

The Witness Who May Not Have Been There: Eastern European Authors Looking
Westward

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Dedication

This dissertation is for my parents, who would not have been able to pursue the kind of studies I have, not because of a lack of talent, but because of the communist regime, which imprisoned them in more ways than one.

Abstract

Using the tool of witnessing, Eastern European authors look westward intending to facilitate the reemergence of what the West imagines to be its limit-space: Eastern Europe. It is my dissertation's goal to increase the West's literacy about the history and culture of a region different from the West, yet one which the West increasingly considers the same. Through an examination of German, Slovak, and Polish writers, my dissertation reframes testimonial literature as a basis for communication between the Eastern writer and Western reader, bringing Trauma Studies, Eastern European Area Studies and Comparative Literature Studies into dialogue. I call this reframing of testimonial literature removed witnessing, since it is a witnessing very different from the narrow legal definition of testimony. In removed witnessing, bodily presence of the witness at an event is possible but not absolutely required. It is in the medium of literature that this kind of witnessing can be established.

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Introduction

Witnesses preserve what happened, but they are more than just living depositories or archives, ensembles of traces of the past. Rather, in addition to safeguarding the past, to seeing to the persistence of the truth, they also transmit it. They are, in that sense, both the guardians of the past, educators of the collective memory of a community, and sometimes pointers to its future. Bearing witness, we might say, is the action that follows from the imperative to see that the truth persists.

-W. James Booth

I. Road Towards the Removed Witness

The term “removed witness” which I coin and continue to use throughout my thesis as one of the crucial requirements for the literature I analyze, is a bit of a misnomer. As the title of my dissertation suggests, a more accurate term would be the “somewhat removed witness” or the “at times removed witness,” since the removal of the figure of the witness I am interested in is not a requirement, but certainly a possibility. It is obvious, however, that longer phrases such as the ones above are too wordy.

The main reason I introduce a removal into the concept of witnessing is in order to make it clear that what I am after in my analyses is not the legal witness, the religious witness, or even necessarily the witness of (auto)biography (although the latter is much closer to my concept of the removed witness than the legal witness). A removed witness can be an author of fiction or non-fiction. Indeed, a removed witness can also work through a form of art other than literature. For the purposes of my dissertation, I limit myself to pieces of literature that in one way or another do the work of removed witnessing. In fact, in my analyses, I find that frequently if the

author her/himself is a removed witness, s/he tends to make one or more characters in her work also witnesses. This is of course especially the case in works that have a tendency towards the autobiographic, since then the difference between the author-witness and the character-witness is much smaller.

I should also point out that I do not argue in any part of my dissertation that all witnessing is removed. In fact, if that were the case, there would be little sense in spending time outlining the exact kind of removal(s) that are possible within witnessing. Direct witnessing is certainly possible, and it is frequently used in the courtroom, in journalism, during crime investigations, etc. While experts in the fields of justice or journalism might argue otherwise, I would also state that even though the witnessing/witnesses they deal with might be direct, this still does not make them infallible. The possibility of a lack of exactitude and clarity is always present, since the senses and the ability to recollect are fallible and limited in each individual.¹

The removal I am interested in might be geographic (i.e. the witness is not in the exact location or even country/culture where the event is occurring about which s/he is witnessing), or temporal (i.e. the witness could not have been present at the event s/he is witnessing to because, simply, s/he was not alive yet or was too young to register the event in question). Both of these kinds of removals clearly still allow for the possibility of a direct witness (i.e. someone who *is* present at the event in question, or someone who *is* alive during the event in question). The witnesses whom I classify as removed are literary figures from Eastern Europe who may for one reason or another have spent a part of their lives in the west, and took this time as an

¹ There have been numerous experiments and incidents (which I am not documenting here) where several witnesses testifying to the same event gave significantly different accounts.

opportunity to witness *in* the west about events occurring in their homelands which they might not have experienced personally, yet about which they still felt passionate and knowledgeable due to their fluency in the culture and language of their home country. The witnesses whom I classify as removed are also Eastern European literary figures who might at some point have been in the west, and due to this experience, set a renewed communication with the west as one of their priorities.

Related to the communication westward, which is an ambition all of the writers I deal with in this dissertation have in common, I would like to clarify that there is no idealization of the west present in my dissertation. There is not even any such idealization present in the authors' works that I analyze. I do not dispute the fact that there are/were many injustices done by western countries. The reason Eastern European removed witnesses are so eager to witness westward is because that line of communication was closed and taboo for many decades. This witnessing is thus an attempt at a renewal of communication, awareness and involvement between the two sides (east and west) whose caring about one another was greatly inhibited by a large and long-lasting embargo on information (or, in the best case scenario, a highly selective and monitored exchange of information). In one way, this removed witnessing westward is simply an attempt at approaching the other which has been distant. As is most obviously the case with the East German intellectuals I analyze, this approach of the western other is also in a way an approach of the self.

The first section of my Introduction is not a sufficient definition of what I mean by the "removed witness." It is merely a taste of my further discussion. I continue my investigation of removed witnessing in my first chapter, and actually

throughout my dissertation, paying close attention to how the mode and/or genre of witnessing influence the concept itself. What ties the works I analyze together is threefold: First, they either all originated around the year 1989 or their subject matter is intimately connected to this year. Second, they all attempt to witness about those times and third, they all work towards not only a spreading of the knowledge they recount, but also a spreading of witnessing itself.

In terms of a theoretical approach, I utilize Psychoanalytic concepts such as trauma, mourning, working through, etc. in order to illuminate and analyze my chosen works. My approach to the definition of testimony/witnessing is also heavily influenced by Psychoanalytic thinking, more specifically by the idea that Freudian concepts regarding the functioning of the human psyche can be expanded and applied towards the functioning of larger groups of people, even entire societies. In addition, I subscribe to the idea that a writing down and a writing through totalitarian times and subsequent revolutionary moments as well as the traumas related to them can function as therapy in itself both for the writer and the reader. Allowing a piece of literature to become a stand in for therapeutic treatment also is a sign of an approach inspired by Psychoanalysis. Methodologically, the most important approach by far for my dissertation is that of close reading, as I believe that a any piece of literature and especially a piece of witnessing can not be done justice without serious, attentive and meticulous close reading. I should also remark that I use the words “witnessing” and “testimony” and their various incarnations interchangeably; for the purposes of my dissertation, I do not delineate a theoretical difference between the two terms.

I would also briefly like to address why I chose to not utilize postcolonial theory in order to read and interpret my chosen pieces of literature. While I have seen Eastern European area scholars use this theory, and I have heard arguments (some valid, some less so) about the potential of postcolonial theory to illuminate the socio-cultural situation in Eastern Europe, I personally think this approach obscures and complicates more aspects than it illuminates. It is impossible to use postcolonial theory in tandem with any piece of literature regardless of its origin without paying close attention to the complex situations and series of events that necessitated this theory. As is evident in its name, this theory sprung up in reaction to and against the colonial rule of a large number of countries over an even larger number of countries throughout a long period of time. While some may (at times rightly) argue that there were aspects of the relationship of the USSR towards its satellite states that exhibited characteristics of colonial rule, these relations were *unlike* a colonizer-colonized relation in many more ways than they were similar. Most importantly, two aspects of the USSR-communist-satellites relationship were almost or completely absent, which were absolutely crucial in the colonizer-colonized relationship: those of race and economy.²

My dissertation is divided into four chapters. In my first chapter entitled “The Promising Impossibility: Witnessing the Moving Event,” I spend time discussing the concept of testimony/witnessing, allowing for some definitions from various fields,

² I should also state here that my dissertation does not concern itself with the post-1989/current status quo in the former USSR. There were innumerable differences between the political, cultural, and socio-historical status of the USSR and the Soviet satellite states before the revolutions of 1989, and these differences remained or deepened after the accelerated historical events after 1989. Additionally, I believe that the post-1989 developments in the former USSR are paid much closer attention than those of the widely varied conglomeration of small Eastern European countries.

such as the legal or the philosophical field of inquiry. Ultimately, I arrive at my definition of removed witnessing. To some degree, this definition is formulated based on numerous ruminations upon what, in my view, witnessing is *not*. In this chapter, I also spend time discussing and defining the concept of the event. I find that this is a crucial step before moving on, since the event is *the* predominant material the witness encounters and relates. Interestingly enough, I find that the success or failure of witnessing depends to a large degree on what kind of event the witness encounters.

In my second chapter, “The Eastern European Poet as Witness: Milan Richter,” I translate, analyze, and discuss selected poems by the Slovak contemporary poet Milan Richter. Richter’s poetry was the inspiration for the topic of my dissertation, and it is at the core of my definition of a removed witness. Having been the president of the Organization for the Dissemination of Slovak Literature Abroad, the chargé d’affaires of Slovakia in Norway and Iceland, as well as the editor of the English language journal *Slovak Literary Review*, and being an active translator into six different languages, Richter is the paradigmatic figure of the (sometimes) removed witness, who is knowledgeable about and involved in the events of his home country while tirelessly and passionately witnessing both at home and in numerous countries abroad.

In my third chapter entitled “The Eastern European Novelist as Witness: Dorota Maslowska and Thomas Brussig,” I analyze the works of two authors of younger generations. The first one is the Polish novelist Dorota Maslowska. Born in 1983, Maslowska is an ideal example of a removed witness: she was only 6 years old when the Velvet Revolution occurred and thus may not remember much of it. That

fact, however, does not stop her from feeling like she has both the responsibility and the need to witness about the repercussions of the regime change in Poland. She deals with the world of Polish youth in the 1990s and the 2000s, and deals with it in a non-glamorous fashion. In other words, her depictions of the struggles and traumas the impoverished youth of Poland has to face on a daily basis speaks directly against the idea that with the overthrow of the Communist regime and the process of westernization, the struggles in Eastern Europe are over and history as such has ended (Fukuyama).

The second author I discuss in my third chapter is Thomas Brussig. Born in 1965, he is certainly of an older generation than Maslowska. Brussig also qualifies as a removed witness, however, for slightly different reasons than Maslowska. In his expansive Wenderoman *Wie es leuchtet*, he creates a character who is Brussig's stand-in within the world of the novel. (This is in addition to several other characters who are also parallels to real life persons). The autobiographical aspects of his novel are undeniable, even though Brussig does attempt to deny them at the outset of the novel. I argue that the autobiographical aspects of the novel are essential, since, via Brussig's *doppelgaenger* within the world of the novel, he becomes able to live through and directly witness to events he may have only experienced indirectly in his life. Another reason I chose to group Maslowska and Brussig in one chapter is due to the fact that both authors' mission to witness influences and somewhat disrupts the form of their novels. These novels acquire various extrageneric aspects.

My fourth and final chapter entitled "The Hazards of Witnessing: Christa Wolf," discusses Wolf's *Was bleibt*, the only work in this dissertation which openly

admits to its autobiographical nature. As with all of the works in my dissertation, my first goal was to give the novella an attentive close reading, focusing on the ways in which the author chooses to witness about her experience to her readers. As with Brussig's *Wie es leuchtet*, I found it essential to also discuss the reactions of Wolf's society at and after the moment of publication. In both cases these reactions were essential, because they not only spoke to the hazards of witnessing that any witness faces who might be recounting ideas and experiences that are considered oppositional, but also, these reactions and debates post-publication spoke to the status of the respective societies at the moment of publication. In other words, these reactions showed what the critics, readers, politicians, etc. were ready to work through, and what they still had repressed. In this manner, the author as removed witness can take on a very hard and rare role: that of a barometer of the emotional and intellectual status of their society.

Such an author-witness can find out what her/his society is ready to hear, and what will bring up too many feelings of guilt and anger. However, I would say that none of the author-witnesses whom I discuss in my dissertation – who all in one way or another stirred up harsh criticisms and protests – would have stopped their work had they known about the reactions ahead of time. In fact, the result with all of them is quite the contrary: Richter, Maslowska, Brussig, and even Wolf, against whom the attacks were by far the most vicious, have continued writing after having been attacked. For all of them, by now even Wolf, these attacks have actually served as inspirations for further writing, further witnessing. The hazards of witnessing thus turned out to also be the advantages of witnessing: Once these witnesses managed to,

so to speak, take the temperature of their respective societies, they could target much more precisely that which needed to be witnessed to/about next, further explained, fleshed out and worked through³.

II. Two More Terms

Before moving on to the body of my dissertation, I would like to briefly address two theoretical concepts which have much in common with my concept of removed witnessing: testimonio and postmemory. I do not use these terms to analyze my selected works, and the reason for this is for the most part insufficient space.

However, I do want to acknowledge the proximity of these terms to removed witnessing. Postmemory has the aspect of removal at the core of its definition. Just like the removed witness, the subject who has postmemories is experiencing memories of events which were not her/his; they may have been passed down from parents or other family members. As Marianne Hirsch puts it in her book *Family*

Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory,

Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through and imaginative investment and creation...Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated...Postmemory – often obsessive and relentless – need not be absent

³ I would like to remark here that the kind of removed witnessing Maslowska (having been born in 1983) and the kind of removed witnessing Wolf (born in 1929) are portraying is not the same, yet it does have some commonalities. Both Maslowska and Wolf tend to speak to the effects of the events which they did not experience first hand. However, while Maslowska's primary removal is temporal (not having been old enough to experience and understand events first hand and thus only being able to witness to them due to her cultural literacy about Poland in the late 1990s and thereafter *as influenced by* the events of 1989), Wolf's primary removal is geographical (potentially not having been present as a direct witness at all the events about which she is witnessing).

or evacuated: it is as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself (22).

As I mentioned, postmemory has a certain removal of the subject in common with removed witnessing. Just as this generational or other kind of removal might mean that the subject with postmemories/removed witness were not present at the original traumatic event, for neither of these subjects does it mean that their memories or witnessings were experienced any less vividly and passionately. Also, both the subject with postmemories and the removed witness definitely have as Hirsch puts it above, an “imaginative investment and creation,” i.e. a profound personal connection to the memories, events or experiences with which they are confronted, and a creative approach to these experiences.

