"Like an Echo Without a Source": Subjectivity as Witnessing and the Holocaust Narrative

by Dorota Glowacka

[W]e are all witnesses and we are all messengers. He who listens to a witness, he in turn becomes witness and messenger.[1]
—Elie Wiesel

We have to remember that Echo produces the possibility of a cure against the grain of her intention, and, even, finally, uncoupled from intention.[2]
—Gayatri Spivak

In a short, poetic reflection "Nocturnal Variation on a Theme," from the volume *Traces,* Ida Fink, an Israeli writer and Holocaust survivor, describes a former camp inmate's recurrent dream: "He was freed from the camp and passed through the gate with the sign Arbeit Macht Frei. He was overcome by a wave of happiness unlike any he had ever known" (109). Like a refrain, this description of the longed-for moment of liberation is repeated three times. In each vignette, however, the prisoner's march toward a new life turns out to be only a detour, before a series of uncanny events leads him back to Auschwitz.[3] While evoking a traumatic event, signaled by the nightmare, the author also gives testimony to a larger "truth" about the Holocaust narrative as witness to the events: it never can be told only once.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben reminds us that numerous survivors of the Holocaust have testified that the imperative to bear witness was their sole reason for survival. Perhaps one of the more compelling examples of survival by witnessing is the testimony of Filip Müller, a member of *Sondercommando* in Auschwitz, as it was captured by Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah*. In one episode, Müller describes his encounter with the women from his hometown, who were among the victims he was delivering to the gas chamber. When he decided to die with them, the women implored him to save himself for the sake of telling their story. Müller recalls their words: "You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us."[4] In a literal sense, he derives his existence from the necessity to be a witness.

The main theoretical framework of the following engagement with the Holocaust narrative is Levinas's ethical reformulation of subjectivity in terms of witnessing and of what the philosopher calls, in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence,* "substitution." In order to elucidate the ethical meaning of substitution, I first will attend to the notion of recurrence, defined by Levinas as the movement of return to oneself in infinite repetition. I subsequently will refer to ethical subjectivity as "iterable subjectivity" and describe it as the structure of witnessing.[5]

It is interesting that a number of contemporary thinkers—not necessarily directly influenced by Levinas—recently have attempted to redraw the parameters of subjectivity in terms of witnessing. In very different ways, authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Kelly Oliver, and Dominick LaCapra have offered this new model of subjectivity as a necessary corrective to modern, universalizing formulations of subjectivity on the one hand and the poststructuralist proclamations of the subject's demise on the other. Feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver, for example, agrees with Levinas that we need to rethink subjectivity in light of ethics, as "response-ability, or response to address" (5).[6] Agamben describes his entire philosophical project as "a kind of per-

petual commentary on testimony" (13). In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, he arrives at the general definition of subjectivity that, at least at first glance, approximates Levinas's own: becoming a subject is synonymous with bearing witness. LaCapra argues for a participatory model of researching history, whereby the historian integrates empathy and the work of memory into the task of establishing the truth of historical facts. In other words, the historian's relation to history is that of bearing witness. Although he refrained from the idiom of subjectivity, Jean-François Lyotard elaborated his theory of the differend in terms of bearing witness to the occurrence of the preontological question *Is it happening?* and posited that this was the main task and obligation of thought today.[7]

The confines of this paper do not allow for a detailed analysis of the excellent works mentioned above; let me comment, however, that I find it fascinating—and by no means self-evident—that Agamben, Oliver, and LaCapra all acknowledge their debt to Dori Laub's seminal thesis about the "collapse of witnessing" and Shoshana Felman's corollary reference to the Shoah as "an event without witnesses," developed in their ground-breaking study on testimony.[8] Subsequently, the three authors take written Holocaust narratives or videotaped oral testimonies as their point of departure. Agamben, for example, derives his notion of subjectivity as witnessing from the necessity to speak for the *Muselmann*, that unique product of the camps about whom Primo Levi famously wrote that they are "non-men . . . the divine spark dead within them: one hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death" (1993, 90). Let us recall that, also drawing on Holocaust testimonies, Lyotard developed his theory of the differend as a refutation of Robert Fourisson's revisionist theses about the gas chambers, the argument to which Agamben returns in his own book.

What gives impetus to the new way of approaching the question of the subject and why is it happening at this particular moment? In psychoanalytic terms, bearing witness to trauma can take place only belatedly. Moreover, as in the case of the Holocaust, a meaningful context in which testimonials could be received has unfolded many years after the events, outside their immediate frame of reference. Shortly after the Holocaust, it was possible for writers such as Theodor Adorno, Jean Améry, or Tadeusz Borowski to note that the catastrophe had resulted in the collapse of mainstay ethical values and epistemological concepts. Yet it is by deferral—in the context of contemporary catastrophes and emergent new cultural dominants—that philosophy can articulate the implications of this historical trauma, of which the necessity to overhaul the parameters of subjectivity is perhaps a "symptom." Agamben suggests that the questions of contemporary relevance of survivors' testimonies can arise only after the factual "truth" of the Holocaust has been established (11).[9] I would like to redirect Agamben's inquiry and ask the following question: is the Holocaust narrative simply an example par excellence of the new notion of subjectivity, with a Holocaust survivor as the figure of paradigmatic witness, or is the emergence of the amorphous genre of Holocaust *témoignage*, whether in its literary guise or in the form of videotaped accounts, what has made it both possible and necessary to rethink the subject in terms of witnessing?

