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## "Blot Out the Memory of Amalek": A Reply

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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 My point isn't to rescue *Fragments* as an historical document.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

people, should be to honor the memories of the dead and to ensure that we recognize the destroyer Amalek in whatever guise he might return (Hitler, czar, anti-Semite, demagogue) and blot him from memory—in short (though this may not be the same thing), destroy him.

And, yet, this is precisely the problem: how do we do this? Let me recall two stories. The first was told to me several years ago by Sydney, my father-in-law. As an infantryman in Europe during World War II, Syd was shipped overseas quite late and he, along with his outfit, slowly traveled through the ruins of western Europe toward Germany. In one little village, he was on patrol when he came across a couple who immediately identified him as Jewish (he never said why), explained to him that they, too, were Jewish and had remained alive by hiding from the Germans. Panicked, Syd turned and tried to get away as quickly as he could. He finished the story by saying that he was and is mortified by his reaction, and that he wouldn't have recalled the incident at all had I not asked him, oddly enough, about *Schindler's List*. I'm struck by two things. His reaction to that couple—not unlike the reactions of many Americans and particularly American Jews to the Holocaust—was simply to avoid it. On finishing the story, Syd told me that what bothers him most about the public reception of *Schindler's List* is that many people believe that, through watching that film, they understand what the Holocaust was like. That reaction is the polar opposite of avoidance: give the event a name or a face—make it recognizable, like something you know (*noir*, horror, suspense; bittersweet but happy ending)—and cover over the horror of the event that you'd rather not confront. Yet, this strategy, like avoidance, prevents us from confronting the abyss of the events by filling it in with knowledge—with what we already know. We'll know Amalek when we see him coming because we've so thoroughly coded horror (or anti-Semitism or trauma) as "Holocaust." Both forms of avoidance rest on prior knowledge: the first keeps what one knows unchallenged by refusing to encounter the difference; the second refuses the difference by simply calling it something that makes it familiar. As was the case with my father-in-law, the horror itself (what was seen but not contained by language or knowledge) remains disruptive and leaves a mark.

The second story is the first mention of Amalek found in the portion of the Torah in Exodus called Beshallah. In it, the Jews—who've left Egypt and seen the Pharaoh's army destroyed by the hand of God—begin to complain: they don't know where they're going, they're hungry, and they're beginning to grow impatient with Moses. To make matters worse,

their flank is attacked by the Amalekites, who pick off the elderly, the young, and the weak. At the end of the portion, the Amalekites are defeated, and the Lord says to Moses: "Inscribe this in a document as a memorial, and read it aloud to Joshua: 'I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.' . . . The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages." In a traditional reading, this passage is understood to be God's imperative to Israel that they should always bear in mind what Amalek did to them so that they may, with God's help, blot him out in whatever incarnation and in whatever age. But the language of the passage is not quite so clear; in fact, it inscribes an ambivalent relation between memory and forgetfulness. In the command to Moses to inscribe as a memory in writing and then blot out the memory of Amalek, the same root, "to remember," is used both to command memory, writing, and its blotting out. In his commentary on the Torah, Kornelis Houtman notes that the Hebrew term for "blot out" means quite literally to erase, to unwrite. Thus, what is commanded is literally to remember to unremember, to create and inscribe a memory that at the same time blots out or unwrites what lies at the very core of the memory itself. This is precisely the point Cathy Caruth makes about the relation of traumatic memory to testimony: the event itself is blotted out, making testimony's relation to the event troubled at best and altogether tenuous at worst. Amalek doesn't stand as a warning to be ever vigilant to recognize Amalek again; this injunction warns about the impossibility of such recognition.

At the heart of any memory is a forgetting, the loss of the event that forms its core and the destructive force of that loss on any subsequent testimony; this is all the more true in the case of traumatic memory. It is this loss that complicates the project of recuperating the fact of the Holocaust through the memories of those who were there, and it lies at the heart of the problem of those testimonies that may not bear witness to the Shoah but provide evidence of some other trauma. This is why Wilkomirski's "memoir" is so problematic: there may be a traumatic kernel wrapped inside the narrative of destruction, but it's one to which neither we nor the writer have access, the historical record notwithstanding. That the elusiveness of this kernel should give succor to the deniers is a terrible result, but it is an unavoidable one. Instead of trying to avoid this problem, we should recognize it and in so doing find other and perhaps firmer ground on which to take issue with the deniers' lies.

It is the immemorial nature of witness that also makes the problem of ethos so vexing: there is embedded in the character of the witness a loss of the events about which she or he speaks, as there is embedded in the

term *ethos* a history that the term itself seems at pains to avoid. It is the void at the heart of memory that makes the tasks—of writing, of speaking about the Shoah—at once so urgent and so fraught. It means that while we desperately wish to anticipate the next Amalek so we can blot him out, there exists the likelihood that we will be mistaken and be outflanked by the actual disaster. But it also means that, as Deborah Holdstein and David Beard remind us, we've got our work cut out for us, and that there are rhetorical tools available—not just the concept of *ethos*—that may be useful, though they are also fraught. In part, our job is to examine how what people say squares with the historical or political ground on which they stand; in part, it is to call out liars when we recognize them. But our job also involves understanding why—even through the most reasonable accounting of the rhetorical enterprise—some texts have effects that seem to defy reason. Part of our job also involves understanding the ways in which writing isn't just representative or mimetic, but is indicative of aspects of our language and of our being that are both much less and a great deal more than what we would readily acknowledge.

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