Unlike postmemory, the removed witness can perhaps claim even more “freedom” from the original event/series of events because, as I argue, a chain leading back to the event proper is not necessary. In other words, a traumatic, revolutionary moment need not have happened to a direct ancestor of the witness in order for him/her to be able to witness about it. Cultural literacy and passionate involvement in the respective culture is all that is necessary. On the other hand, the removed witness may have less “freedom” from the original event because unlike the subject with postmemory, the removed witness *can* potentially witness based on a personal recollection of an event. Removal is a frequent situation for the removed witness, not a requirement (hence my specification above that the term “removed witness” would more accurately be “at times removed witness”). The other aspect in which the concepts of postmemory and removed witnessing differ is the question of

dissemination of the (post)memories in question. While many subjects with postmemories may witness about their experiences, this impetus is not necessarily an intrinsic part of the definition of postmemory. On the other hand, the impetus to witness, the passionate need to spread knowledge, awareness and, simply put, care about the event witnessed, is at the very core of the definition of removed witnessing. Another way to relate postmemory to removed witnessing is perhaps to state that a subject with postmemories can be one of the subcategories of removed witnessing, but certainly does not encompass all of the possibilities of removed witnessing.

Testimonio, the Spanish term roughly translatable into English as “testimonial narrative,” is the second concept I would like to address. While this concept originated in Latin America during the Cold War era, it became much more debated after the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, a testimonial narrative about the genocide of Quiches and Mayans in Guatemala. While Menchu’s story was published in 1983, it took more than a decade for critics, lead by David Stoll to investigate several inaccuracies in Menchu’s testimonio. Without going into too much detail, it was Stoll’s investigation and Menchu’s self-defense which ultimately received a lot of attention from literary communities around the world, and as a result, inspired a more general debate about the parameters and requirements for testimonio.

Much like the attacks against Christa Wolf after the publication of *Was bleibt*, David Stoll’s attacks against Menchu became so vicious that for the purposes of this very brief discussion, I prefer another literary scholar’s discussion of the concept of testimonio. John Beverley involved himself in the debate around testimonio as early

as 1989, and has written numerous works on the subject matter since, most notably his collection of essays entitled *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. In this work, he spends a considerable amount of time not only defining the concept, but also discussing its origins and the numerous debates surrounding it. According to Beverley,

If testimonio is an art of memory, it is an art directed not only toward the memorialization of the past, but also to the constitution of more heterogeneous, diverse, egalitarian, and democratic nation-states, as well as forms of community, solidarity, and affinity that extend beyond or between nation-states. To construct such forms of community, however, it is necessary to begin with the recognition of an authority that is not our own, an authority that resides in the voice of others. In this sense, testimonio, despite its ambiguities and contradictions, continues to be part of necessary pedagogy (24).

Based on the above definition, it is quite easy to spot the commonalities between testimonio and removed witnessing: both have the same desire for knowledge and change, both see the need to employ memory to construct new, better communities. Both also see a clearly pedagogic aspect to testimony, as well as the potential in testifying across political and cultural divides.

In addition to the many similarities between testimonio and removed witnessing, there are also numerous differences. I will limit myself to only discussing one here. Beverley states: “The position of the reader of testimonio is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom. Unlike the novel, testimonio promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness” (32). While sincerity is very important with removed witnessing, literariness is a key aspect of removed witnessing. In all the pieces of literature I discuss here, literary tropes are *the* key way in which truth is told or alluded to; literary tropes are also *the* key way in which

to relate to the reader. Unlike a member in a jury passing judgment, the reader of a piece of removed witnessing is ideally supposed to feel compassion and an impetus to also witness at the end of a successful encounter with a piece of removed witnessing. Finally, I should like to remark that, similarly to the concept of postcolonial theory, the concept of testimonio is much too culturally specific to be fully applicable to the also very culturally specific socio-historical situation in Eastern Europe around 1989.

Ultimately, when witnessing is done (in as much as it can ever be done), it not only gives voice to the victim and preserves an understanding of the event that is not necessarily or not only facts-and-figures-based; it also transforms the very subjectivity of the person on the receiving end of witnessing. It makes a formerly uninvolved, ignorant stranger into an empathetic friend, a co-witness. As Kelly Oliver puts it in her work *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, “If the inner witness [in my wording, the co-witness] is an incorporation of dialogic relations with others, of external witnesses, then its ability to create an enabling and empowering subject position is determined by the sociohistorical context of the dialogic relations with others” (87). This recipient, this co-witness or as Oliver calls it, this “inner witness,” might, just like my figure of the sender or removed witness, never have been present at any of the events in question, yet via her/his new information and related passion about this information, s/he now can become as close to a direct witness without having been “there” as is humanly possible. In the end, as Oliver suggests, being both at the “sending” and “receiving” end of witnessing significantly affects not only the quality and potential of human interaction across wide spans of geography, culture and history, it also significantly affects the very subjectivity of both the

witness and the addressee. Through this specific, empowering dialogic interaction, both receive a large amount of cultural literacy and agency. They both find a (stronger) voice, begin to care about the witnessed material, and thus, very simply, become more complex, more interesting, better human beings.

Chapter One:

The Promising Impossibility: Witnessing the Moving Event

There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators.

-David Hume

I. The Witness

Why is it important to study testimony? What makes the act of witnessing important and irreplaceable? As C.A.J. Coady argues in his work *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, “The judgments of others constitute an important, indeed perhaps *the* most important, test of whether my own judgments reflect a reality independent of my subjectivity”(12). The act of witnessing does not only allow one to express (and thus mentally “digest”) what one has encountered. More importantly, it allows the witness to locate the self within a world that is decidedly outside of his/her own subjectivity, his/her own ideas. In other words, on a basic level, testifying about what one encountered allows a sort of proof to the self not only of “what actually happened;”⁴ it also allows for a comparison of accounts of this event with other witnesses, a sort of reinforcing of the lucidity of one’s own perception and rational evaluation abilities, and by extension, builds a *community* of witnesses. Of course, in the event that an act of witnessing turns out a malfunction, this witnessing allows the

⁴ I use scare-quotes here in reference to the impossibility to ever know “what really happened.” This would presuppose the ability of someone or something to objectively record, which, as is well known in biographical studies, courtroom witnessing and other areas, is impossible. Coady argues something similar when he quotes Augustine: “Not without reason do we say that we know not only what we have seen or see, but also what we believe, when we yield assent to some fact under the influence of suitable evidence or witnesses” (20). Coady here points out that the process of witnessing (both uttering and receiving) is not simply a matter of knowledge, but also, with equal importance, a matter of belief/trust in one’s own abilities of perception, and fair interpretation.

subject to reevaluate not only the other that was encountered (the “outside” world), but also *how* it was encountered and reworked to be transmitted (the “inside” world).

While Coady’s first definition of testimony is unclear, and simply vague [“The concept of testimony...is that of a certain speech act...an illocutionary act, which may be and standardly is performed under certain conditions and with certain intentions” (25).], it improves vastly when he later specifies,

Asserting, testifying, objecting, and arguing all have the same illocutionary points – roughly, to inform an audience that something is the case – but they differ in other illocutionary respects. In the case of testifying, of either the formal or informal variety, the way of achieving the point is through the speaker’s status as one having a particular kind of authority to speak to the matter in question, a matter where evidence is required (43).

As opposed to the run-of-the-mill participant of an argument, then, the witness has the advantage of having something outside the self to refer to for support, for evidence. Plain opinion turns into a witnessed event which then (sometimes involuntarily) produces a certain opinion or a certain line of reasoning. Thus, as Coady rightly argues, the witness becomes an expert. Generally, one could argue that active, involved members of any society form a community of witnesses, a community of experts on that society’s qualities, discontents, culture, etc. A member’s plain day-to-day involvement in the “life” of a society or nation is not enough for him/her to qualify as a witness, however. The ontological requirement for the status of a witness is always also the *willingness and need to testify*, a momentum and determination, which may not always be an easy and comfortable choice for that witness. This uneasy status stems perhaps from the fact that to a large extent, one does not choose what event one encounters, the event chooses the witness.

According to Coady, witnessing is such a slippery concept which – for instance in the context of the law – has to be given numerous definitions and rules to guide its functioning, because it is in fact mostly needed and utilized in cases of uncertainty, or complete lack of knowledge about an event. Thus, so to speak, witnessing starts from scratch, and before it even is formulated, it already has to face questions about its accuracy and about ulterior motives of the witness. One could argue that the “hard” (i.e. most reliable) evidence is always only going to be that which can physically be manifested. The witness can never teleport the solid piece of evidence s/he has seen for the audience: s/he is always facing too much physical and temporal distance from the original event to accomplish that. Thus, ultimately, the figure of the witness is simultaneously pushed into two opposing corners: s/he is expected to speak with authority, with expertise unavailable to her/his audience to be allowed the title of witness⁵. However, *because* this same knowledge is unavailable to the audience, this witness is also approached with reluctance and suspicion. This is yet another fascinating contradiction in the figure of the witness: *the status of the witness is that of a highly suspect expert*. Rarely is the character of a person subjected

⁵ Coady asserts his position on the conflicted ontological status of the witness from a slightly different angle when he states,

That we are active, selective, interpretive in what we perceive and recount is not only consistent with our also being in part passive, receptive, and recorder-like but it actually seems to require it. Unless we register quite a lot we cannot act, select, and interpret at all. The real story is quite complex and multi-layered; neither the picture of wholly passive registration nor that of furiously active invention is adequate (268).

One interesting point, which will become clearer later, surfaces here: It is impossible for a subject to function as a witness unless s/he has been exposed to a multitude of experiences him/herself. The witness is always weathered, traumatized, affected, polluted, involved, etc.

to more scrutiny than at such a time when s/he is witnessing about a shocking, unexpected, or particularly unbelievable event to his/her audience.

As even the strictest definition of a witness in general is problematic, the definitions of variations and gradations of witnesses based on their relation to the event, its context, or to other witnesses are infinitely more complicated. Coady calls this problem extended testimony:

It is common in ordinary parlance and in philosophical discussions, to use the term ‘testimony’ of material which is not an obvious product of the sort of explicit speech act of testifying that we have been considering. I have in mind what might be called ‘documentary testimony’. Historians and philosophers of history, for example, refer to such documents as church registries of births and deaths, private diaries, confidential diplomatic minutes, newspaper reports, and so on as testimony...where we can legitimately create an author-reader situation it would seem natural to extend the notion of testimony to cover such cases as well (49-50).

While it is by no means my intention here to trace neither the history nor the taxonomy of the terms ‘testimony’ and ‘witness’ (this has been done elsewhere, Coady’s work being one example), there are certain subgroups of testimony and theories of witnessing that are more interesting to me than others. It is the above – arguably less strict and more creative – definition of testimony that I find much more productive for my project than Coady’s first cut-and-dry clinical one. It is understandable that by limiting the cases in which the title of witness can be allotted, one is ideally also limiting the amount of lies or misinformation this witnessing might produce. On the other hand, however, by severely limiting the definition, an incredible richness of events and their accounts is lost or given less credence to.

Particularly, if one were to follow Coady’s suggestion of extending the status of testimony to the “author-reader situation,” one could deduce that the whole of

literature is, among other things, a tool for the transmission of testimony. While this may be true in the most general sense of the term testimony, this deduction is too simplistic for my purposes and needs to be complicated. As a part of this project, I set out to specify the requirements for literature (specifically novels and poems) to be qualified as testimonial⁶. For now, it suffices to say that for a novel or a poem doing the work of witnessing (just like for a subject doing the work of witnessing), it is unimportant how far down the chain of hearsay or how derivative it is. What *is* important is the author's general commitment to establishing a line of communication which will enable a transplant of experience, passion about, and a sense of involvement in a certain moment in history (and a certain situation in a society) from the site of the author (i.e. the "witness") to the site of the reader. In other words, *a literary work of witnessing has to have the extension of the community of witnesses as its major goal.*

It is necessary here to differentiate between witnessing in the courtroom and witnessing in literature. While both of these have been, according to my argument, "chosen" by an event, they do not both choose to recount the event. The courtroom witness is called often times against her/his own will and witnesses as a *response* to the call of the law. One could, in other words, qualify such witnessing as a reaction. The literary witness, on the other hand, has no call to heed but that of his/her own feeling of urgency and responsibility to the event (as will be seen in my discussion of

⁶ I redefine the term "testimonial" here. While there is obviously a large body of writing grouped under "testimonial literature," this is not exactly what I intend to work with. I extend my definition of "testimonial literature" far beyond the strict eyewitness account. I will expand on these ideas below.

Badiou, below). This kind of witnessing is not a response; it is not a *reaction to*. Rather, it is an action originating in and with the witness.

I would now like to extend my point about the highly suspect expert (and add to Coady's point about hearsay) by stating that, under certain conditions, it is possible for a subject to be drawing on an infinitely removed chain of hearsay or generalized experience, and still qualify as an expert witness. In fact, the very term "expert witness" in legal jargon specifies just that kind of witness. Coady, again:

The whole category of expert testimony...undermines the rather natural idea that reports can be given only to what has been observed...Experts do not usually testify to what they have observed, though they may do that too, but rather to an expert view or opinion they have formed...Even predictions may be regarded as reports where there is sufficient expertise backing them (62).

This type of definition of expert testimony makes it clear that the original event, the occurrence observed which supposedly "makes" the witness is surprisingly unimportant, perhaps even nonexistent in some cases. In other words, for the "expert," it is a multitude of (seemingly) unrelated experiences spread out throughout a lifetime (rather than the single event that needs to be "replayed" in recorder-like fashion) that qualify her/him as an expert. When discussing the expert witness, one should ask the question: How does a witnessed event ultimately become knowledge? The only possible answer, of course involves the process of *representation* of the event witnessed. Thus, the expert witness, or any witness for that matter, more than testifying to the actuality and details of an event, testifies to her/his specific ability to *represent* the said event in a unique manner⁷.