What initially prompted my research was the dual epigraph of Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. It reads, in the English translation: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by National Socialists, and of millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism." The dedication in Hebrew, however, evokes Levinas's loved ones who had been murdered by the Nazis: "To the memory of the soul of my father and teacher, Rabbi Yehiel, son of Rabbi Abraham Ha'Levi; my mother and teacher, Deborah, daughter of Rabbi Moshe; my brother Dov, son of Rabbi Yehiel Ha'Levi and Aminadab, son of Rabbi Yehiel Ha'Levi; my father-in-law Rabbi Shmuel, son of Rabbi Gershom Ha'Levi; and my mother-in-law, Malka, daughter of Rabbi Haiim. May their souls be preserved in the bond of life."[10] The doubling of the dedication and the disjunction between a more general statement in French and its intimate, untranslated Hebrew equivalent is even more significant if we consider that the Shoah is seldom an explicit subject of Levinas's philosophical reflection. The motivation for this reticence is, as Levinas writes in "Loving the Torah More Than God," that "I refuse to offer up

the ultimate passion as a spectacle and to use these inhuman screams to create a halo for myself as either author or director. The cries are inextinguishable; they echo and echo across eternity. What we must do is listen to the thought they contain" (81).[11] In light of the epigraph to *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas's own reflection on the constitution of the ethical subject as a witness to the existence of another can be reread as—although by no means reduced to—an act of witnessing and a prayer, reminiscent of Elie Wiesel's repeated recitation, in both his written works and his public appearances, of "Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabba," the first lines of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, in which the divine name is glorified.[12]

Asked whether he had not said enough about the horror that is now many years in the past, Wiesel retorted: "Even if I wrote on nothing else, it would never be enough" (1995, 333). Responding to Wiesel's proclamation of the never-ending task of witnessing and moved by a sense of urgency it exudes, I would like to attend to the movement of repetition in the construction of the Holocaust narrative and listen to the reverberation of the witnessing voice.

If we peruse the canon of Holocaust literature, we notice that a number of writers—such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Imre Kertesz, to cite the most familiar names—initially produced autobiographical accounts of their "survival in Auschwitz" and then carried on with works that, although not directly on the subject of the Holocaust, have been "variations on a theme."[13] Although Primo Levi's feat of surviving Auschwitz was put to doubt by his suicide in 1987, the other two writers went on to achieve the status of emblematic survivors. Both were awarded the Nobel Prize: in the case of Wiesel, he received the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, while Kertesz received the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature. There exist many lesser-known, striking examples of literary "repetition compulsion" in Holocaust narratives. A remarkable example is the work of Isabella Leitner, a survivor from Hungary now living in the United States. In 1978 she published *Fragments of Isabella*, an account of her ordeals in the camps, based on the notes she had jotted down shortly after the liberation. Later, with the help of her husband Irving Leitner, she revised her initial text several times, in each subsequent version adding, rearranging, and editing her "fragments."[14]

These repeated yet always different literary excursions into the traumatic past draw attention to the continuous, open-ended nature of witnessing, precluding the understanding of testimony in terms of archival safe-keeping of memory. I also will posit that this insistent movement of return, performed as a response to the imperative "Remember!," establishes a recollecting subject as witness.

Levinas defines ethics as the calling into question of the same by the other, whereby my identity arises from the impossibility of escaping ethical assignation. The ethical subject, primordially indebted to another, thus appears prior to the autonomous subject that always remains safely anchored in its sense of self-sameness. Levinas frequently evokes the myth of Odysseus in order to describe the subject whose departures from itself already are animated by the goal of a safe return. It is mediated through the ideal principle that, while engulfing its singularity, offers indemnity against the risk of remaining adrift. To the Odyssean adventure, Levinas juxtaposes the myth of Abraham, who, after his ordeal at Mount Moriah, departs for an unknown land. Like Abraham, the ethical self forsakes its ancestral home.[15] As Levinas writes in "Substitution," recurrence—the repeated movement of withdrawing into oneself, constitutive of subjectivity, disallows coincidence with oneself, evicting the subject from the core of its own unity and breaching the plenitude of its self-presence. This iterable mis-encounter with oneself is precipitated by the ethical truth that, rather than originating in the self, recurrence is "an exigency coming from the other over and above the active dimension of my powers" (2000,179). Predicated on the prior moment of ethical obligation, recurrence is not a matter of volition or ability (of the "I can"). In the ethical relation, the self is never at rest in its identity but remains in exile, "outside the nucleus of my substantiality" (1998, 142), in the affective state of vigilant disquietude. The self is, first and foremost, oneself-for-the-other since prior to having ventured outside itself, it already has returned from the outside, from the absolute exteriority that it cannot inhabit. The self returns to itself in identity proper to cognition and memory only because recurrence, as initiated by the

other whom I cannot appropriate, is prior to departure.

Since iterability—the movement of return from the non-place of the ethical encounter—is the function of the ethical relation, the hypostasis of the I as a subject is already testimony to the existence of another: "The subject, in which the other is the same, insomuch as the same is for the other, bears witness to it" (1998, 146). The ethical subject is a witness before it assumes the task of witnessing, that is, before intentionality. It bears witness to the source of its own obligation, the source that is absolutely external and cannot be derived from consciousness. Although the phenomenological subject is anchored in the temporal continuum through memory and intentionality, which are "the content" of its selfhood, the subject as witness is the addressee of a command arriving from the other, who cannot be seized in reminiscence. Temporality as such must therefore be reconceived starting from the time of the other, as the recurrent movement of departure and return from the (non)place of alterity.

As a witness to the other, the subject is always nonsynchroneous with what it bears witness to. It is primordially transcended by the diachrony of the other that signals, through the gratuitous lapse of time, "a past more ancient than every representable origin, a pre-original and anarchical passed" (9). The subject as witness returns from the past, which cannot be represented as *arche* and synthesized in the present; it lags "already in the past behind which the present delays, over and beyond the now which this exteriority disturbs and obsesses" (100).

