue, the result places too much epistemic pressure on the concept of ethos. By grounding an argument's persuasiveness in an ethos that draws strength from a text's *inability* to represent an event, this redefined, indicative notion of ethos becomes the primary and analytically unassailable ground for an

argument's persuasiveness. Ethos moves from being an available means of persuasion to being *the* unassailable epistemological foundation of argument. When he claims that "Wilkomirski's memoir does not so much call to mind the events which, if verifiable, could grant authority to the author," Bernard-Donals places the cart before the horse ("Ethos" 573). In using ethotic appeals as a means of persuasion, the rhetor does not hope that the events related in the discourse grant authority to the author. The rhetor's authority is intended to add credibility to the relation of events in the discourse. A redefined, indicative notion of ethos takes ethos out of the realm of the artistic proofs and places it in the realm of the inarguable ideal.

In the end, Bernard-Donals' notion of indicative ethos is intended primarily to grant Wilkomirski's narrative a protected status, to craft a theoretical shield that would protect Wilkomirski and his text from the work of historians reconstructing the actual events of the Holocaust. Bernard-Donals believes that although Wilkomirski's authority has been "seriously undermined, the book's status as a testament to witness is thus far unimpeached"—a status his own redefinition of ethos is designed to maintain ("Ethos" 569). Contrary to Bernard-Donals' efforts, however, ethos was not intended to make a text impervious to criticism; it was not intended to carry the full epistemic weight of a Holocaust memoir. And Bernard-Donals' attempt to revise the concept in this fashion does not expand the rhetorical critic's toolkit with the addition of a new critical term. Instead, it actually restricts the possibility for rhetorical work by declaring some texts impervious to critical analysis.

More specifically, Bernard-Donals' revised concept of ethos validates a text that is probably not about the Holocaust at all. He admits that the trauma at the center of *Fragments* "may not be the historical events that we call the Shoah" (579). Bernard-Donals is not the only critic to celebrate Wilkomirski's work, regardless of whether it is based in individual, empirical experience of the historical events we call the Holocaust. As Harvey Peskin notes, Wilkomirski is celebrated for the effects his work has had on bringing public consciousness to recovered childhood memories of trauma regardless of whether his own recovered childhood trauma was that of the Holocaust.

Holocaust scholars, however, have resisted the appropriation of the Holocaust as a trope for understanding other traumas. For example, in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, James Young notes that critics of Holocaust literature condemn Sylvia Plath's allusions to the Holocaust because they feel a critical resistance to "the movement between a

Holocaust icon and a personal state of mind” (131). Celebration of Wilkomirski’s work, if it is not the product of a Holocaust survivor, amounts to celebration of the use of a Holocaust icon to express a personal state of mind. Following these critics, I too must ask whether we want such a recuperation of the Holocaust as a trope for other traumas, and whether we can afford to admit into the rhetorical tradition a retheorized concept of ethos that grounds such a recuperation. The answer to both questions, I think, is no. In what follows, I propose more traditional avenues of rhetorical criticism rooted in ethos as a means of exploring the texts that Bernard-Donals wishes to analyze.

An Alternative Approach to the Problem of Ethos

Rather than redefine ethos with the kind of overwhelming epistemic power that Bernard-Donals would attribute to it, we should recall that argument based on ethotic appeal (a species of argument *ad verecundiam*) is simply an example of what Douglas Walton calls “presumptive and plausibilistic” reasoning. Walton indicates that arguers agree that if “the premises are true (or acceptable), then the conclusion does not follow deductively or inductively, but only as a reasonable presumption in given circumstances of a case, subject to retraction if those circumstances should change” (*Argumentation* 13). Generally speaking, arguments *ad verecundiam* depend, as Walton puts it, on “appeal to reverence or veneration of ‘great names’”—or, more simply, appeal to authority (*Appeal* 64). If the circumstances that support the veneration of authority shift, the argument *ad verecundiam* loses presumption and thus becomes unpersuasive. For example, Wilkomirski claims that he is a Holocaust survivor; through this appeal to authority, he leads audiences to accept his narrative as reasonable. The conclusion—that the events narrated by Wilkomirski happened more or less as he depicts them—is provisionally drawn, based on “a weight of presumption as supporting a tentative conclusion” (*Ad Hominem* 201). An appeal to authority as a Holocaust survivor gives Wilkomirski “presumption,” while shifting the burden of proof (the responsibility to prove his claims false) to those who would argue against him.