⁷ The still very close relationship between the Old English meaning of "witan" (to know), the Proto-Germanic "witanan" (to have seen and hence to know), and the current colloquial use of the terms

II. The Event, The Event's Subject

Since to a large extent what a witness encounters (or what makes a subject into a witness) is a “collision” with an event, it is important here to define and further complicate the notion of the event, specifically as coined by Alain Badiou. As Peter Hallward argues in his book *Badiou: A Subject To Truth* (while quoting Badiou himself),

For Badiou, first and foremost, an event is “purely haphazard,” and cannot be inferred from the situation” (EE, 215). An event is the unpredictable result of chance and chance alone. Whereas the “structure” of a situation “never provides us with anything other than repetition,” every event is unprecedented and unexpected (C, 189; DO, 11). Only the event enables the assertion that there can be genuine “novelty in being” (EE, 231, cf. EE, 444-45). It is its evental origin that ensures that true innovation is indeed a kind of creation ex nihilo, a chance to begin again from scratch, to interrupt the order of continuity and inevitability. For what is encountered through an event is precisely the void of the situation that has absolutely no interest in preserving the status quo as such. The event reveals “the inadmissible empty point in which nothing is presented” (PP, 115; cf. EE, 227), and this is why every event indicates, in principle, a pure beginning, the inaugural or uncountable zero of a new time (a new calendar, a new order of history). (Hallward, 114-115).

Badiou, via Hallward, is outlining the conflicted nature of the moment: there is both an absolute need to repress the impending event, *and* the absolute necessity for the same event to come into being. Hallward stresses here the radically new and unexpected nature of Badiou's event. It also becomes clear why this type of event would be a danger to the “situation” which is set in its ways and has a vested interest in a prolongation of the status quo. The event could be seen as the proof of a fundamental malfunction in the situation, which made the event possible. Based on

wit/witness highlight the close connection between seeing and knowing, and in the case of wit (intelligence), also the ability to process the material seen.

the event's interest in a radical interruption, and ultimate extermination of the status quo, it becomes clear why subjects announcing and formulating such an event would be seen as dangerous insurgents to be eliminated by the situation⁸.

Since the event is seen as a “zero of a new time,” it is clear that the question of temporality when formulating and representing the event will become important: “An event can only be “evanescent,” though what is subsequently done in its name...may provide the basis for an altogether new time...the temporality of the event as such is necessarily confined to the time of a future anterior: thanks to a subsequent subjective intervention, the event “will have been presented” (EE, 217) (Hallward, 115). While the event is immediate and does not last, what is “subsequently done in [the event's] name,” can still be considered as the ripple-effects of the event itself, and thus loosely belonging to it. There is always something of the past, as well as something of the future in the event. What is being anticipated in fact is a better past (which will then inevitably, and with little effort, result in a better future). This is in fact where the ultimate need of the subject to connect or even *transport* the past into an anticipated, transformed future, stems from. As seen in Badiou here, the discrepancy of time lies not only in the subjects' intentions; it is inherent in the event itself⁹.

While there certainly is a reason for an event to occur, it is up to the subject of this event to *make it mean*. S/he actively investigates the circumstances surrounding

⁸ While the objection that Badiou is performing an anthropomorphizing of the event in ascribing it “interest” or even agency may be on target here, the (at first glance) somewhat magical nature of the event is less problematic when one points out that it is *not* the event which acts. Rather, it is the witnesses of the event who act on its behalf.

⁹ I will discuss the time-shifting related to the work of witnessing later in this chapter.

the occurrence of the particular event. This type of interaction between the subject and the event results not only in a development and relative stabilization of the event, but also creates significant development in the event's subject as well. Hallward, again:

As a rule, every "singular truth has its origin in an event. Something must happen, in order for there to be something new. Even in our personal lives, there must be an encounter, there must be something which cannot be calculated, predicted or managed, there must be a break based only on chance." Such an encounter or event has no objective or verifiable content; it takes place in a situation but is not "of" that situation. A truth persists, then, solely through the militant proclamation of those people who maintain a fidelity to the uncertain event whose occurrence and consequences they affirm – those people, in other words, who become subjects in the name of that event...Any...routine can be broken by an encounter with something that does not fit with the prevailing regime of representation – a moment of pure surprise, a crisis of some kind, to which the individual as such cannot react (something he or she cannot easily re-present) (Hallward, xxv-xxvi).

According to Badiou, it is only through the encounter with an event and through a fidelity to it that an individual becomes a subject, a subject of that event. Since the event is "evanescent," it is the subject of that event who will make the event 'last' longer: if not ontologically, then at least in the translation of it to others as well as in a spurring into action of the new inventions that the event necessitates. (Spreading the meaning and objectives of the event becomes a spreading of the event itself).

Taken a step further, one should point out that it is only through the fidelity to an event that an individual can also become a witness. Badiou's subjects of the event do not only vow to represent it; more importantly, via a kind of a willingness to see "anomalies" which might regularly be dismissed as a part of the situation, they make the event possible. As can be seen, the encounter between the subject and the event is filled with an immense challenge for both sides: the challenge for the event is always

that of coming into being, while the challenge for the subject (witness) is to represent *precisely* that which it is hard (if not impossible) to represent (to “send” a truth future-ward, as well as outward, towards a collective “we”).¹⁰

As Badiou argues in his book *Infinite Thought: Truth And The Return Of Philosophy*, the realization of an event begins with a “wager,” “...the decision to *say* that the event has taken place” (62). It is by this wager (completely based on belief) that a subject is constituted. Badiou continues, “[The subject’s] utterance is as follows: ‘This event has taken place, it is something which I can neither evaluate, nor demonstrate, but to which I shall be faithful’ ...A subject is what fixes an undecidable event, because he or she takes the chance of deciding upon it” (62). In the moment of the decision to commit to an event, the subject has no content-based information on the event, and thus, so to speak, has to buy a hat without being able to try it on. This type of blind commitment thus is obviously an act of great courage on the part of the subject.

This courage (in addition to the willingness to commit to an event and to subsequently “do” in the name of the event) is another indispensable criterion of the subject, especially since s/he has to be all but eliminated in the process of giving voice to the event. This intense act of speaking almost consumes her/him. According to Hallward’s discussion of Badiou’s subject,

¹⁰ In order to avoid an easy misreading, one should point out that Badiou’s concept of the event is somewhat more elusive (and more closely linked to what Badiou calls the “void”) than may be expressed in this project. As he states in *Infinite Thought*, “For myself, a truth commences by an event, but this event has always disappeared or been abolished; there will never be any knowledge of it. The event thus forms the real and absent cause of a truth” (86). In other words, when speaking of the subject testifying to an event, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the subject is testifying to a truth which was *spurred by* or *brought into being* by an event.

A subject is an individual transfigured by the truth she proclaims. The individual...hardly survives this transfiguration: "It is only by dissipating himself in a project that exceeds him that an individual can hope to direct himself to some subjective real [*reel*]," and thereby contribute to the constitution of a true collective subject. From the moment of this commitment, the "'we' that this project constructs is alone truly real, that is, subjectively real for the individual who carries it." The real subject of truth is this new collective "we," which comes to be at precisely the point where the self is lacking: "The individual is thus, in his very essence the nothing that must be dissipated in a we-subject" – a we that is itself immortal, eternal, indifferent to any perishable nature or mortality (LS, 82) (122-123).

A sort of altruism directed towards the community, a new communal utopia with an individual sacrifice at the outset, is required of the subject. Thus, on a different level, Badiou here gets to a community which is not dissimilar to that suggested by Coady earlier. *The ultimate goal in both cases of the witness/subject (as well as in my case of the removed witness, discussed below), is a type of community, a community on a higher level of self-realization, one which will eventually be able to "see" the journey from truth to event to subject to the "we" of itself, and thus be able to fulfill the objectives/demands of the event faster and in a more effective manner.*

Once steps to spread the "inventions" of the event are taken, one inevitably enters the realm of the political, and is faced with the necessity to name/formulate the event in relation to its location, both spatial and temporal. The stakes are high to formulate the event, but more importantly, not to betray it by either dissolving it in the situation, or by representing it in an unintelligible manner. Badiou calls such unintelligible events "obscure," and warns in *Manifesto for Philosophy*,

This is not the place to say whether these events, in terms of pure facts, were favorable or ill-fated, victorious or vanquished. What is sure is that we are *in suspension of their naming as political events*. Undoubtedly,...these politico-historic instances are all the more opaque that they gave themselves a representation of themselves, in the consciousness of their actors, in

frameworks of thinking whose outdated character they pronounced at the same time...What was taking place, although thought within this system, was not therein thinkable (84).

In these cases Badiou refers to (May 1968, the Cultural Revolution, etc.), it is the expression of the event which, by using the soon to be dated language of the current ideological system, betrays the event, and makes it stale from a revolutionary point of view. The process of naming fails or remains incomplete, because of a “vain transparency of representations.” Obscure events, however, do have the potential to “re-open...the possibility of the political,” and on the other hand, politics can “stabilize...naming” (85). The event and the political are mutually dependent.

While Badiou does not further specify the nature of an innovative fresh language that should be used in order to remain truthful to and representative of the event, it is obvious that his challenge is precisely this¹¹. What, then, does it mean to remain faithful to the event? As Badiou says, “to be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented by *thinking*...the situation ‘according to’ the event” (qtd. in Hallward, 128). This “thinking” of the situation should probably warrant a new name, since it is a thinking aimed at ultimately destroying the situation. More precisely, one may say that the event-based thinking (and thus also language) of the situation is in fact a thinking of the revolution. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in *The Ticklish Subject* (when analyzing Badiou’s concept of the event),

Subject-language involves the logic of the shibboleth, of a difference which is visible only from within, not from without. This, however, in no way means that the subject-language involves another, ‘deeper’ reference to a hidden true

¹¹ One possible answer may be provided by the specific language of testimonial poetry, which I will discuss in my second chapter.

content: it is, rather, that the subject language, ‘derails’ or ‘unsettles’ the standard use of language with its established meanings, and leaves the reference ‘empty’ – with the ‘wager’ that this void will be filled when the Goal is reached, when Truth actualizes itself as a new situation (God’s kingdom on earth; the emancipated society...). The naming of the Truth-Event is ‘empty’ precisely in so far as it refers to the fullness yet to come (136).

According to Žižek, it is this kind of language that is present at the ‘birth’ of, a catalyst of a new content; the language is *not* the new content itself. Also, in order to achieve a successful realization of the event, the subject’s goal has to be to make the ‘without’ more like the ‘within,’ in other words, to achieve an externalization of that which occurs in the individual when s/he becomes a subject of an event. (As Žižek puts it, “the engaged ‘subjective perspective’ on the Event is part of the Event itself” [137]). Thus, the trajectory has to lead from the event through the subject, to the situation, through a new thought/language to a revolution, whether it be a literal/physical, or a cultural one.

The challenge to the witness in Eastern European literature is precisely this: to avoid the consistent delay in the events’ full realization. The momentum of any situation makes it always infinitely easier to tolerate it than to oppose it. What is more, it appears as utterly in vain, inconceivable, and dangerous for the subjects of the situation to fight something perceived as already fixed in place. Thus, it requires a certain talent, and, as mentioned earlier, courage, to see impossibility, to see beyond what “is”. As Hallward puts it (while again, evoking Badiou), “The Revolution qua revolution – that is, as distinct from a political crisis, disturbance, or disorder – will appear as such only to those who in some sense adopt its cause as their own. In short, ‘it will remain forever doubtful if there really was an event, except for those who, by

intervening, decided that it belonged to the situation' (EE, 229)" (128). This, in other words, is very much the figurative (and sometimes literal) battle between those who are initiated and those who are not.

As I have suggested in my introduction when discussing "The Dream of the Man Who Dived," the poem by the Slovak poet Milan Richter, when defining a removed witness a chain leading back to the original event is not necessary. In some cases, *a chain leading back to the original event is in fact not even possible*, and thus, the only kind of witnessing of that event *is*, by definition, removed. As Maurice Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*,

We are not contemporaries of the disaster: that is its difference, and this difference is its fraternal threat. The disaster would be in addition, in excess, an excess which is marked only as impure loss. Inasmuch as the disaster is thought, it is nondisastrous thought, thought of the outside. We have no access to the outside, but the outside has always already touched us in the head, for it is the precipitous...The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience – it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes. Which does not mean that the disaster, as the force of writing, is excluded from it, is beyond the pale of writing or extratextual (6-7).

It is obvious here that Blanchot's description of "disaster" has much in common with Badiou's discussion of the event. Disaster is figured as that which is *outside* of thought, as that which is inaccessible to words, to writing. By suggesting that it is "in addition," that it is "in excess," Blanchot is not only positing the disaster as that which could be called an unwanted tumor on the structure of the event, he is also highlighting its limited accessibility. (I will further elucidate the relationship between the event and the disaster below). In combining thought and the disaster, both are

compromised, it seems, evidenced by Blanchot's insistence on the impossibility of disastrous thought, his defining the experience of disaster as "de-scrib[ing]," i.e. *un-writing*, undoing the work of writing. On the other hand, however, Blanchot immediately pulls back from completely discouraging the writer, by alluding to the fact that a "force of writing" is also a kind of disaster, and thus the two are part of a complex weave, which is both inclusionary *and* exclusionary at the same time.

Blanchot's insistence that it is impossible to be "contemporaries of the disaster" and that the disaster "escapes the very possibility of experience" makes the figure of the removed witness not only possible, but absolutely necessary: the removal of thought (the utter impossibility to think the disaster in the moment of the disaster) is part and parcel of the *temporal* removal. While it is unclear here if the moment of the disaster is *always before* any "time" attempting to experience or represent it, or whether disaster for Blanchot is actually atemporal, in either case, *if any witnessing is possible, it is only that of the removed kind*. This line of thinking also answers objections regarding the authenticity of any kind of removed witnessing: here, *all* witnessing is only removed. It is also impossible to 'lose' the event or disaster when narrating it across spatial and temporal boundaries, because, in a way, all is already lost *in* the first or original encounter; the spatial and temporal boundaries around the disaster already make the "first hand" experience a removed one. (This kind of confrontation with the event or disaster also sheds some light on the temporality in Richter's poem: "The Dream of the Man Who Dived" definitely represents a disaster that is *never* at the actual site of representation: temporal frame of the narrator is just slightly before the Warsaw Pact invasion, while the temporal

frame of the author is just before 1989. This interesting gesture of trying to *anticipate* an important event *in retrospect* may be Richter's way of dealing with the irreconcilable repulsion between presentation and representation).