To convey the sense of the subject's being touched by the unpresentable exteriority from which the demand to bear witness issues, Levinas resorts to the metaphorical figure of the echo. The self, writes Levinas, is like a sound "that would resound in its own echo" (103), endlessly repeating after him who had called upon it in the immemorial past. The echo is Levinas's paramount figure of speech through which he attempts to convey the sense of iterable subjectivity. The echo reverberates in the witness's speech, rippling across the surface of his or her words. It is a trope for what Levinas calls Saying, that is, the ethical essence of language as "response-ability," antecedent to communication. Levinas underscores the iterable nature of Saying: "There is then an iteration of Saying, which is . . . a 'here I am' as the origin of language . . . bearing witness regardless of the later destiny of the said" (2000, 198). Already transmuted into echo, the self cannot refuse to respond, repeating after the voice whose source remains unknown. The "echoing" speech foregrounds its status as an address to the other, who is not only an interlocutor but also the source of the witness's language. As Gayatri Spivak explains, in her brilliant reflection on Ovid's representation of Echo, this mythical figure—who is condemned to express herself through the repetition of another's words and who thus acts as a foil to Narcissus's desire for self-knowledge—is an excellent trope for "the (un)intending subject of ethics [through which] we are allowed to understand the mysterious responsibility of ethics that its subject cannot comprehend" (190).

At the same time, to articulate the self figuratively as echo is to designate it as the movement of infinite repetition, of insistent and unstoppable return of the other's voice, even against the self's will. In this movement, the self is simultaneously proclaimed and repeatedly desubstantiated. Its speech is evacuated of positive content and becomes echolalia—the reverberation of the infinitely distant sound, "uncoupled from intention." As the echo, the self lends its voice to another, putting itself in his or her place. It is in the idea that the ethical subject is responsible to the point of substitution that Levinas's own articulation of subjectivity is most dramatic. The self's relationship with itself is declared to be "the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility that answers for the faults and misfortunes of others"(Levinas 1998, 10). This heteronomous self-relation entails that not only is the self called upon to answer before the other and for the other's deeds, but it also holds itself accountable for the other's responsibility.

As in the case of Filip Müller's testimony,[16] the Holocaust narrative is a site where the movement of substitution is occurring in a paramount fashion. Insofar as one is a witness, he or she assumes the impossible position of the victim, entering the unimaginable place where speech ceases, in order to bring that silence to speech. In volume two of his memoirs, Elie Wiesel writes: "Long ago, over there, far from the living, we told ourselves that . . .

the one among us who would survive would testify for all of us. He would do nothing else." The witness is also motivated by an obligation to lend his voice and his talent as a storyteller to the other survivors who find it difficult to speak. In that sense, as Primo Levi has noted, the survivors are never true witnesses since they cannot testify to the limit experience at which only those who were permanently silenced had arrived. The survivor is already a surrogate witness, speaking "in their stead, by proxy," borrowing the authority to speak from the dead (1988, 84).

Toward the end of *Night*, Wiesel recalls the events leading to his father's death. Wiesel's father, who was by his side and sustained him throughout the ordeal of the camps, falls ill during the death march and, one night, simply disappears from his bunk. Wiesel writes, in sorrow, "His last word was my name. A summons to which I did not respond" (1982, 106). Wiesel's recounting of that unwitnessed event also carries the trace of an even deeper, unspeakable wound: that of the death of his mother and his little sister Tzipora, whom he saw for the last time on the ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Yet, this is the summons to which the writer is still responding, and the impossibility to be indifferent to that call is the meaning of the witness's "speaking by proxy." Isabella Leitner has dramatized the substitutive displacement of the witness's voice by writing her "fragments" in the second person, as an address to her dead loved ones. When she asks, "I saw the flames. I heard the shrieks. Is that the way you died, Potyo? Is that the way?" (32), this question is not a mere figure of speech but an intimate address to her little sister. The writer's promises given to her dead mother are just as immediate: "I will tell them [Leitner's two sons] to make what is good in all of us their religion, as it was yours, Mother, and then you will always be alive. . . . Mother, I will keep you alive" (103).

The sense of undeclinable duty, however, issues not only from the survivor's being a literal porte-parole for another but also from an even more fundamental sense of having taken another's place. Levi asks: "Are you ashamed because you are alive in place of another? And in particular, of a man more generous, more sensitive, more useful, wiser, worthier of living than you?" (1988, 81). The concentration camp is then the most extreme example of Levinas's critique of Heidegger's Dasein: its "being there" always amounts to taking up someone else's place under the sun, of literally having lived in his or her stead.

In order to examine the way in which the Holocaust narrative mobilizes the notion of substitution, I will look briefly at two novels, Wiesel's *The Gates of the Forest*, written in 1964, and Kertesz's *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (1990). In Wiesel's novel, the main character, Gregor (an assumed name), is hiding in a cave in the forest, eluding a massive manhunt. One night, a stranger arrives at the hideout, claiming that he has forgotten his name. He responds with laughter to all of Gregor's queries. Under these circumstances, Gregor, who himself has been stripped of everything, offers the stranger the gift of his Jewish name—Gavriel. The novel opens with the following sentence: "He had no name, so he gave him his own. As a loan, as a gift, what did it matter? In the time of war every word is as good as the next. A man possesses only what he gives away" (3). It seems that Gregor's gesture of dispossessing himself of his real name makes it possible for the narrative to commence. As if in consequence of receiving the gift, the stranger begins to tell his story: unable to leave, Gregor has to listen to the horrifying account told by him who now bears his name. Gavriel commands Gregor, "You must learn to listen. Listening gives you the key" (44). Such listening, in which the listener is a prisoner of the tale, is what precedes and what will bring about the witness's own speech. When the story is finally told, the stranger surrenders himself to the Germans, who believe they have captured Gregor. Gregor survives the war first by slipping into the role of a deaf-and-dumb village idiot and then by living out what would have been Gavriel's life with a group of Jewish partisans.