In my view, Wilkomirski’s critics should reevaluate *Fragments* by analyzing Wilkomirski’s argument *ad verecundiam* using Walton’s list of critical questions to guide the criticism of appeals to expert opinion. According to Walton, any *ad verecundiam* argument should be open to examination through these critical questions:

- How credible is E as an expert source? (expertise question)
- Is E an expert in the field that A is in? (field question)
- What did E assert that implies A? or Did D really assert A? (opinion question)
- Is E personally reliable as a source? (trustworthiness question)
- Is A consistent with what other experts assert? (consistency question)
- Is A’s assertion based on evidence? or Is A consistent with known evidence in D? (backup evidence question)

(see *Appeal* 223; *Argumentation* 65)

In assessing Wilkomirski’s testimony as an argument *ad verecundiam*, critics might identify a number of trouble spots. For example, Daniel Ganzfried (the journalist who first challenged whether Wilkomirski was ever in the camps) raises the fourth question (Is Wilkomirski trustworthy?), and finds that the answer is no—that Wilkomirski has not been honest with his readers (see Bernard-Donals, “Ethos” 568). By implication, Ganzfried also raises the first and second questions, as Wilkomirski’s credibility and field are drawn into doubt when his presence at the events he describes is called into question.

Most interestingly, scholars would seem to disagree about the sixth question, “Is A consistent with known evidence in D?” Historian Raul Hilberg finds Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* inconsistent with historical data about the Holocaust (see also Finkelstein 57-62). Others, including political scientist Daniel Goldhagen and Holocaust museum director Israel Gutman supported *Fragments*, noting as Bernard-Donals does that Wilkomirski’s memoir is consistent *not* with the writings of Holocaust historians (such as Christopher Browning and Hilberg), but with the Holocaust testimonials maintained at the Yale archive (see Finkelstein 57-62).

It is in these points of controversy that rhetorical studies finds its work. More specifically, in debates over Wilkomirski’s memoir, we find, on the one hand, arguments *ad verecundiam* supporting Wilkomirski’s testimony, and, on the other, we find authors such as Ganzfried, Hilberg, and Finkelstein engaging in arguments *ad hominem* designed to raise the questions of *ad verecundiam* argument. Walton calls this use of the *ad hominem* the “obverse of the *ad verecundiam*” and describes it as an attempt to “discredit some arguer’s pronouncements as biased or disoriented.” Walton claims that some types of *ad hominem* argument allege “that the accused is so deficient in knowledge, methodology, expertise, or requirements for rational thinking that he or she is not only not worth paying attention to, but is likely to be misleading or off the mark in any

pronouncements on the subject at issue" (*Arguer's* 79).

Walton identifies four types of *ad hominem* argument (see "Use"). Of these types of *ad hominem* arguments, two are most useful for understanding the ways that scholars might raise critical questions about Wilkomirski's argument *ad verecundiam*: the direct or abusive type and the circumstantial type. The direct or abusive *ad hominem* argument holds that "the respondent is a bad person, and that therefore his argument should not be accepted as being as plausible as it was before" ("Use" 182). When Finkelstein calls Wilkomirski "half-fruitcake, half-mountebank," he engages in abusive *ad hominem* of the type that Bernard-Donals sought to circumvent in his *JAC* essay (*Holocaust* 60). Circumstantial *ad hominem* argument is "always based on an allegation of inconsistency" ("Use" 182). When critics such as Hilberg and Ganzfried raise questions about whether Wilkomirski was ever truly in the camps, they are not simply impeaching his character. They are identifying an inconsistency between Wilkomirski's claims and historical data, between Wilkomirski's claims and Wilkomirski's own lived experiences and behaviors. When critics claim that Wilkomirski was a Swiss-born, non-Jewish child, they are identifying an argument *ad hominem* of the circumstantial type that forwards questions about Wilkomirski's expertise in the field by raising questions of inconsistency between what he has written and what activities he has engaged in.

This debate cannot be resolved simply. As Bernard-Donals' essay demonstrates, some scholars continue to advance claims on behalf of Wilkomirski, while others continue to denounce him. In part, the continued tension is a product of the multidisciplinary nature of Holocaust studies, and it is a situation that leads Hilberg to ask why "we have no decent quality control when it comes to evaluating Holocaust material for publication?" (qtd. in Finkelstein 60). The attempt by scholars such as Finkelstein to distinguish Holocaust "literature" from Holocaust "studies" only complicates the controversy, and lucky for those of us in rhetorical studies that it does!

Rhetorical criticism is at its best when embroiled in the study of controversy. Scholarly and popular debate over Wilkomirski's *Fragments* centers around the relative strengths of the *ad verecundiam* and the *ad hominem* arguments in the politically charged and intellectually fractured arena of Holocaust studies. This is a controversy that offers an ideal occasion for the work of rhetorical criticism. Ethotic argument *ad verecundiam*—as traditionally conceived and in tension with arguments *ad hominem*—opens a rich field for rhetorical studies in the analysis of

these conflicts. In fact, by retheorizing ethos in a way that makes Wilkomirski's text impervious to *ad hominem* arguments, Bernard-Donals robs rhetorical critics of a vital opportunity to analyze these two arguments in dynamic tension.