Giorgio Agamben's narrative of the "lacuna" puts a clearer marker on the rather elusive argument above, when he explains in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, why survivors can not be what he calls "complete witnesses:" "The 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who 'touched bottom': the Muslims, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony" (34). Agamben's approach here is unusual, in that the survivor – who in everyday rhetoric is viewed as the most authentic witness of them all – is figured here as the absolute fake, the one who is only able to witness via a kind of simulation, perhaps an imagining of what it would have been like to be a "complete witness." This imagining, of course, is not only removed, but also involves an impossibility. It is important to note here that the witnesses "by proxy" are not trying to represent the event, the disaster. Rather, already, their challenge is to witness a "missing testimony". There is a radical disconnect, a tear in the desired continuum caused by death here: the witnesses by proxy are called to only *imagine* what the complete testimony would have been. According to Agamben, and by extension Blanchot, the only direct, complete, or authentic witness is the dead one.

At this point, one needs to return to the important differentiation between the concept of the event and that of the disaster. While until now these terms were used interchangeably in this chapter, this was only done in order to eventually better point

out their difference. Let us return to Blanchot for just a moment. He further clarifies the relationship between the disaster and experience when he states, “We feel that there can not be any experience of the disaster, even if one were to understand disaster to be the ultimate experience. This is one of its features: it impoverishes all experience, withdraws from experience all authenticity; it keeps its vigil only when night watches without watching over anything” (51). In this passage, it becomes clearer why the concept of the event might be a more fruitful ground on which to anchor the removed witness than the concept of the disaster. The event allots somewhat more possibility for the witness. First, it does not kill off *all* of its witnesses, and as seen in my earlier discussion of the concept of the event, it is less closed to the possibility of experience or representation than the concept of the disaster, while being very careful to not allot it full, facile possibility. (In other words, what needs to be avoided here is the disaster of the disaster, namely, the destruction of the witness). The event ideally *encourages* an enrollment of witnesses on its behalf. Thus, the differentiation between the disaster and the event parallels the differentiation between of an almost entirely impossible representation of experience, and a less impossible representation of experience¹².

The “complete witnesses” Agamben speaks of are obviously only possible with respect to the ultimate disaster, while with “milder” events, the possibility to witness, albeit still a complicated one, increases. Here, my project clearly branches off from Holocaust studies and towards the problem of the consciousness-forming

¹² I would like to point out that by differentiating the disaster and the event in this way, I am in no way suggesting any kind of qualitative ranking of the event vis-à-vis the disaster. Simply put, the concept of the event just produces the kind of removed witness I am more interested in.

events in Eastern Europe spanning from the late twentieth century until today (in my case mostly the events leading up to, happening in, and resulting from the crucial year 1989). This region was (and is) faced with a multitude of perhaps at times less disastrous, but vastly more varied, and nonetheless (occasionally) traumatizing series of events. This is also why the wider, more liberal definition of the event (the event as a potentiality for possibly a disaster *as well as/and /or* a vast improvement over the given status of the situation) is more useful to my project than that of the disaster. It is also this additional sense of anticipation or possibility at hand in the concept of the event (as opposed to the sense of loss and impossibility in the concept of the disaster) which allows my project to not only examine the recent past, but also to keep part of my focus turned toward a future. While it is impossible to ignore the close relationship between the event and the disaster, formulating a future within the concept of the disaster remains impossible.

In order to situate and locate the removed witness of Eastern Europe vis-à-vis the vast amounts of literature produced under the rubric of Holocaust or trauma studies, one should ask the question: What makes the Eastern European removed witness specific? Whence the need to define her/him and speak about her/him? The answer which I will outline both theoretically and with the examination and close reading of essential literary texts in my forthcoming chapters will involve the way in which this witness has experienced crucial events and/or traumas in a fundamentally different manner from the way in which a typical Holocaust victim would have. This is the difference between the Holocausts' witness/victim narrating an account of an immensely traumatic event and its extensive consequences that nonetheless had a

shorter duration, versus the Eastern European witness narrating a multitude of extremely varied accounts with varied degrees of trauma inflicted over *decades and generations*. In the Eastern European narratives, there is also a critical concern not only with the past, but also with the way in which *these narratives can become crucial interventions on the way to a future*, which is always imagined or alluded to as more than the past or the present. Thus, often times dystopic narratives also include crucial utopias.

The specification of the Eastern European witness' trauma is *not* an attempt to essentialize the types of trauma or narratives that this witness goes through (in fact, removed witnessing is possible and absolutely necessary in other geographical and historical spaces). *Rather, it is an attempt to locate the specificity of this experience in the limit-space/outskirts of Holocaust and trauma studies*. Since, as mentioned, the original traumatic event is much vaguer, multiple, and dispersed over time in Eastern Europe, its digestion warrants a different approach as well. Jacob D. Lindy and Robert Jay Lifton explain the near impossibility and simultaneous need to formulate the Soviet and post-Soviet era trauma as separate from other traumas of the century in their volume *Beyond Invisible Walls: The Psychological Legacy of Soviet Trauma*, a work which gives voice to local professionals (mostly psychologists or psychiatrists), and through them, also to their patients. When explaining the overwhelming central goal of their work, Lindy and Lifton introduce the idea that the twentieth century in Eastern Europe produced three “successive waves of violence and death” (15). They continue:

For those caught in these waves, there were traumatic losses and radical discontinuities in their experience of themselves, their families, and their world. Soviet political repression is the...primary source of trauma and loss for the patients and their therapists. But political repression became so folded in with war, genocide, famine, natural and man-made disasters, and disease that precise distinctions are difficult. Survivors find that they cannot isolate an atmosphere of political repression from these additional catastrophic traumas which complicate them (15).

While the literal sorting out of Soviet-era traumas may not be possible or even desirable, it can be deduced from the above that in order to *give voice* to such traumas, one needs to have at least an inclination towards this task. It is less important here to place blame than it is to allow for alternate retellings of history and experience, ultimately and ideally resulting in at least partial cures of trauma.

Apart from the scientific dialogue-style accounts such as that of Lindy and Lifton's, a multitude of fictional autobiographies, slightly altered historical narratives (*courting* the event instead of nailing it down) are prevalent. These fluid styles are different from the more straightforward diary-style narratives much more common with Holocaust survivors. Yet another source of complication is the fact that while the crimes of the Nazi regime (excepting the events which occurred on German soil itself), were done by "others" (i.e. by entities stemming from outside a particular nation), more often than not, the crimes of the various socialist regimes were done by "us" to "ourselves."¹³

Within Trauma Studies, the emergence of a serious approach to the events in Eastern Europe after and not related to the Holocaust has become an all but impossible challenge for several reasons. First, Trauma Studies have gradually

¹³ This may be a partial answer to the question regarding the reasons for the disinterest of the current Eastern European vis-à-vis his/her *most recent* history. It is more comfortable to leave the direct or implied guilt of the self (or those close to oneself) unexamined.

become equated exclusively with Holocaust Studies. Secondly, although Trauma Studies do deal with Eastern Europe, this region gets treated almost exclusively as a crime scene. The actual Eastern Europe is effaced with an implied suggestion that all Eastern Europeans are guilty by association for stemming from a barbaric place. My goal is to complicate and add dimension to this reading, thus bringing Trauma Studies, Eastern European Area Studies and Literature into a closer and less tortured relationship.

IV. Writing Witnessing

The removed witness of Eastern European literature is always looking westward, with the intent to facilitate the reemergence of the West's limit-space: Eastern Europe, at a moment when even the designator "eastern" is rapidly disappearing. This removed witness' goal is not so much to recount an accurate laundry list of traumas, damages or injustices as encountered by the Eastern European during World War II, in 1956, 1968, or 1989, as it is to *increase the West's literacy about the history and culture of a region so radically different from the West, yet one which – with, for instance, nonsensical statements about "the end of history"¹⁴ – is increasingly and alarmingly being considered "the same" as the West.*

(The problem at hand is not necessarily that the *name* "eastern" is disappearing, as much as the fact that some of the potential the region gained post-1989 is waning: with Eastern Europe's ascendance to NATO, the European Union, even with the exchange of the designator "eastern" for the designator "new," what is

¹⁴ This particular statement stems from Francis Fukuyama's piece *The End of History and the Last Man*.

being gradually lost is the initial moment – and momentum – of *potential* and, at the risk of sounding naïve, *independent agency*. This potential the Velvet Revolution helped create was one for a perspective regarding both the regime which was just overthrown, as well the one which was prevalent in Western Europe: for a brief period of time, it seemed possible to regard both Communism and Capitalism from a distance, with a real possibility of an informed and true choice. Importantly, this choice did not have to be either of these systems. Obviously, this moment of prospective has faded, which can most clearly be seen in Donald Rumsfeld's redesignation of Eastern Europe as New Europe as a gesture of reward for Eastern European countries who by backing the war on Iraq– according to Rumsfeld – have proved their relevance in the post-Cold War world order. Subsequently, one could argue that the figure of the removed witness is a product of wishful thinking: if this type of witnessing is done and received successfully, perhaps it will manage to *return and renew* some of the missed potential of the Eastern region of Europe, now so entrenched in Capitalism and multinational organizations. Of course, one does need to realize that this hope for a return and renewal of potential can never be the same as a return to the moment of 1989; this is obviously impossible. Setting the goal of a renewed isolation and neutrality of Eastern Europe is a project and manifesto far beyond the scope or even intention of this project).

After traversing the multiple levels of removal at hand (the removed witness' distance from the “original” event, the Western reader's even further removal from said event in addition her/his removal from the culture in which said event occurred, the frequent narration of a fictional life around an actual event, etc.), one may wonder

what thread could be woven through a complicated “delivery” system such as this. This would have to be a thread that could allow the pieces of literature involving witnessing to become autonomous and mean independently of the social context that produced them. The common thread allowing the cultural “transplant” to survive on its journey westward is to be found on the level of the personal *and* in the technique of the narrative.

Obviously, this ideal of literacy to be accomplished via literature relies, at its core, on the universal appeal and comprehensibility of the narrative technique. As Hayden White argues in his essay “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,”

As a panglobal fact of culture, narrative and narration are less problems than simply data...narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific. We may not be able fully to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have relatively less difficulty *understanding* a story from another culture, however exotic that culture may appear to us...This suggests that far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality can be transmitted (1-2).

It is impossible to transplant, let alone translate somewhat intelligibly a monumental event and its collective experience into a location entirely unfamiliar with and detached from said event. Without first establishing a specific kind of cultural literacy to draw from, such a task becomes overwhelming. White defines narrative here as the common denominator across cultural divides in both *formulating* the knowledge of the writer and in enabling the *comprehension* by the removed reader. Thus,

narrative is an essential step on the way to cultural literacy. Being that the removed witness is faced with a series of impossibilities and distances as discussed in this chapter, it is essential that s/he have this somewhat less problematic tool of narrative at her/his disposal.

It remains important to point out that neither the aspiration to (re)establish a line of communication between the East and the West via literature, nor the goal to establish a new relationship of cultural responsibility between the writer and his/her readers, are radically new projects. The former task has been embarked upon innumerable times, including some strands of postcolonial literature, as well as Russian literature produced at the turn of the century. Russell Berman's theory of literary sociology, which he develops in his book *The Rise of the Modern German Novel: Crisis and Charisma*, makes essential points about the writer/reader relationship. While his theories involve the moment of what Berman terms "modernist rupture" of 1900 – a moment different from the one examined in the project at hand – the call to responsibility on the part of both the reader and the writer provides an essential precedent for a similar call vis-à-vis 1989:

Rather than examining the subjective intentionality of the individual author, literary sociology inquires into the structures of communication facilitated by the text. By intervening in its sociocultural environment, the text undertakes a project of social transformation, and thus a political project, which reciprocally determines the formal features of the text itself. Literary sociology therefore examines the social relations of literature, especially those produced by the text and generating communicative structures between author and reader in terms of traditional, legal, or charismatic models (53).

Berman defines charisma as "a fundamental break with established logic, a leap sui generis, an act of grace..." (52). The concept of charisma here is a redefinition of

utopia: it manages to retain the innovative momentum implied in utopia, while changing it into an *attainable* goal. Deduced from the quote above, it is the redefinition and innovation of the writer/reader relationship that produces a potential for this charisma, a potential for a new community. Berman, again: “the goal of modern writing [is] the establishment of a qualitatively new social relationship or a new community within literature, between authors and readers, that would at the same time extend beyond literature and generate a *new social community*”(52, italics mine). It is this kind of “journey” from the writer to the reader all the way to a larger community that I am interested in. (Charisma for Berman also signifies a break in/from linear progress. In this way, Berman’s idea of charisma draws a significant parallel with Badiou’s concept of the event, where innovation and hope can only be brought about with the simultaneous destruction or rejection of the status quo, what Berman calls an “iron cage”).

The parallel between Berman’s reading of Weber’s work in Wilhelmine Germany and my reading of Eastern European authors vis-à-vis the rest of the world is the *creation of communities* which for cultural, political, or (most obviously) geographical reasons would otherwise be impossible. These are different kinds of imagined communities from those evoked by Benedict Anderson: they are based not on partially fictionalized narratives of exceptionality tied to a particular geographic location. Rather, they are based on partially fictionalized narratives creating a set of knowledges that invoke political responsibility, “exporting” a particular geographic location or a particular historical moment.

In this manner, the process of writing, publishing and promoting literature becomes an entirely political project: the work that the piece of literature is supposed to do is not completed with the act of reading. Rather, the reader's reception is only where the literature's labor *begins*. The content of this kind of charismatic literature is so charged that it inevitably also changes "the formal features of the text itself."