Levinas contends, in the section "Witness and Language" in *Otherwise Than Being*, that the subjectivity of the subject is "the possibility of being the author of what has been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am an author" (148). To an unparalleled degree, the author of the Holocaust narrative rescinds his autonomous right to the authorship of his story. Insofar as the witness substi-

tutes for another, he always lends his true name to the stranger. The stranger is then the locus of the witness's identity, now evacuated outside itself, while the name that the witness carries and that designates him or her is always only an alias. The transposition of the name in witnessing evokes Levinas's notion that, in its identity as a being, the self is only a mask: "It bears its name as a borrowed name, a pseudonym, a pronoun" (106). On the other hand, this gesture of putting oneself in place of the stranger constitutes the subject as witness and enables the passage from the absolute impossibility of speech to the actuality of testimony. As conveyed poetically in Levinas's metaphor of the echo, the indisputable fact of the existence of the other can be manifested only in the witness's voice. This fact also means that the imperative to speak must be obeyed, and it is in this sense that ethical responsibility amounts to "the impossibility of being silent, the scandal of sincerity" (143). Witnessing is an event of spectral revisitation unhinged from time, the incision in chronologies recorded by history, and the dispersion of language beyond the said. Yet, as always already repetition, it also precipitates the witness's entrance into the continuum of time and space, into the actuality of speech and writing.

The folding back upon itself in recurrence is already a persecution by the other who holds the self hostage and puts into question the meaning of individual existence as "for-itself." Levinas writes: "It is therefore necessary that there be in the egoity of the I the risk of a nonsense, a madness" (2000, 20). In *God, Time, and Death*, Levinas locates the core of that "nonsense" in the scandalous fact of the other's death; it makes "no sense" because it radically cancels the possibility of response. The madness of absolute no-response, located in the very core of meaning, consigns the self to the other. In "Useless Suffering," one of the few texts where he makes an explicit reference to Nazi atrocities, Levinas also focuses on the "no-sense" of the other's pain and postulates that the self's own suffering and death can acquire meaning only starting from the suffering of someone else. For Levinas, that madness at the center of signification has to be affirmed as the nexus of subjectivity, affecting the self in its very identity, since it marks the limit of speech as the vehicle of meaningfulness (94). Thus recurrence, the movement of return from "beyond essence," is set in motion by the nonsense of the other's death, and the exteriority from which the witnessing subject returns is the unpresentable place of that death. The subject's temporality is then the function of the awakening of the same by the other in the light of the other's death and suffering. The other's absolute "no-response" commands response and means that the witness, with the "culpability of a survivor," is turned toward "another source of meaning than the identity of the same with itself" (2000,12). The other is the incision in temporality; constituted as a witness to the existence of the other, the I is the reverberation of this preoriginal interval.

Again, the Holocaust narrative reveals this limit condition of witnessing—the "no-sense" of the other's suffering and death that initiates the movement through which the I posits itself as the subject. In its primordial manifestation as witness, always in the accusative and accountable for the other's choices, the subject is deposed from its sovereign position as the originator of logos. Prior to being an address, the witness's speech is already "a response to a non-thematizable provocation" (Levinas 1998, 12). Only in the voice of witnesses can history trace the evanescent passage of the other through the world: "Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this outside of being, this ex-ception to being" (6). The meaning of the witness's speech is therefore what Levinas calls obsession, that is, the self's being affected by the encounter with the other. Since the movement of repetition, constitutive of substitution, puts the subject out of phase with itself, its speech is also dissonant, animated by significations that it cannot derive from itself. Insofar as witnessing is primarily Saying, in which only the self's appointment by the other speaks, the words are devoid of sense and the witness's speech is obsessive.

A frequent symbolic inscription of Holocaust speech, emptied of meaning by the fact of the other's death, is the figure of a "madman," usually someone who miraculously has escaped execution and returned to warn the others.[17] A particularly haunting example, which was later immortalized by a Polish director Andrzej Wajda in his film *Korczak* (1990), is an episode in *Bread for the Departed*, a novel by Polish-Jewish writer Bogdan Wojdowski that describes the life and disappearance of the Warsaw ghetto. In the hours preceding the deporta-

tions, "a bellowing specter" is running through the streets, exclaiming incomprehensible words: "Brothers! They drive people naked into ditches and shoot them in the back. They fill in the pits and the blood flows over onto the fields. Like a watery swamp. The blood surfaces above the graves. The earth moves over those graves. . . . They have some kind of smoke. They have some kind of fire. They suffocate and they burn" (374). An indismissible *revenant*, the figure of a madman appears in almost all Wiesel's writings. The most memorable character in the writer's first narrative, *Night*, is Moshe the Beadle, a survivor of a mass execution who returns to his village to warn the Jews of Sighet. His stories are disbelieved and he is said to have lost his mind. In *The Gates of the Forest*, the madman reappears as the laughing stranger who claims that his name "has left him."

The tension in Wiesel's narratives arises from the fact that, ever since *Night*, his testimonials have been a struggle against Moshe the Beadle and at the same time a continuation of his irrefutable legacy. To write about the Holocaust is to say "here I am" to the unrelenting specter of Moshe, to be his hostage. It is significant that, before his lapse into "madness," Moshe was young Wiesel's teacher in the cabbala and introduced him to arcane knowledge. To testify to the Event, to be a witness, is to repeat Moshe's fate: it means to tell stories that are insane, to utter empty words that do not deliver meaning. Yet it also means to toil against language; to compose meaningful phrases, even if they continue to abscond into madness. The "mad" speech, which seems to be the only way our language can describe the words of the Holocaust witness, marks the chiasmus between the possibility and impossibility of speech. In *And the Sea Is Never Full,* Wiesel writes, "The mystical madmen of Sighet, the beggars, bearers of secrets, drawn to doom, they all appear in my fictional tales. But I am afraid to follow them too far, outside myself or deep within me" (5, emphasis added). The madman is the stranger-within-the-same, yet whose strangeness can never be absorbed and who perseveres as the sign of absolute exteriority whose trace is imprinted in the witness's speech. The madman is a paradigmatic survivor and, at the same time, a trope for "a modality not of knowing, but of obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition" (Levinas 1998, 87).