*University of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota*

Works Cited

- Bernard-Donals, Michael. "Ethos, Witness, and Holocaust 'Testimony': The Rhetoric of Fragments." *JAC* 20 (2000): 565-82.
- Bernard-Donals, Michael, and Richard Glejzer. "Between Witness and Testimony: Survivor Narratives and the Shoah." *College Literature* 27.2 (2000): 1-20.
- Browning, Christopher R. *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- . *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Finkelstein, Norman G. *The Holocaust Industry*. London: Verso, 2000.
- Finkelstein, Norman G., and Ruth Bettina Birn. *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth*. New York: Metropolitan, 1998.
- Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. New York: Holmes, 1985.
- Peskin, Harvey. "Holocaust Denial: A Sequel." *Nation* 19 Apr. 1999: 34-38.
- Walton, Douglas N. *Ad Hominem Arguments*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998.
- . *Appeal to Expert Opinion: Arguments from Authority*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997.

———. *Arguer's Position: A Pragmatic Study of Ad Hominem Attack, Criticism, Refutation, and Fallacy*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985.

———. *Argumentation Schemes for Presumptive Reasoning*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1995.

———. "Use of *Ad Hominem* Argument in Political Discourse: The Battalino Case from the Impeachment Trial of President Clinton." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36.4 (2000): 179-95.

Wilkomirski, Benjamin. *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. Trans. Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Schocken, 1996.

Young, James E. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.

* * *

"Blot Out the Memory of Amalek": A Reply

Michael Bernard-Donals

I'm grateful to Deborah Holdstein and David Beard for responding to my essay on ethos and Holocaust testimony. The responses point out some of the complexities involved when using the term *ethos* in connection with testimonies of the Shoah, complexities that are both political and ethical. Beard is right to see that the implications of a view of ethos that is connected to witnessing are troubling for Holocaust studies and for rhetoric itself. And Holdstein's response clarifies the stakes that are involved for a generation now more than fifty years removed from the disaster. I am reminded of how high they are this year by my eight-year old's question about the armed police officer stationed outside the door of our synagogue as we entered to recite the *Kol Nidre*, by the violence in Jerusalem, and by the cries of "death to Jews" that have been heard coming out of the mouths of stone-throwing men in Ramallah and those of demonstrators here at home. We must be careful about using terms such as *ethos*, or even *Holocaust* (from, ironically, the Greek for "burnt offering") without recognizing that their histories are contested not just through argument but often through violence.

I fear, however, that David Beard has missed my point. True, I'm putting a great deal of pressure on the idea of ethos (the word he uses is "inflates"), and it's true that by focusing on the authority of the author of a book like *Fragments* I'm taking a somewhat curious tack. But to say that I "champion" the author or the book is to misread my essay. Benjamin Wilkomirski (aka Bruno Dössekker) is certainly delusional or a fraud. That there may have been some motivating break or rupture in his experience—something that neither he nor we have access to except through what Shoshana Felman calls "precocious testimony"—that drove him to code it in terms of the Holocaust is an open question and quite problematic. Wilkomirski's text is hardly made "immune from critique" by the account of ethos that I propose in my essay. I would think that Daniel Ganzfried, Philip Gourevitch, Elena Lappin, and, most recently, Stefan Mächler have laid to rest any question about the historical veracity of the account. My point isn't to rescue *Fragments* as an historical document. It's to figure out why, regardless of its now-impeached status as a document or a memoir, it nonetheless provides readers a glimpse of a kernel of the historical "real"—something beyond representation that may not be the event of the Holocaust but may be "disastrous" in Blanchot's sense of the word. I think an indicative notion of ethos explains this phenomenon, and provides a way to link the study of ethos with questions of witnessing and of the Shoah more generally. I don't think, and I didn't claim, that such a theory rescues the text. In fact, I think it complicates our ability to see Holocaust testimonies as windows on the event, and this is all to the good: "reality is not a matter of the absolute eyewitness," as Jean-François Lyotard observes, but is instead a matter of testing what we see against our ability to say it (53). The historical record is just that—a record. It's no more or less transparent than are other records, including testimony. The documentary record may give us a way to conclude that *Fragments* isn't history, but it doesn't explain its effects.

And this is why I felt, and continue to feel, uneasy in my research on Holocaust testimony, memory, and trauma. As some commentators on the Wilkomirski affair have said, to suggest that false testimony may nonetheless be an effective instrument through which we may bear witness to the Shoah is to provide Holocaust deniers with one more way to doubt all testimonial evidence about what happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945. To conclude that there is, in the Wilkomirski "fraud," a traumatic kernel that may be connected somehow to the horrors inflicted on the victims of the Final Solution would seem to fly in the face not only of good taste but of human decency as well. Our jobs, as teachers and as righteous