As Berman states at the very outset of his project when pointing out other authors' lack of involvement with the question of "modernist rupture," "An answer is provided here by *treating the rhetorical structures of the texts as aspects of a communicative strategy* designed to produce a relationship with the recipient, a relationship that is always social and therefore responsive to the social crisis" (iv, italics mine). This assertion by Berman provides an idea of just how content is supposed to help determine form: rhetorical formations such as figures of speech (metaphors, personifications, etc.) are being *employed* with very clear intentions. The proverbial original intent of such figures of speech – to achieve beauty or vividness of style – is infused with *new, political* objectives of addressing a *specific* intended reader. Thus, this is an important way in which a piece of aesthetically pleasing literature becomes a highly political piece of removed witnessing. In my specific case, the implied reader is predominantly a Western one, since the level of detail, explanation, and *performance*¹⁵ given in these pieces of removed witnessing would clearly not be necessary for the indigenous Eastern reader who would be familiar with such idiosyncrasies.

¹⁵ With performance, I mean a literal kind of parading of the Eastern Other for the benefit of Western eyes. This technique is frequently used (by authors like Thomas Brussig or Christa Wolf) as an attention-getter within the constraints of the world of the novel, but, more importantly, it is used as a very obvious parallel to get attention *outside* the constraints of the world of the novel.

Obviously, this type of writer/reader theory *absolutely rejects* the idea of social or political irrelevance of art (in this case the written word), and has no use for dispassionately detached art. This opens it up to charges of utilitarianism which may not be entirely unfounded. However, such charges do not make this type of literary intervention project any less important.

It is in the translation and transport of one collective experience to another that individual witnessing, as defined here, becomes essential. It becomes a tool by which a collective experience can be made intelligible *via a personal narrative*. As Shoshana Felman argues,

To testify...is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community...To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences (204).

Witnessing here seeks to create a community; a community that is not only literate about the general facts and aftereffects of “an occurrence,” but a community that also will, via the absorption of this testimony, become similarly passionate about the events it just witnessed, by extension. Understanding a personal narrative – punctuated with a sense of passion for the collective experience and a sense of *urgency and responsibility* to further the understanding of the same – is a much less daunting task. This is especially true for Western cultures, where personal narratives of great hardship followed by great success (just think of the – by now mythical – narratives of self-made men ‘pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps’ or

‘pulling themselves out of the swamp by their own hair’) are still venerated and aspired to. There is, of course, a danger of loss of the ‘purity’ of the original message by using codes of communication which are as strongly embedded in the implied reader’s culture as these, however, translation – whether literal or figurative – always requires a certain price. It is also clear that the question at hand is that of the autonomy of the work of art. If art is socially produced, then the removed witness is a particularly skilled medium of transmission from one social situation to another, and, vis-à-vis the work of art, a giver of autonomy.

Felman further fleshes out the relationship of translation and history when she uses her redefinition of translation to expand on Badiou’s notion of the event as a “performance of a radical discontinuity” by making it historical:

Translation...itself becomes a metaphor for history, not only in that it demands the rigor of a history devoid of pathos, but in that it opens up the question of *how to continue when the past, precisely, is not allowed any continuance*. Translation is the metaphor of a new relation to the past, a relation that cannot resemble, furthermore, any past relation to the past but that consists, essentially, in the historical performance of a radical discontinuity (162).

It becomes clear here that Felman’s reading of the relationship between translation and the past has a lot in common with Badiou’s relationship between the event and the situation. The relationship is not a parallel. Rather, translation, in its looser definition as a “new relation to the past” and a facilitator of a radical discontinuity could be seen as the tool or rhetoric that the witness has at his/her service when working in fidelity to the event, thus aiding in the abolishment of the situation. Thus, the politically infused figurative language derived from Berman above is precisely this rhetoric that is faithful to the event. As seen from the above quote, however, the

rupture with a problematic flow of history still includes a radically *new* relationship to the past (while in Badiou, the concept of the event could be seen as making a clean – and desperately needed – amputation of the past). It is important to keep in mind this redefined notion of translation, as this is the pedigree of the language and rhetoric I will argue the authors of the literary pieces I examine are using.

The process at hand, in other words, is that of a translation of collective experience by the removed witness into individual memory which then hopes to connect to another individual memory across cultural boundaries¹⁶. And, ultimately, if this process is greatly successful, the readers of the removed witness's narratives will form a culturally literate and impassioned collective of their own. *Thus, the simplified trajectory is that of a journey of a collective experience to another collective's experience, via the individual, where the single individual is used as a tool of translation.* This may be seen as an updated version of Berman's literary sociologist, or Felman's "international reporter," who is in a "consistent movement toward the outside and toward the Other, a movement which repeatedly combines geographical displacements with the formulation of...philosophical and analytical reflections" (247)¹⁷.

It remains important to point out that the genre of testimonial literature is always inevitably a hybrid, one which – by its very existence – blurs the boundaries

¹⁶It is important to speak of the blurring of boundaries, since it is the liminal spaces that always harbor the most transformative (and utopian) potential, while also being most telling about the shortcomings of whatever two or more aspects/areas/fields the liminal space is between.

¹⁷ Here it becomes again apparent why the concept of the event is more useful than that of the disaster. While the disaster will always remain an Other, an outside to even its closest witnesses, in this context, the removed witness needs to confront an entirely different Other on his/her way to transport and transplant experience to a spatial and temporal Other.

between history and memory, between fiction, autobiography and non-fiction, and, in a similar constellation, between truth and lie. The act of witnessing is a contradiction, since – as pointed out in the above discussion of Agamben – when one is directly present in the midst of an event, it is the very immediacy of the event (thus the very factor which should imbue the witness with authority and authenticity) that takes away the possibility of reflection and contextualization inevitable for an intelligible testimonial narrative, thus making the act of witnessing a failed one. On the other hand, with even the slightest removal from the immediate presence of the historical event, the witness becomes susceptible to reservations about the necessary fictionalization of her/his narrative (which, paradoxically, resulted from the above mentioned reflection and contextualization).

The dividing line between the writer and the reader (or the speaker and the audience) tantamount to that between the teacher and the student (or the professional and the amateur) so essential for traditional historical narratives which rely on this impenetrable barrier, is necessarily breached once it becomes clear that the most important aspect of witnessing is *not* the cult of personality represented in the writer at the source, but rather the *vector of movement and intersubjectivity* always in anticipation of a transformative arrival, an arrival with an impassioned literacy in sight. As Harriet Davidson puts it,

The act of witnessing, as a performative act, unsettles established boundaries between writer and reader (or speaker and audience), between fiction and history, between experience and ideology, even between the past and future of memory and desire. The positions of speaker and audience are crucial here, and in fact testimony establishes a *contract* with its audience different from a literary one. The testimony *demand*s belief...though not in the historical accuracy of its story. The testimony is not a recital of history, but is the

creation of a history through an intersubjective process in which both the speaker and hearer gain their witnessing subjectivity through the new knowledge of a shared situation. Both subjectivity and knowledge are created in the testimony. Witnessing and testifying are always, in literature as much as in the legal system, performative acts, relying on complex notions of being *here* and being *there* (165, some italics mine).

Dominick La Capra alludes to both a similarly crucial role of the witness as well as a similar blurring of the boundaries of genre in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* when he states, “I would argue that the response of even secondary witnesses (including historians) to traumatic events must involve *empathic unsettlement* that should register in one’s very mode of address in ways revealing both similarities and differences across genres (such as history and literature)” (47, italics mine). La Capra differentiates here between the victims (i.e. the primary witnesses) and the secondary witnesses: the victims relive or act out the past, while secondary witnesses relate to the past via empathic unsettlement. While this empathic unsettlement is a more removed, and again secondary way to relate to the original event, it still carries in it traces of reliving or acting out. Just as the primary victim is trapped in a compulsion to repeat until his/her trauma is worked through, so the secondary witness is committed to/in a cycle of narration until he/she is heard. The notion of acting out is still present in the removed witness, albeit in a more figurative manner. Related to the discussion of performance above, rather than just a performing *of* something (for oneself more than anyone else), removed witnessing becomes a figurative performing *of something for* someone.

It is implied both in Davidson’s as well as La Capra’s statements that witnessing inevitably also complicates the division between telling ‘the truth’ and

lying, since the ultimate goal of bearing witness is not necessarily a double-checked, surgically accurate recounting of figures, names and numbers, as it is a rendering of that which transpired intelligible. Witnessing always has the questions “Why does this matter? Why should I (the reader) care about this?” as its ultimate challenge.

Hayden White pursues a similar point from a slightly different angle when he states, “The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries” (23). While at first glance (using the most common misreading of historiography as an unproblematic, straightforward ‘story of what really happened’), one is tempted to argue that historiography needs to be paired with ‘truth,’ and removed witnessing should be paired with ‘lie,’ complicating this constellation proves quite telling. Since it is a basic part of White’s argument that real events get connected into strings of fictionalized narratives and are in this ‘wrapper’ *made* into very specific, intended meanings, it becomes clear that at its best, historiography is a complicated combination of ‘truth,’ *and* ‘lie.’ It is by now clear that removed witnessing is such combination as well. From this vantage point, removed witnessing dares to openly do that which historiography only reveals after closer inspection, namely, the outward and unapologetic reliance on the devices of fiction.

V. And Finally

In order to further complicate the above concepts of “passing down” and “passing across” of cultural literacy as functions essential to both traditional and

removed witnessing, one should not neglect to point out that in addition to a “looking westward,” the witness also performs a “looking towards the future.” More precisely, the witnessing by the Eastern European witness is often done with a future in mind which will allow the west to lose its fear of its eastern other (its eastern “second”) and also gain an interest in understanding this other, and thus *itself*. As Tyrus Miller puts it in his essay “The Burning Babe: Children, Film, Narrative, and the Figures of Historical Witness” when discussing Hayden White’s notion of “historical figuration,”

“In [historical figuration] and by [historical figuration] reality is at once represented as an object of contemplation and presented as a prize, a pretium, an object of desire worthy of human effort to comprehend and control it.” In other words, the figures of history that White is considering...are at once attempts to grasp historical reality and to project that grasp into a time in which the historical fact or event may be recalled and redeemed, the past’s power drawn upon in a present moment of resistance or its violence dispelled in a new moment of retrospective revaluation. [White points out the text’s] figural doubleness to comprehend historically and to transcend projectively... (208-209).

Historical figuration is presented here almost as a magical tool which, if used correctly, will manage a productive short circuit between the past and present, one that will manage to reconfigure the past as not only a faded footnote to the present, but as an essential and indiscriminate *part* of the present. Thus, the witness’ looking towards the future is just as concerned with the present as the past. It is in this way then that a subject of an event can act in fidelity to the event, as evoked by Badiou. In this case, the removed witness’ ‘faith’ entails transferring the material seen and thought at/about the ‘true events’ Badiou speaks of via historical figuration into

precisely a “present moment of resistance” and induce a “moment of retrospective evaluation.”

One of the untold stories of the post-1989 world is the peculiar identity crisis that the West plunged into almost immediately following the fall of the iron curtain. With the Soviet satellite states disappearing, the thick red line delimiting who “we” are and who “they” are dissolved into thin air in the western imagination, and, I would argue, is still a source of discomfort. Now, that “they” can travel freely and can possibly be all around “us,” are they part of “us”? If so, who is the enemy? And more importantly, who are “we”? The utter denial to acknowledge such crises is still seen today in James Bond movies made *long after* 1989, mystery novels written *long after* 1989, even the Oscar-winning movie *Million Dollar Baby*, where the Eastern is still figured as violent, mysterious, harsh, masculine, unfair, and devoid humanity¹⁸. It is this type of exoticization (a result of ignorance and disinterest) that my project is aimed at overcoming.

In a very closely related matter, the other kind of “we” which is suffering a crisis is the “we” of the collectivities in post-Communist countries. In addition to the identity crisis Eastern Europe plunged into after 1989 and still is facing today, the collective “we” is confronted with the inevitable Communist stigma any present evocation of collectivity brings to mind. As Alain Badiou puts it in his essay “Philosophy and the ‘Death of Communism,’”

Will the evocation of death allow us to find an appropriate way of naming what we have witnessed? Yet are we solely witnesses? And besides, who is this ‘we’ that I am interrogating, and what could be said concerning *what* it is?

¹⁸ In an even more curious shift, the “old” enemy is being fused with the “new” enemy in Western pop culture texts, where the Serbians, and most recently the Arabs/Muslims are the new Russians.

There is no longer a ‘we,’ there hasn’t been for a long time. The ‘we’ entered into its twilight well before the ‘death of communism’. Or rather, the dismantlement of the Soviet Party-State is nothing more than the objective crystallization (because objectivity, or representation, is always the State, or a state, a state of the situation) of the fact that a certain thought of ‘we’ has been inoperative for more than twenty years (126).

Here, Badiou is complicating the notion of witnessing *via* a pointed complication of collectivity. First, the implication is that the deterioration of the utopian concept of collectivity was not something that magically revealed itself in 1989. Rather, it was present since the early years of the communist regime. Second, whatever corruption the system was under in the Eastern Block countries after roughly the mid-1950s did not have just ‘pure’ witnesses observing these occurrences. Instead, large numbers of subjects were also *implicated* in these activities. Thus, the current rapid decline of collectivity and a clear and uncanny silence about the latter years of the communist regimes (as well as the moments of change) *within* the countries of Eastern Europe is a clear sign of a denial of any collective responsibility. At the risk of generalizing and oversimplifying the situation, I would argue that most Eastern European societies are still in the midst of the era of deep lack of fascination and interest in working out, working through, and representing their most recent history.

This silence is yet another reason why witnessing as discussed in this chapter is so essential. There is a potential here for a mutually beneficial relationship between what used to be the western and eastern sides of the Cold War. The formulation and rehabilitation of a certain “we” will make it easier to re-package and transport it westward. On the other hand, the witnessing about “us” (which inevitably includes the historical, political and cultural complications that made “us” into who

“we” are) also helps to facilitate a (re)formulation of just who it is “we” are and how “we” want to be seen by “them.” Westward-oriented witnessing by the Eastern European *can not* only have an effect on the West. Ultimately and ideally, it needs to have an auto-therapeutic effect for the Eastern European him/herself.