Obsessive words are the insignia of the narrator's halting monologue in Imre Kertesz's *Kaddish for the Child Not Born*, the novel that carries the paradox of substitution toward a new limit. The author was fifteen when he was deported to Auschwitz and, from there, to Buchenwald. Already in his first novel, *Fateless* (1975), he speaks of having lived a borrowed existence: "I, too, had lived out a given fate. It wasn't my fate, but I am the one who lived it to the end"(188). In *Kaddish*, the narrator's voice exudes a sense of homelessness, a survivor's endemic rental life that "I didn't quite live, and undeniably, this was not quite life; it was, rather, functioning, yes, surviving to be more precise" (45). The main character reflects on his failed marriage and on his career as a writer and translator. He confesses that he writes all the time because of the "stubborn duty" to write, although, unlike Wiesel, he cannot clearly articulate the meaning of this "duty": "I can't help it; if I write I remember, I have to remember even if I don't know why I have to. . . . I can't be silent about [my stories] because it is my duty, albeit I don't know why it's my duty, or more precisely why I feel it's my duty" (21, 34). The unavowed raison d'être of this rapid, confused monologue, however, is its unfolding as an address to a child "not born," whom the narrator has refused to beget "after Auschwitz." The text performs the rites of mourning for the child that could have been born and whose potential existence was annihilated by Auschwitz. The narrator chooses not to "multiply the survival of himself in descendants," which painfully contrasts with, for instance, Isabella Leitner's exhilaration at the birth of her two sons, whom she repeatedly calls her greatest victory over Hitler. The opening sentence of the narrator's confession is the announcement of this refusal: "No, I said immediately and forthwith, without hesitation and spontaneously" (1). This "screaming, howling 'No'" resounds throughout the book, at times becoming a painful, even nostalgic question of "Were you to be a dark-eyed little girl? With pale spots of scattered freckles around your little nose? Or a stubborn boy? With cheerful, hard eyes like blue-gray pebbles?" (22) What does it mean for the witness to speak in response to him or her who will not have been, whose nonexistence was begotten by Auschwitz?

In *Kaddish* the narrator views his existence through the lens of the unfulfilled potentiality of another's life, and the refrain "my life in the context of your potentiality" is repeated on almost every page of the short novel. The intrinsic cause that has undercut that potentiality is revealed through the other leitmotif reiterated throughout the monologue: the narrator's life has been nothing but "digging the grave in the air." Thus, the astonishing fact of the narrator's survival—that is, the unfulfilled possibility of his death at Auschwitz, the death that he continues to die—is inseparable from the unfulfilled potentiality of his child's birth. He qualifies his thesis as follows: "to view your non-existence in the context of the necessary and fundamental liquidation of my existence" (24). His existential reflection on Being-toward-death (now indelibly marked by the impossibility of his very possible death at Auschwitz) is tantamount with the Being-toward-"not being-born" of his child. The compulsion to write, to bury himself literally in his writing, is inseparable from the repetitious "digging the grave others had started for me in the clouds"; as the narrator says, "for the pen is my spade" (24).

Kaddish for a Child Not Born is also an erudite philosophical reflection, abounding with allusions to German writers and thinkers, most notably to Rilke, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger. The only famous name the narrator conspicuously passes over in silence is that of Paul Célan, a Holocaust survivor who committed suicide in 1970 and whose famous verses from the poem "Death Fugue" he quotes repeatedly: "How could I have explained to my wife that my pen was my spade? That my reason for writing was that I had to, and I had to because even then they whistled to me to dig deeper, to play death's tune darker, more sweetly? How could I be expected to perform work predicated on the future using the very same spade with which I must dig my grave into the clouds, the wind, into nothing?" (66).[18] Toward the end of the novel, the narrator's droning voice, his mad speech on Being-toward-death after Auschwitz, becomes that of a madman from Wojdowski's or Wiesel's tales: "Occasionally, like a drab weasel left over after a process of thorough extermination, I run through the city" (94). As if mourning over his own grave and the grave of his unborn child—which is always "the grave in the air" drifting from the chimneys in Auschwitz—the narrator ends with a prayer that evokes all the "drowned" of Primo Levi's narratives: "I may drown/Lord God/let me drown/forever, Amen" (95).

Yet, because it is an address delivered in the second person, his voice is ultimately, by Levi's own definition, that of the "saved" one. Undoubtedly, the narrative of *Kaddish* reinscribes the (non)experience of trauma, and its most powerful vehicle is the displaced repetition of Célan's refrain. With his pen turned spade, the narrator can only "dig up" words that instantaneously turn into ash. His inability to anchor himself in life, his "pristine homelessness," is caused by the fact that the only home he makes for himself is the unlocatable "grave in the air." And yet, this failure to assert the givenness of his existence after Auschwitz leads the narrator to the realization that his right to be must be considered in the light of another's potentiality for being; his address, then, is primarily a response to this exigency. The text unfolds as *_poch_* of the facts of his existence, stripping the narrator to the nudity of the address to another: he witnesses; therefore, he is. Bearing witness—to those buried in the grave in the air, to his own imminent death, and to the child not born—thus constitutes the mystery of his survival, delivering him into subjectivity. The announcement of another's annulled potentiality for being in face of his imminent and yet unfulfilled death is the enunciation of his subjective existence, of his "here I am." The narrator's supernumerary life, the miracle of *sur-vivre*, consists of his being-witness. In lending his voice to the child not born, the narrator transforms his "obsessive speech" into the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead that extols the divinity of the other. The witness's speech arises from the impossibility of speaking, but it is also—as Agamben insists—why the subject is always a witness, why it can speak for those who cannot speak: *"The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—that is, in his or her being a subject"* (158, italics in original). In a stark and unsparing manner, *Kaddish* brings out the complexity and difficulty of being a witness "after Auschwitz." It also throws into sharp relief the narratives that attempt to present the survivor's life in terms of redemptive closure; at the very least, it points to the hidden ruptures in those narratives.

The imperative "Remember!" issues from the time of the other, from the past that neither historiography nor individual memory can assemble and that haunts every testimony as obsessive and traumatizing exteriority. The compulsion to repeat, intrinsic in the Holocaust narrative, indicates that the subsequent retellings of the story do not assuage the need to testify, and the witness never can disburden herself of her task; on the contrary, she suffers the increasing demand to bear witness. In Levinas's terms, these retellings are marked by obsessive "insatiability." Paradoxically, the witness's responsibility is augmented the more she or he testifies; the debt is not dischargeable, and it grows with each repetition of the story. Wiesel summarizes this exigency by means of a succinct metaphor encrypted in the titles of the two volumes of his *Memoirs*: Volume one is called *All Rivers Flow to the Sea*, while the title of volume two is *The Sea Is Never Full*. Levinas writes: "The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am" (1998, 112). In that case, the infinite debt incurred by the Holocaust witness cannot be discharged not only because those who cannot speak for themselves are innumerable but also because the irreducibility of the ethical obligation—which produces subjectivity in the movement of recurrence—is the condition of the very possibility of witnessing.

What does it mean to testify to the events of the Holocaust? Perhaps the answer is that one can only become a witness, in the sense of giving testimony to traumatic events, because as a subject, one is always already a witness. To arrive into speech and to announce oneself as an "I" is already a pronouncement of the "Here I am"—that is, the subject's election in the movement of return and departure from the (non)place of the ethical encounter. Only because to be a subject means to be a witness is it possible to assume the concrete task of bearing witness and to remain accountable for the ways in which this task is fulfilled.

The Holocaust narrative insists on the duty to bear witness, and it is written as an interpellation in which the subject of enunciation appears as the inscription of the trace of the other. It is addressed both diachronically to the other who has affected the witness and proleptically, to him or her who would have been. This modality of future anterior inscribed in witnessing, of "*Il y aura obligé*," is signaled in Kertesz's novel by the negative figure of the unfulfilled possibility of the child.[19] Antecedent to the time measured ontologically against the horizon of one's own demise is the ethical time, defined by the possibility of the other's death. It confers meaning on both life and death, insofar as the "I" lives for the other, for the "beyond-my-death." The subject of ethics returns not only from the immemorial past but also from the unknown future in which his or her voice will continue to reverberate. It is in this sense that the retelling of the Holocaust story is an homage to the victims but also a gift to the future generations of rememberers. In the context of the Holocaust narrative, it is of special importance that Levinas's shattering of the temporal horizon circumscribed by the ego tensed on itself introduces the witnessing subject who is responsible for the past before its immediate time and for the future that extends forward, beyond the horizon of its death. In Levinas's own words, "the work of memory consists not at all of plunging into the past but of renewing the past through new experiences, new circumstances, new wounds or horrors of everyday life. And from this point of view, it is the future that is important and not purely the past."

The compelling need to bear witness after the Shoah, as it has gradually materialized in the form of innumerable Holocaust testimonies, has mobilized the attempts to rethink subjectivity in terms of witnessing; this necessity has found its most profound expression in Levinas's thought. I have elaborated Levinas's model of the iterable subject as a witness substituting for another and related it to the repetition compulsion that underwrites the Holocaust narrative, as well as to the witness's "obsessive" speech. It is remarkable that Levinas frequently borrows the psychoanalytic language of trauma to describe the ethical encounter with alterity.[20] Drawing on the work of Sigmund Freud as well as Dori Laub's study of trauma in the aftermath of the Shoah, Cathy Caruth reminds us that trauma never can be experienced directly and thus marks an interval in the temporality of the subject. Trauma, then, returns

not only in nightmares but also through the survivor's unknowing acts, "haunting" the survivor (2). Especially important for my discussion is Caruth's conclusion that, since the experience of trauma consists in the repeated reenactment of the event that was not fully experienced at the time of its occurrence, trauma is locatable in the movement of repetition rather than in the event itself.

For Levinas, the ethical exposure to the other is always "a trauma at the heart of my-self" (2000, 187), "a deafening trauma, cutting the thread of consciousness which should have welcomed it in the present "(1998, 111). The shock of being affected by the other, which constitutes the ethical subject as witness, cannot be comprehended or captured in memory; it is "the bursting of experience" rather than its disclosure. The encounter with alterity marks a break in the subject's experience of time; it is indeed, to borrow Caruth's term, a "missed encounter," since the self is never contemporaneous with the other. Given that response to the other is an "obsession"—that is, a "persecuting accusation that strips ego of its pride" (110)—on the level of affectivity, one experiences the being of the other as a shock, a suddenness that cannot be converted into cognition. For Levinas, the subject as witness repeatedly turns toward the other, although this movement of infinite approach already presupposes the return from outside the periphery of the same. Recurrence is then described as the dialectic of return and departure from the site of trauma.