Russell Berman points out a slightly different problem when he critiques the texts of “declining realism” during the early twentieth century. What he identifies as bureaucratization results in a loss of “communication [potential] among readers,” which is obviously an important standard for Berman. He continues, “As culture is transformed into a commodity, it becomes an object of mere display, robbed of its traditional substance” (53). What Berman critiques here is very close to what I am concerned with. I concentrate on the novels of Dorota Maslowska, Thomas Brussig and Christa Wolf as well as the poetry of Milan Richter specifically because these are, via their accounts of removed witnessing, sites of resistance to the kind of commodification of (in this case Eastern-European) cultures and thus entire societies that Berman condemns. My project is to analyze these pieces of literature as promising alternatives to the popular and easy transcriptions of Eastern Europe into uncomplicated, ignorant slogans and caricatures which support a very specific task the West has allotted for Eastern Europe. This is also the type of “present moment resistance” Miller speaks of that needs to benefit from removed witnessing.

**Chapter Two:
The Eastern European Poet as Witness: Milan Richter**

There is no content, no formal category of the literary work that does not, however transformed and however unawaresly, derive from the empirical reality from which it has escaped.

-Theodor Adorno

Poetry is one of the places where a rewriting of subjectivity can happen.

-Harriet Davidson

My corner of Europe, owing to the extraordinary and lethal events that have been occurring there, comparable only to violent earthquakes, affords a peculiar perspective. As a result, all of us who come from those parts appraise poetry slightly differently from the majority of my audience, for we tend to view it as witness and participant in one of mankind's major transformations.

-Czeslaw Milosz

I. On the Poet

Poetry, due to its abundant figurative language as well as some other key factors which I will discuss in this chapter, has the advantage of providing a hiding place for the witness in times of trepidation. This kind of hiding in plain sight allows the witness (in this case the poet) the luxury of “speaking” despite appearing silent (or at the very least complacent). Comparing witnessing in poetry to the witnessing potential in literature written “for the drawer” highlights the important possibilities poetry provides. The poet’s (and by extension, the event’s) *hiding* behind poetic figurations has some similarities, as well as some significant differences to the literature of various forms and genres written by intellectuals trapped in totalitarian regimes.

Writers who wrote exclusively “for the drawer” had to hide what they wrote for decades. While there was an impetus, a strong passion at expression (events had to be formulated, witnessed to *at the time of their conception*), it was impossible to

“listen” to them, distribute them in the same historical moment. Witnessing had to wait until such time when this “listening” became possible. Thus, while expression was taking place, *reception* got delayed, producing state-imposed recluses, who were both passionately witnessing *and* impotently silent. In the case of poetic witnessing on the other hand, it was much more accessible since, literally, the “wall” of figurative speech and imagery – while certainly at times impenetrable – was much more accessible than the barrier of a desk drawer.

The poetry of witness allows for the initiated and interested reader to unveil and discern its message. Hence, it is more productive than writing for the drawer even during repressive times. With “drawer writing,” the material is entirely inaccessible. In the latter case, the author faces a second challenge (the first being the writing of the piece of witnessing): he/she has to make the right decision as to when and how it would be right and timely to release this long-hidden piece to the public. This act, this *second “writing,”* is a more performative “writing” *for* the world, as opposed to the more therapeutic *first writing* of/for the event and the self. Importantly, this opening up to the world could produce just as much anxiety as the first writing and censure. In addition, while with poetic witnessing, there is also a possibility of a gradual, well-dosed delivery of witnessing (similar perhaps to the planned, need-based delivery of intravenous morphine where the patient decides when some, a lot, or none is needed), with the one-time and often times inevitably grandiose act of publishing of the writing done for the drawer, such subtlety is impossible.

Milan Richter's narrative on the repercussions of censure and "drawer writing" (published under "Author's Note" in his collection *Angel with Black Feathers*¹⁹) is a fascinating case in point. Richter recounts his reaction to the tough era of Normalization (which he calls the "dark 70s") and to the 11 years of having been silenced (1976-1987):

Many poems from those times would only have a documentary value today, while with others, I have a relationship like a grandfather would have with his grandchildren: uncritical, genuine. I know that they have helped me survive, even though they were allowed to only "flicker in drawers." There is anger, jealousy, irony, frustration in them. Sometimes, there is a child hiding behind the overgrowth of words and images; the child is pointing its finger at the naked emperor. Now, I have at times thinned out that overgrowth and at times, I have dragged out that child into the light. But these adjustments are not significant: they resemble those a grandmother would make combing and washing her grandchildren before their return from vacation to the big city...from each of my collections, I had to sacrifice 10-15 poems to the ancient communist overlord (155, translation mine).

Via the clear and strong language of deep love, care and loss, Richter demonstrates here the profound influence of censure on the poet: to the censored poet, the loss of the possibility of expression was not simply a loss of abstract words comprised of impersonal, mechanic letters which could be replaced by other, more acceptable ones at any time. Rather, as is evident from the quote above, the loss of a voice to Richter is similar to an actual *physical* loss, a loss of a part of oneself, of one's own flesh and blood, as is demonstrated by Richter's analogy between the poet with his poems and a grandfather with his grandchildren²⁰.

¹⁹ The original title in Slovak is *Anjel s ciernym perim*.

²⁰ The last sentence of the block quote above is significant. Richter is drawing out a telling parallel between feudal overlords and serfs/commoners in Central Europe, and the censors and poets during the times of communist totalitarianism. Richter combines this imagery into the "communist overlord," who required various kinds of sacrifice for his tolerance and "protection," just as a feudal lord would have required large portions of the serf's harvest and goods for using the lord's land, and as a sign of

The relationship of the poet to his/her censored/“drawered” poem is a complicated one: it consists of a profound resentment that it was not allowed to “mean” when it needed to (and that now it is nothing more than a distant, irrelevant echo from the past). On the other hand, however, it consists of an acute awareness of the enormous potential those same poems may have (poems in drawers as bombs waiting to explode). When poems are censored, or even when the censored poems are allowed to mean with a significant delay, there is always a sense of loss, a loss of urgency, a need – albeit small – of re-translation from the moment of writing *for* the moment of its reading.

This kind of “second writing,” publishing at a time when it is “ok” to publish as opposed to the time when it was highly dangerous to do so, is more *passé*, both in the sense of having less urgency, and in the literal sense of largely being *of the past*. The physical barrier of the drawer prevented the text in question from circulating in the society’s consciousness, thus imbuing any claims at resonance and presence (though made *in* the time of the event) with a sense of staleness. On the other hand, the metaphorical barrier of imagery and figures of speech in poetry did not prevent circulation in times of danger. *In fact, it is precisely this barrier which allowed for the presence of subversive poetry specifically in these times of danger.* The seed that was planted was not seen immediately, and not seen by everyone. However, it was

loyalty. Thus, the implication is that both, the feudal serf, and the poet under communism served a self-proclaimed demigod who required sacrifices to be appeased, and, of course, gave nothing in return. Were one to deduce Richter’s stands on the larger historical developments in Eastern Europe from the sentence at hand, one could assume that Richter’s imagery reflects the persuasion that not much historical progress took place between feudalism and communism. The power relationship was still very much that of the oppressor and the oppressed.

still present, always on-the-way-to-being-read²¹, available to varieties of readers on various levels of meaning. This is precisely the strength of poetry as a form of removed witnessing: in dire times, it manages to use the very requirements of the form of poetry (elusive, figurative language, and multiple meanings) both as a tool of observation and guerilla critique against a repressive system, *as well as* a shroud of protection against those better left uninitiated.

While the association between witnessing and pain management referred to above is not exact, this comparison is telling nonetheless. Witnessing is, in various stages, a form of remembering, repeating, and, most importantly, working through. After all, it is the overcoming of a pathological silence that is at stake here. If one accepts Freud's premise that the compulsion to repeat is a form of remembering and further that working through occurs when the resistance of the patient's acting out (repeating) is overcome (Freud 150-151), one can further elucidate the differences between the process and impact of "drawer writing" and poetic witnessing.

I am drawing out the following parallel here: while, in Freud's scenario, it is the therapist who ultimately cures the patient of his/her pathologies via extensive speaking and an ultimate working through, here, it is the author/witness who achieves the same cure by making his/her culture speak and thus also alleviating western audiences' ignorance of that same culture. In the "writing for the drawer," the only thing that happens in the first stage of writing is a remembering and repeating *for the writer* (sans any communication or contact, sans any bringing up/extending of the

²¹ Of course, this advantage of being always on-the-way-to-being-read went hand in hand with the disadvantage of being always on-the-way-to-being-discovered. Even so, given the elusive nature of figurative language, the process of proving a piece of poetry as anti-government or rebellious would be increasingly difficult and lengthy in the latter decades of the communist regime in Eastern Europe.

event to the present). Only in the second stage (the publication) can remembering, repeating and working through take place *for the reader*, and a final working through can be initiated for the writer.

In this case, there is a telling parallel between the resistance of the patient which the therapist has to overcome on the road to working through in the Freudian scenario, and the “resistance” of censure. This censure should be seen as a totalitarian society’s resistance to an always uncomfortable and dangerous return of the repressed (the speaking out of the silenced). The advantage of poetic witnessing on the other hand is that the stages of remembering, repeating and working through can occur intermittently at times, separately at others, always adjusting that which needs to be said to that which the reader (or society) is ready to hear at a specific time²². The constant (possibility of) repetition is also of the utmost importance here, since it is *the way* to bring an event of the past *into* the present, and it is one of the classic figurative techniques of the poetic form.

Based on the discussion of removed witnessing in my first chapter, it is possible to deduce that witnessing could be considered a distant relation to the talking cure, with the significant difference that it is executed via the written word. Further, it is necessary to complicate the analyst-patient relationship vis-à-vis the multi-layered pattern of witnessing I am outlining. If one sees a kind of “cure” as the ultimate goal of witnessing, this cure does not only need to happen on the “patient’s” side, but on the “analyst’s” side as well. When considering the triangular constellation of the

²² The advantage I am referring to here is not exclusive to poetry as a form of witnessing. It is, however, exclusive to those forms of witnessing using *highly figurative language* as their medium. Thus, following this definition, it is most prevalent in poetry.

author (the Eastern European removed witness), his/her society of origin, and the Western society (the destination of/for the witnessed material), assigning the “patient” and “therapist” functions to these parties becomes more problematic than it may seem at first glance.

The author operates in the role of the analyst when s/he makes his/her own culture “speak” as a patient, and thus helps it overcome its pathological silences. At the same time, however, the author can be seen as his/her *own* therapist, in that s/he is “speaking” out about and working through her/his own silences. These two designations are simultaneous, and one is obviously impossible without the other. Finally, the Western audience/reader can also be considered a patient, in that, via a reading of removed witnessing, it is getting cured of a different kind of silence, a silence due to ignorance. The author’s ultimate (and admittedly largely utopian) goal is achieved when the western audience adopts some of the author’s knowledge, goals and passions as its own. This kind of impassioned western audience can ultimately end up serving the original Eastern European society as a “therapist” by hearing it, responding to it, caring about it, and hence allowing it to become visible in all its complexities. Thus, rather than “finishing” or closing off a “chapter,” a circle of communication is opened, something is *begun*.

As can be seen from the above characterization of poetry as witnessing, it is clear that poetry is both more open than other genres (for creative and purposeful readings), and more highly coded (and thus capable of multiple meaning). The question then arises: Does the encoder (i.e. the author, the initial removed witness) also have the ability to somehow facilitate (prepare for) the process of decoding

already *within* the text itself? The answer here has to be two-fold. During totalitarian regimes, poetry with the potential for witnessing could be read by initiated literati, but not only by them. The larger audience-pool was the general public of the given repressive regime (and by proxy, the readers in some of the surrounding countries with totalitarian regimes). These readers were at least partially qualified as decoders of testimonial poetry's elusive witnessing by the virtue of their simple presence, fluency, and investment (in this case more similar to entrapment) within the particular regime. This ability to read witnessing-in-hiding did not depend on the reader's level of formal education as much as it did on his/her political allegiances and passions. The ability to decode often depended on the awareness of the presence of codes. On this level of reception, the author could rely on a common language, cultural codes, customs, idioms, etc.

On the second level of reception, however, matters become more complex. The question at the root of poetry (and for that matter, any other form or genre) as a vehicle for removed witnessing is: How does one *make* a witness out of the Western reader, a witness who is similar to the "first" reader (the reader from the original culture)? In other words, how does one make at least a slightly initiated, subtle reader out of the doubly-removed Westerner? The all-too-easy answer that only scratches the surface of the complexities of this issue is that the writer has to rid him/herself of the requirements of immediacy and currency that the traditional concept of witnessing often requires.

The western reader can often only give removed witnessing meaning *in hindsight*, when s/he knows what kinds of codes s/he should be looking for. This is

the case because unlike the “first,” more initiated reader, the western reader does not have an awareness of (or a cultural experience with) the presence of specific codes. When the reader is unaware of the presence of an additional level to discourse beyond the open and explicit, it becomes all but impossible to expect this reader to know what to decode (what to be suspicious of), let alone expect them to do a productive and at least partially accurate reading/decoding. Thus, when answering the above question about the ability of the encoder to instill hints at decoding within the same message, one should stress that these hints have to be much more literal, elementary, and obvious for the “second” Western witness to pick up on. Barring the classic, and frequently addressed, complexities of linguistic translation, the author has to tackle a *cultural translation*, a transfer, and a re-formulation of aspects which are matter-of-fact to the “first” reader. In this manner, through goals like cultural translation, the text – via a hidden presence of the author – creates its reading subjects.

While different authors approach this immense challenge in various ways, it will be useful here to briefly look at the poem “The Dream of the Man Who Dived” by Milan Richter, which I will fully analyze later in this chapter. In the original version of the poem (which was first published in the collection *Dreams from Black Days*²³ in the 1980s), there are no dates to locate neither the moment of writing nor the moment of the event narrated in the poem. The English language version, published in a multi-author book series on Slovak Poetry, has both a date of writing (November 1988) and a date of the event narrated (Summer 1968). Richter’s

²³ The original Slovak title is *Sny z ciernych dni*.

particular volume in this series (entitled *Roots in the Air*²⁴) is multilingual, including translations into English, German, Swedish, New-Norwegian, French and Spanish, very obviously intended for the Western audience.