As Dori Laub already noted, the overcoming of trauma, the breaking away from the immobilizing cycle of repetition compulsion, becomes possible in the process of giving testimony. Since the accounts of traumatic events mostly convey the impact of their incomprehensibility rather than a positive content, Caruth insists that "it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place" (56). Caruth's rethinking of trauma in terms of survival and her emphasis on the passage from compulsive "acting out" to "witness" draw attention to Levinas's positive valorization of repetition in the positing of subjectivity as recurrence and thus to his transvaluation of the very notion of trauma in ethical terms.

Levinas's reinscription of trauma also underscores the fact that the subject as witness is not a passive victim afflicted by the demands of the other and incapable of meaningful action. To read Levinas according to these terms is to overlook the fact that his entire project is a protest against victimization and degradation, of which the Holocaust victim was the epitome. It is certainly the case that Levinas's idiom of "obsession, persecution, and submission" implies victimization, but these connotations themselves can arise only within the traditional understanding of subjectivity, whereby the alternative to conquering otherness is being its victim, that is, within the very paradigm of victimization. The reformulation of subjectivity in terms of witnessing is necessary in order to arrive at the notion of the self's activity, which is geared toward more than self-interest. The self's awakening to the needs of others and its restlessness (since it cannot assuage the need to help) make it impossible to be indifferent; that is, it is necessary to act. Such is the meaning of Levinas's insistence on the need to "to pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the persecutor, from suffering to the expiation for the other" (1998, 110). The ethical relation designates me as responsible even for my persecutor's deeds; that is, it decrees respect for the humanity of those whose face is hidden behind the mask of murderous hatred.[21] "Turning the cheek," symbolic of the subject's patient passivity in the ethical relation, is a radical act that breaks the cycle of violence. It also marks the suffering subject's ethical transformation from a victim to a witness and initiates a passage toward the possibility of the subject "after Auschwitz."

As Levinas insists, the existence of the other, "the glory of the infinite," traces itself in the witness's speech. Thus, the emergence of subjectivity in substitution enables the transition from the impossibility of speech to actual speech in the form of testimony. In paramount fashion, the Holocaust narrative calls for a need to pay attention to that passage as well as for vigilance concerning how this journey is accomplished.

Drawing on the idiom of witnessing, Agamben describes his own project as "listening to something absent," as finding a way to "listen to the unsaid" (14). The following passage, in which

Agamben's language suddenly reverts to the first-person singular, is particularly striking. Commenting on a witness's account of a soccer game played in Auschwitz, he avows, "I, like the witnesses, instead view this match, this moment of normalcy, as the true horror of the camp. . . . But also hence our shame, the shame of those who did not know the camps and yet, without knowing how, are spectators of that match, which repeats itself in every match at our stadiums, in every television broadcast, in the normalcy of everyday life" (32). This statement leads me to conclude that not only does philosophy take up the task of rethinking the subject as the structure of witnessing but also that the very task of philosophy is being redefined in terms of witnessing, as was announced already in Lyotard's injunction that the task for thought today was bearing witness to the differend. Paramount in Levinas's writing and strongly resonant in the works of authors as different as Agamben and Oliver is the theme of a philosopher assuming the position of witness. In the case of LaCapra, a historian is the witness, while for Caruth, the witness is a literary critic. Agamben identifies the Muselmann as a lacuna in experience, knowledge, and speech—the point at which the very notion of subjectivity implodes. The living dead from the camps are "the larva that our memory cannot succeed in burying, the unforgettable with whom we must reckon" (81). As the untestifiable par excellence that gives rise to the necessity of speech, the Muselmann is the limit from which we must rethink what it means to be a subject. Although Agamben's diagnosis is important, namely that the Muselmann is the catastrophe of the subject—the dissolution of the very notion of humanity that marks the limit of speech—it overlooks the need to pay attention to other innumerable "black holes" that punctuate Holocaust narratives. I have spoken of these breaking points in terms of "madness," of "no-sense," that impels the witness's speech. More specifically, in Wiesel's *Night*, the threshold from which Wiesel's life of witnessing has unfolded is the missed experience of his father's death, as well as the unspeakable wound caused by the loss of his mother and sister. The vortex of the narrator's monologue in Kertesz's text is the unpronouncable name of Paul Célan, as it coincides with another missing name: that of his unborn child.

It is also in the caesura between the possibility and impossibility of speech that a peculiar feeling, experienced by the secondary witness—the reader of the Holocaust narrative—is located. It is an affective mixture of grief, awe, and respect but certainly also shame—the shame for the other's shame, the shame for my own comfort. This singular sensation is possible only as an affective trace of being beholden to the other, a sign of the "breathlessness that pronounces the extraordinary word beyond" (OB, 16), the "breathlessness" that is almost audible in Paul Célan's poetry. This extraordinary expression conveys the mortal danger of the deprivation of air and thus the sheer physical impossibility of speech. It is the limit condition from which speech bursts forth, "pronouncing" the beyond, the rhythm of respiration that is inspiration for the witness's speech. In another striking metaphor, Levinas describes this speech as "the breathless spirit [that] retains a fading echo" (Levinas 1998, 42). The fading echo of his murdered relatives' voices in Levinas's own texts is perhaps why I always lean over the epigraph/epitaph preceding *Otherwise Than Being* and think of that book as a matzevah in the form of a philosophical treatise. After all, if—as Levinas insists—our ethical obligation to the other is always directed at a human being rather than at an abstract entity, so are our words.

Notes

[1]*From the Ashes: Elie Wiesel in Conversation with Roy Bonisteel*. The Man Alive series, Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 1973.

[2]Gayatri Spivak, "Echo," in *Selected Works of Gayatri Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1996) 186.

[3]Giorgio Agamben describes a similar nightmare, as it was recounted by Primo Levi: also a former camp inmate, Levi dreams of having dinner with his family or friends. After a while, the picture becomes blurry and he hears, once again, the guard's screaming voice: "Wstawa_! [Get up!]" (101). In *Remnants of Auschwitz*: *The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

[4]Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 165.

[5]I am guided by Derrida's discussion of iterability in essays such as "Signature Event Context," in *Limited, Inc.*(Evanston ILL: Northwestern University Press, 1988) or in "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). I would like to thank Dalia Judovitz for suggesting the term *iterative subjectivity*, which I have modified as *iterable subjectivity*, to indicate its derivation from *iterability* (repetition that already divides the origin), as different from *iteration* (repetition in the usual sense of the term). See Rodolphe Gasché's discussion of iterability in *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) 212–17.

[6]According to Oliver, rethinking subjectivity in terms of witnessing requires that we move beyond Hegelian recognition, the paradigm that relies on the distinction between the subject and its object and is thus already a symptom of the pathology of oppression. According to Oliver, reconceiving subjectivity beyond recognition—that is, in terms of witnessing—is necessary if we are to envisage interhuman relations as peaceful, compassionate, and respectful of difference.

[7]"What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 3.

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

[9]I am skeptical of Agamben's assertion that the process of acquiring factual knowledge about the events of the Holocaust is now complete, especially in the face of new historical data still emerging and especially in Eastern European countries such as Poland, Ukraine, or Lithuania.

[10]I would like to thank Mrs. Liliana Falk for translating the Hebrew epigraph.

[11]The essay is a commentary on the novella *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, by Israeli writer Zvi Kolitz. Originally published in 1963, the essay was reprinted in Levinas's *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

[12]"May the great and ineffable name of the Lord be exalted and sanctified in the world." When Wiesel and Levinas once met in person, Levinas praised Wiesel's work by using the term *kiddush hashem* (the sanctification of the Lord's name). Incidentally, the two had the same Talmud teacher, Mordechai Shushani. I would like to thank Joseph Rosenberg for sharing his inspiring ideas about the recitation of the Kaddish in relation to Levinas's ethics.

[13]The autobiographical accounts I refer to are Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Imre Kertesz's *Fateless*. It is fascinating to compare, for instance, Levi's account of his ordeal as it was first written in 1946 with his reflection on the same events in a much later book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988). The same can be said of Wiesel's refashioning of his initial account in his autobiography, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. Unlike Wiesel and Levi, who insist on the factual truth of their accounts, Kertesz describes *Fateless* as a novel that draws on autobiographical detail.

[14]The subsequent revisions include: Isabella Leitner and Irving Leitner, *Saving the Fragments: From Auschwitz to New York* (New York: NAL Books,

1985); Isabella Leitner and Irving Leitner, *Isabella: From Auschwitz to Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); and Isabella Leitner, *The Big Lie: A True Story* (New York: Scholastic, 1992). Isabella Leitner also recorded her story on audiotape and authorized its production as a motion picture (made with the support of Amnesty International).

[15]For the analogy between the biblical Abraham and the ethical subject, see Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[16]It is important to keep in mind that the viewer receives that account within the frame of Lanzmann's magnum opus. For comparison, see also Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999).

[17]Dori Laub notes that the power of the Nazi delusion was such that those who tried to tell "the truth" about it were taken to be mad.

[18]The following lines from Célan's poem are tacitly woven into the narrative of *Kaddish for the Child Not Born*:

> we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
> A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
> he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
> he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he whistles his pack out
> he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
> he commands us strike up for the dance
> . . . . . .
> He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany
> he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air.

Paul Célan, *Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1988) 61–62.

[19]This expression comes from Jacques Derrida in "At This Moment, in This Text, Here I Am," in *Rereading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 1–48.

[20]Incidentally, in a less pronounced way, Agamben also uses the idiom of trauma when he says that "subjectification, the production of consciousness in the event of discourse, is often a trauma from which human beings are not easily cured" (123).

[21]For an excellent discussion of Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, and Paul Célan in relation to Levinas's notion of witnessing, see James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000). Hatley writes, in chapter four, "The Transcendence of the Face": "The question is not whether one should witness the victim but whether one is to embrace one's responsibility for that witness. The witness, according to Levinas, occurs whether one wills it or no" (94).

[22]Perhaps it is also important to consider another constitutive limit of all Holocaust speech, that of the survivor's—the paradigmatic witness's—suicide. Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Célan, Jean Améry, Primo Levi, and Sarah Kofman all occupy this category. If being a witness is a condition of possibility for speech in the first place, does the annihilation of their own ability to speak by those who have spoken mean an absolute, irreparable destruction of all speech?

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.

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

Fink, Ida. 1998. "Nocturnal Variations on a Theme." In *Traces*. Translated by Philip Boehm and Francine Prose. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Kertesz, Imre. 1992. *Fateless*. Translated by Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press.

LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Leitner, Isabella. 1978. *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*. New York: Dell Publishing.

Levi, Primo. 1988. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Summit Books.

_____. 1993. *Survival in Auschwitz*. Translated by Stuart Woolf. New York: Collier Books.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 2000. *God, Death, and Time*. Translated by Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

_____. 1999. "Loving the Torah More Than God." In *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*. Translated by Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Pantheon Books.

_____. 1998. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alfonso Lingis. Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press.

_____. 1998. "Useless Suffering." In *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1998. *The Differend*. Translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Oliver, Kelly. 2001. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1996. "Echo." In *Selected Works of Gayatri Spivak*. Edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean. New York: Routledge.

Wiesel, Elie. 1995. *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. Volume one of *Memoirs*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

_____. 1966. *The Gates of the Forest*. Translated by Frances Fenaye. New York: Holz, Reinhart, and Winston.

_____. 1982. *Night*. Translated by Stella Rodway. New York: Bantam Books.

Wojdowski, Bogdan. 1997. *Bread for the Departed*. Translated by Madeline G. Levine. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press.