The original version of the poem also has no mention of Alexander Dubcek by name (he is only referred to as “that gentleman with the long nose”). While this, coupled with the “gentleman’s” obvious leadership abilities, would have been enough for “first” readers to at least suspect the identity of the diver, this would obviously not have been enough for the “second,” Western reader. Hence, the *Roots in the Air* version adds a photograph of Dubcek actually diving, *and* the caption “The man who dived in summer 1968: Alexander Dubcek. The place: Spa Santovka, Western Slovakia.”²⁵

What would have most likely been a slightly disturbing poem about a family outing at a pool for the uninitiated western reader, now, with the numerous hints and decoding tools (the dates, the name, the photo, the place) becomes a powerful and complex piece of removed witnessing, a piece which not only recounts a specific and contextualized event witnessed by the author, but, more importantly, one that *invites and enlists* the western reader to be a removed witness of this event as well – to become knowledgeable and passionate both about the event just witnessed and the region from which the event stems. In this way, the tendency of witnessing to stretch the past into the present is actually useful for the western reader.

²⁴ The original Slovak title is *Korene vo vzduchu*.

²⁵ While the question regarding Richter’s actual presence at the spa is an interesting one, it is of no consequence in the kind of witnessing Richter wants to accomplish. Richter may or may not have taken the photograph which is included with the poem. Having certainty about this issue will not add to or subtract weight from the message of the poem.

Allowing the past to speak out in this literature of witness provides a contextualization that is unavailable in the initial moment of the event. This kind of bringing of the past into the present is particularly necessary and essential due to the common stigma Eastern Europe faces in the West, and especially in the USA: it is always already of the past, whether a dangerous and detested, or a nostalgic one (or, most often, a more complicated combination of the two). The way in which the West relates to Eastern Europe blurs the differentiation between space and time (Eastern Europe becomes the West's *current* location of/for a *past* whenever one is necessary), yet it lacks the sense of urgency (for attention, for improvement) that other non-European "regions of the past" have. Thus, the challenge here is not only to bring Eastern Europe "up-do-date" in the Western reader's eyes. In addition, the challenge becomes to also instill in it the same kind of urgency some of the mentioned "regions of the past" get automatically.

II. On the Poetic Witness and Time

A doubly disturbed linearity is at stake: while Eastern Europe is never contemporary with the West, witnessing is out of step with the present and with traditional ways of narrating history as well. As I discussed in my first chapter, while witnessing is acutely concerned with the present – the moment of "seeing," and with the future – the moment of delivery, it is just as concerned with the past. Witnessing revels in the concept of being "of the past:" the challenge at the very core of its definition is to stretch this "past" of the event witnessed *into* the present. This being "of the past" has nothing to do, however, with traditional ideas of having been dealt

with, or being irrelevant. Jenny Edkins refers to just this specific characteristic of witnessing in her book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, when she speaks of the non-linear nature of witnessing.

Referring to a psychoanalytic conception of time, Edkins argues that it is *impossible* to be a witness without a necessary temporal confusion: “Time no longer moves unproblematically from past through present to future. In a sense, subjects only retrospectively become what they already are – they only ever will have been” (13). According to Edkins, the subject (and it is essential to note that – just like Agamben – Edkins does not differentiate between a witness and a subject) can not understand, reflect upon, let alone express oneself in the present moment of her/his being about that particular moment. That moment has to be allowed to pass and be abandoned unexamined in order to be revisited and contextualized at a later time. (The notions of re-visiting and re-examining are actually very common faulty descriptions of this situation, as this “return” is actually *the first examination*). The future part (“will”) of the phrase “will have been” sneaks into the temporal constellation of the subject’s process of reflection as a kind of anticipation of the past, a plan to ‘will have become’ a reflexive subject. This “will” may perhaps be the only aspect of the subject’s presence in the present moment that looks forward to more than an automatic navigating- through the present moment. Short of an actual *reflection of/on the moment*, it is a *promise of one*²⁶.

²⁶ Edkins expands on this point when she says, evoking Agamben: “So the speech of the witness bears witness to a time in which human beings did not yet speak; and so the testimony of human beings attests to a time in which they were not yet human.’ In other words, *it bears witness to the real*” (188). The real here becomes comparable to the material which needs to be witnessed to, yet can not be formulated. In other words, if one concedes that a time without expression, without language (the

Why is this temporal complexity so important when it comes to witnessing?

The answer to this question may come when one relates the figure of the witness (and in this case, more specifically, the poet) to the more general figure of the subject.

According to Agamben, “To be a subject and to bear witness are in the final analysis one and the same” (158)²⁷. Based on this assertion, witnessing itself may not simply illuminate how subjects experience and later formulate events for their own benefit and for that of their surroundings; more generally, a close examination of witnessing illuminates the very functioning and formulation of subjecthood itself.²⁸ If one concedes that the entry into subjectivity is an event which the subject spends the rest of her/his life formulating and working through, one will also shed light on the way in which a witness encounters any (potentially) traumatic event in her/his life. Edkins calls the time which could not – for whatever reasons – be yet historicized and politicized, “trauma time:”

In trauma time...we have a disruption of...linearity. Something happens that doesn't fit, that is unexpected – or that happens in an unexpected way. It doesn't fit the story we already have, but demands that we invent a new account, one that will produce a place for what has happened and make it meaningful. Until this new story is produced we quite literally do not know what has happened: we cannot say what it was, it doesn't fit the script – we only know that ‘something happened’ (xiv)²⁹.

This simple feeling that ‘something happened’ (closely related to the uncanny feeling produced in the viewer of a horror movie who heard but has not seen the source of a

initial moment of the “will have been” can also be called a time of the “not yet human,” then *the process of bearing witness literally becomes the process of making, creating the human.*

²⁷ This passage is also quoted in Edkins, p. 188.

²⁸ Yet another way to put this close relationship between the witness and the subject is by pointing out the fact that the very etymology of the word subject invites a musing on *what* exactly this individual was *subjected to* in order to have become a subject. In the case of the witness, this subjection was to *the event* and to his/her own role in that event.

²⁹ This description of “trauma time” is very similar to the way in which Alain Badiou describes his notion of the “event.” I discussed this at length in Chapter 1.

suspicious sound) has to, of course, be reworked and contextualized. This is where the importance of a witness comes in. The witness (albeit in various problematic ways) *facilitates the creation of a story*, not only for the self, but more importantly, for all her/his audiences, for the society in which s/he is implanted. In this manner, s/he alleviates the uncanny feeling of ‘something happened,’ and replaces it with a very certain ‘*this* happened, now we know, let’s move on.’ In this way, the witness finds a way to *work through* the trauma while still remaining faithful to and passionate about recounting the event that caused the trauma.

This is also precisely where the importance of the poetic witness comes in. While the most frequent types of witnessing produce highly problematic, utilitarian narratives which are largely subservient to whatever political regime they are produced in³⁰, the *poetic witness* has the largest potential to resist this kind of subservient inclusion. According to Edkins and others (Felman, Blanchot, Agamben), the most problematic kind of witness is the one who couples her/his remembering with a utilitarian forgetting. In other words, when the narrative of “trauma time” is constructed, those parts which do not make sense, which would question the dominant narrative, or which would suggest an alternate, potentially oppositional narrative, are simply ignored. (Thus, a utilitarian remembering can not occur without a very purpose-driven forgetting). These kinds of narratives do not deny the traumatic event per se. Rather, in the same breath of acknowledging it, they feign a *complete understanding and a clearly known purpose of the trauma*.

³⁰ Edkins spends a large part of her book examining war memorials, sites of former camps, etc, where various kinds of problematic narratives of “trauma time” are related and visually represented.

The poetic witness rejects all this, and this rejection comes that much more easily because her/his “tool” (the poem) rejects/replaces the “tool” of the subservient witness, namely the fluent and “transparent” narrative. The poetic witness, via the poem (even the epic one) demonstrates and performs a failure of the traditional, temporally disciplined narrative. In this manner, the poetic witness approaches – via the malfunctioning, multifarious, and at times suspended time of the poem – the “time” of “trauma time.” Unlike the traditional subservient narratives then, the poem has a potential to be subversive via its rejection of traditional temporality and via a mimicking of that which it is intending to represent. While “trauma time” includes that which escapes logic and resists any kind of summation, poetry oscillates between a very similar state, and the impetus to approach that state nonetheless with words³¹. I will discuss this “failure that can succeed” – as Thomas A. Vogler puts it – at length below.

III. Towards a Community

In resisting the (often times state-sponsored) dominant narrativization of traumatic events, witness accounts can pose a threat to the status quo of the society they are expressed in. This is, according to Edkins the source of both: these witnesses’ marginalization *and* their importance. When traumatic experience gets appropriated,

Witnesses lose control over the interpretation of their testimony. Because testimony is highly political, economic and social forces will pressure

³¹ Edkins puts this idea similarly when she states, “[The] aporia between speaking and not speaking, between the compulsion to bear witness and the impossibility of doing so, is for Giorgio Agamben the very structure of testimony” (177).

survivors either to keep their silence or to revise their stories. Survivors who are marginal or isolated will be most at risk of the appropriation; *if there is a powerful community a measure of control can be retained* (190, italics mine).

The above is clearly a call for an establishing of a community of witnesses as an alternate source of ideology within a particular society. As I stated before, it is the poetic witness especially who possesses the potential to express subversive ideas or accounts of events, since the messages of poetry, due to the lack of clear temporal sequence (and due to the figurative nature of its language) are literally ‘hard to keep track of’ and can change in an instant. In this manner, this poetic witness is also an ideal initiator of a community of witnesses³².

How exactly can a community of witnesses be created? Since it is impossible to imagine a witness in isolation (in fact the very definition and purpose of the witness always requires more than just one person), the act of witnessing always already creates and imagines a very specific community. According to Harriet Davidson in “Poetry, Witness, Feminism,”

The witness is crucially about a speaker *and* a hearer and must create an addressee when it does not have one; this is not solitary, meditative, or soliloquizing speech. Both speaker and hearer are witnesses to what is said; indeed each needs the other to hear or speak. This implies that as an encounter, the witness is a speech act, not a discursive statement, which attempts to communicate, in the sense of transfer, urgency – to make something happen, to turn the hearer into a witness too. In this way the witness, while perhaps speaking of the past, is most concerned with the future (164).

³² Edkins gives a fascinating example of the rogue power of poetic witnessing from an event in 1989 China when officially delivered poems in praise of a deceased leader who advocated reform “turned into criticisms of the party leadership” (220).

It is important here to point out that to Davidson, the witness is not only a voice which seeks to be heard across long distances, but more importantly it is a voice which seeks to imbue its audience with a voice, and thus a sense of agency.

Robert Pinsky argues a related point about the transmittal of *attitude and passion* in addition to the information about an event when he suggests in his essay “Responsibilities of the Poet,” that poetic witnessing is not simply the transmittal of an objective, untainted reality. Ideally, witnessing is opinionated, tainted by the way in which the author absorbed the material that s/he is now giving voice to. Thus, the artist can not claim unmediated authenticity of experience, because s/he always already couples it with judgment:

Witness may or may not involve advocacy, and the line between the two is rarely sharp; but the strange truth about witness is that though it may include both advocacy and judgment, it includes more than them, as well. If political or moral advocacy were all we had to answer for, that would be almost easy. Witness goes further...because it involves *the challenge of not flinching* from the evidence. It proceeds from judgment to testimony (425, italics mine).

Pinsky reverses the traditional progression from witnessing to judgment here (a progression that has been all but naturalized by the judicial process). He puts a stronger language to an assumption that is frequently made even in more traditional arenas of witnessing: before anything is witnessed to, it is judged. While this kind of judgment (evaluation, relation to the witness’ own set of experiences and values) is considered a drawback in courtroom testimony, it is precisely this “tainting,” this judgment (which to Pinsky is in fact inseparable from simple perception) which *defines* poetic witnessing: “What poets must answer for is the unpoetic. And before we can identify it, or witness it, an act of judgment is necessary” (426). *Among other*

things, it is via this judgment that the witness can inject the events witnessed with his/her cultural literacy that then allows the second (Western) witness to read the material in a more culturally literate way.

At this point, one may start wondering whether there are ways in which the judicial process fails to deal with injustice, and whether poetry can step in where the judicial process fails. This suggestion may seem a bit far fetched specifically since the repercussions and influence of even the most successful poetry can never be seen as clearly and immediately as a court's judgment. I would, however, argue that poetry does pick up the slack in the instances when the judicial system gives out an inappropriate sentence (due to its limitations), or when it ignores an issue entirely. Having adopted Agamben's division of witnesses into "witnesses in the court of law" and "survivors," Edkins specifies that survivors

Do not want to duck the question of judgment: they would have no hesitation in condemning those who committed crimes. It is just that the law does not exhaust the question. Juridical categories and ethical categories should not be confused: the survivor is concerned with what is beyond the law (205).

While it is clear that the above concept of the survivor does not at all times match my concept of the poetic witness, the way in which both of these figures elude and expand the by-the-book definition of judicial witnessing is all but identical. In a fictional example, while the judicial system may have its hands tied when dealing with a murderer or corrupt politician due to issues such as double jeopardy or the statute of limitations, a successful piece of poetry may give voice to the victims of such figures, thus facilitating a public awareness and discussion, the results of which may be a lot more long-term than those of a reduced sentence.

Returning to Pinsky, he is also arguing for a kind of *synergy* to be part of the definition of his particular reading of witnessing: poetic witnessing is perception, a writing of precisely those parts of the culture which are not considered poetic (such as political oppression), it is advocacy and judgment, but it is always also more than that. The ultimate multifarious product of removed witnessing *includes and parenthesizes* all of the following: the original event, the first witness, the original culture as well as the intended “reader” culture, and the intended second witness.

To return to the complicated issue of “accomplishing a witness” in the western reader, one should also stress that, since (according to Michel Foucault in *Dits et Ecrits*) all experience is a fiction, the writer (the initial removed witness) has to resist the temptation to make any claims at authenticity, unmediated access to, or pure experience of the event (in this specific case the events surrounding 1989 in Eastern Europe)³³. The more self-effacing the author, the more even the most removed witness (reader) can imagine *becoming* that author (experiencing an event) by extension. The goal here, however, is *not* mimicking an unmediated experience; it is delivering *a very specifically* mediated experience. According to Maurice Blanchot,

To write is to know that death has taken place even though it has not been experienced, and to recognize it in the forgetfulness that it leaves – in the traces which, effacing themselves, call upon one to *exclude oneself from the cosmic order* and to abide where the disaster makes the real impossible and desire undesirable (66).

³³ It is important to point out here that Pinsky’s point about passing judgment on an event as a part of the witnessing process is not at all in conflict with my argument about the witness’ rejection of claims of authenticity vis-à-vis the witnessed event. In fact, if the witness is open about the fact that his/her judgment is inextricable from what s/he is witnessing, it will become immediately obvious that any claims at objectivity or authenticity are impossible. If one returns to my definitions of the “removed” portion of removed witnessing in my introduction, one will easily see that Pinsky’s argument about judgment in/as witnessing works easily as one of the factors which can contribute to the removed nature of witnessing.

When witnessing is written, what one needs for the text to “arrive” at its destination is both: an absolute coming to life (and remaining alive) of the author and his/her culture, *and* an absolute surrender, abandon, and perhaps as Blanchot suggests here, even death of the author in order for the removed witness (reader) to “buy” the events as one’s own (experienced, albeit remotely). This “death” is the price the writer pays in order to drive the witnessed events even further towards the more removed witnesses. After all, the ultimate goal (a passionate engagement with the encountered/recounted event) can only be fully achieved if even the most removed witness can accept this passion and adapt it as *her/his own*.

Now one can usefully return to Freud’s term, *Uebertragung*, which is traditionally translated into English as “transference.” *Uebertragung* literally means a *carrying over and above* (in this case over and above one subjectivity and one experience) towards another (and in our case, towards many). The relationship between the initial witness and entire (western) cultures has to be that of transference. Significantly, it is *sympathy* (in addition to knowledge and stories) that gets carried over in the process of transference. Thus, one could argue that transference is a *catalyst* in the transfer of knowledge and passion, a catalyst of easier cultural translation. The figurative death of the author in this case makes room for the readers, but only in as far as the reader already partially has become an author via transference. Hence, the author is both alive and dead and inevitably remains in this tension throughout the journey of any work of removed witnessing.

Returning to Richter’s “Author’s Note” (in *Angel with Black Feathers*), one can observe what specifically happens to the poet when transference (as the process

which allows a transport over and above one experience towards many) is successful.

In addition, one can also gather the hopes and dreams the poet has for his poetry

when this transference is accomplished:

I write mostly for myself, for all the dead ones in me...Maybe sadness is catching up with me...since I am unable to reach across the precipice of time and help those poems that came about at the outset of my journey. *But, as is often the case in both life and poetry, maybe a reader will stop by these poems and unexpectedly guide them across a foot-bridge over that precipice...guide those poems to themselves, to the safety and comfort of a different life, a different fate. What else can an author wish for? This does not qualify as kidnapping in poetry...In poetry, just like in life, it is true that the creature born (a verse) can always survive or perish – but, as opposed to nature, the continued life of the poem depends on people* (156, translation mine, italics mine).

The phrase “I write mostly...for all the dead ones in me” is fascinating. Here, the author clearly admits that writing to him is auto-therapeutic, where the writing he is finally able to do in the present is done *for the past, for his old silenced selves*. It is obvious here that the subjectivity of the poetic witness is always multiple, because it has to imagine and write not only for all of his/her selves – past and present – but also for all the potential readers. Also, the present self becomes in retrospect both a source of hope (demonstrating to the past selves what will be announced freely in the future), *and* a somber witness to the multiple “dead ones” inside the same self (demonstrating the importance of remembering that forced silence).

The idea I alluded to earlier, namely that the author’s auto-therapy is only really successful *through* an accomplishment of the therapeutic goals set for the reader, is clearly confirmed here by Richter. The reader in this case in fact becomes the new home for the poem after the author fails in commitment or energy to house it any longer. Richter labels the spreading of his message, the spreading of the passion

of his poetry a positive, desired kidnapping. In other words, to rework an old cliché, if the poet is his readers' conscience, in this case the readers also have to become the poet's conscience in return. Via the process Richter describes, poems come into their own *through* the reader. Thus, the author's goal is accomplished.

Both in the act of "writing for the drawer," and in the act of writing poetry of witness, there is a curious and uneasy combination between activity and passivity, between presence and absence. Put more specifically, one should insist that in both cases, a peculiar *presence despite absence* is formulated. (A particular case in point can be seen in Richter's allusion above that he writes "for all the dead ones in me"). This is the same fault line along which Blanchot situates his understanding of *Ecriture*. As Ann Smock argues in her "Translator's Remarks" on Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*,

[*Ecriture*] isn't the word for what is written...but seems, rather, the word for what is to be, for remains to be (*ce qui reste*). *Ecriture* seems to designate what is left still to say when everything that can be has been – the remains of that which is always already completely over...Writing: doing, when nothing is to be done, when nothing is being done. Neither activity nor passivity, but the action of passiveness. "Passion" names this feverish urgency of patience, and "patience" this cold stillness of passion. In these words ("passive," "passion," "patience"), the "not" (*pas*) that recurs is also a *pas* ("step"). Notice it here, too: "passage" (xiii).

It is precisely writing that allowed the Eastern European subject of a repressive regime to remain active (or at least, according to Blanchot's definitions here, passively active) in the face of censure. And, one has to point out that it is also precisely the *poetic nature* of the very definition of *Ecriture* that makes this active passivity possible. At the very core of Smock's discussion, one finds a word-play with alliteration, and this is no accident. A creative misreading of passivity as

passion is absolutely necessary for the survival of the poetic witness in times of censure. Also, the poetic transformation of passivity into a *step* is quite telling. A work of poetic witnessing can only be passive in as far as it encourages the reader to develop the activity of the first *step* in reading it, in confronting it. Thus, poetic witnessing is only allowed passivity in as far as it is patiently waiting to cause the first steps of activity in its readers³⁴.

Realizing that poetic witnessing requires conviction and passion, one encounters limitations and warnings from various sides about what could amount to an overinvestment in witnessing, whether it be on the part of the artist (as is argued by Adorno³⁵), or, as Thomas A. Vogler argues in his essay “Poetic Witness: Writing the Real,” on the part of the theoretician or critic. While Vogler’s work is certainly influential on my present project (I will outline why below), I would like to first discuss the key way in which Vogler’s argument diverges from mine. When launching his critique of Shoshana Felman, Vogler identifies what he deems to be a problematic inflection common among the critics and theoreticians of witnessing:

Even critical commentary, as part of the discourse of the sublime, will try to work by expressing the quality it aims to convey and to mimic the action it

³⁴ While it is quite tempting for the American reader to see the passive resistance of the poetic witness through the lens of the Civil Rights Movement, the passive resistance *and passion of resistance* is much more complicated when discussing the Eastern European witness’ attitude towards totalitarianism. For instance, while a figure like Martin Luther King, Jr. was a crucial witness to the events in a particular country in a particular restricted time period, the removed witness (in poetry as well as other forms of literature) is defined by the *very* fact that s/he *intentionally* both witnesses to *and* trespasses historical moments and geographical locations. In fact, were it not for the Eastern European removed witness’ *original intent* to reach beyond the confines of his/her country, to specifically reach towards the West, the very definition of removed witnessing as it is discussed here would change. (Also, while figures of the Civil Rights Movement were clearly writing from within a political system which they were adamant about changing, the Eastern European removed witness often either could not see even a remote possibility of such change, or, on the other hand, was writing his/her witnessing *after* the regime changed already occurred).

³⁵ Adorno speaks of the over-committed work of art as dangerous in his essay “Commitment.” I will discuss this point at length in the next section.

conveys, being sublime on the sublime, making criticism itself a passionate event, rather than a calm instance of understanding, evaluation, or interpretation (197).

Vogler seems to be arguing that the mimicking of the witness by the critic is not only self-indulgent, but that it compromises the process of examination. Based on this, a “passionate” criticism rather than a “calm” examination is unfair to the original work of witnessing, and may end up limiting the multitude of possible meanings of the work. It is important to point out, however, that a passionate examination of a work of witnessing is *precisely proof* of the fact that the original work of witness *was and is* successful. After all, who is to say that a critic can not become one of the many witnesses intentionally “*made*” by the initial removed witness? In addition, the suggestion that passionate criticism and calm understanding are somehow mutually exclusive is highly problematic. If one follows my definitions of witnessing in the preceding pages as both a spreading of knowledge, *and* an account of feeling(s), it becomes all but impossible to take Vogler’s side on this issue.

It is also important to highlight Vogler’s argument that poetic witnessing should be concerned with depicting “an idea of the event” rather than a historical event itself. Forming an “idea” of an event is very similar to Pinsky’s argument about judgment *preceding* rather than succeeding observation. Returning to Richter’s poem “The Dream of the Man Who Dived” once again, it is abundantly clear that the author is not at all concerned with giving an accurate depiction of the events of 1968 and the succeeding Normalization. Rather, the author’s “idea[s] of the event” include betrayal, a call to action and responsibility, as well as a testament to Alexander Dubcek’s character. All of these ideas and Richter’s “judgment” are closely tied to

and *informed* by the events of the Warsaw Pact Invasion of 1968 and the Velvet Revolution of 1989, yet at the same time, none of these ideas are a *direct depiction* of those same events. *While most of the typical literature of witness is interested in depicting the crisis or catastrophe, the kind of poetry of witness I am interested in does not stop there. In fact, sometimes it does not even have to “start” there: it may start with the moment of crisis, but more often than not it deals only with the reverberations that the moment of crisis caused when the excitement of emergency evaporated into the drudgery of the everyday.*

After having considered this discussion of passion in witnessing, one should return to Pinsky and Davidson for a moment to create a profile of sorts of this evoked author / poetic witness. Passion relates to judgment in that it is impossible to be passionate about a subject matter without having passed it through a process of evaluation and judgment. In addition, Davidson asks (via Drucilla Cornell) about the ultimate task of the poetic witness, “How do we gain another’s ‘perception’? Analysis is not enough alone, for we enter the beings and worlds of other people through imagination, and it is through imagination that we glimpse how these might change” (162). Thus, apart from judgment and passion, imagination is necessary.

Where judgment and passion are related to the attitude of the author vis-à-vis the events perceived, imagination is more related to the ability of the poetic witness to formulate the material perceived in such a way that it is accessible and appealing to the target audience. In “imagining” the target audience here, the author *becomes* this target audience, if even only for a moment. Arguably, this is how Milan Richter determined the necessity of the additional points of information for the Western

reader in a lot of his poetry. He lived abroad – Norway, England, Iceland, Germany, USA, etc. – for extensive periods of time, and hence could more easily imagine “the beings and worlds” of certain “other” audiences: the knowledges westerners were likely to possess, and those they were likely to lack.

In addition to judgment, passion, and imagination, perhaps the most important characteristic of the author / poetic witness is a willingness to be stubborn.

According to Davidson,

The word ‘stand’ indicates a kind of stubborn *insistence of presence*, not only against a chancy future...but more broadly against what I cannot imagine – the future, yes, and the Other, others, the unconscious, death, another’s pain. I am asking the poetry of witness to do a lot of work with this: to safeguard that unimaginable from appropriation, to make us aware of the limits of our imaginations, and to make it *stand guard*, imaginatively, over our beings (163, italics mine).

Davidson describes the witness as a kind of champion, an attempt at an insurance policy against the unpredictable. The poetic witness is enrolled here as a source of stability and as a patient presence, which dovetails well with Blanchot (who invokes a similarly passionately calm and steadfast author). This patience and presence is, of course, not only with the fleeting and unstable nature of historical progress and geographical distance, but just as much with the volatile nature of “our beings,” i.e. the unpredictable and almost childish nature of those who are being witnessed to. This kind of description of the poetic witness as parental and reliable works very well with Pinsky’s claim above that the poetic witness has to accept “the challenge of not flinching from the evidence” (Pinsky, 425). The characterization of the author as a source of stability in the face of all the mutability discussed above allows her/him to remain present in a work of poetic witnessing even when s/he is absent.

In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*, Kali Tal goes even further with the idea of a passionate and steadfast witness, insisting:

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure (7, also qtd. in Edkins, 191).

By turning passion into aggression, even a willingness to conflict, Tal indicates that the most effective witness is the one who is willing to be an instigator, who is willing to allow his/her witnessing to turn him/her into a revolutionary. Of course, while this kind of witness may be most effective, it is also the most rare and utopist kind, since it is impossible to require every single act of witnessing to be revolutionary or closed to compromise. Setting these kinds of absolute requirements might confront the act of witnessing with a sense of impossibility, and thus slow down, or even freeze its momentum. In addition, if one speaks of the necessity to willingly “endure a lifetime of anger and pain” in order to be a witness, one is certainly only giving witnessing the choice between a larger and a smaller “evil,” thus making the state of witnessing seem bitter and resentful by definition. The description of an angry and painful mental and emotional state seems rather the pathological result of an interrupted therapeutic process than a state that could facilitate – let alone support – the process of witnessing³⁶.

³⁶ Perhaps the analysis of Milan Richter’s poem “Our Hands are Bare” (which will follow in section V below) will serve as a good example of the difference between Tal’s effective witness (who, based on the definition above is mostly a political agent) and my concept of the removed witness. In this poem, the students who are standing on St. Wenceslas Square in November of 1989 could be considered effective witnesses due to their direct – albeit perhaps still not angry enough – involvement, while the

IV. On Poetry

Using poetry as a vehicle for witnessing creates some fascinating complexities. While, on the one hand, it is difficult to conceive of a case in which poetry would be admissible in a court of law as “fact,” it is perhaps precisely this lack of a direct relation between poetry and fact (as well as poetry and prose) that opens up new possibilities to consider poetry as an essential source of removed witnessing. This form is freed of a requirement to be “truthful,” to be “reportage,” requirements of which no prose assuming to witness (even prose strongly subscribing to its *fictional* character) can entirely rid itself.

Having established the necessary traits that enable an author to become a witness, one should follow up with a few more questions. First, what, exactly, does it mean for a work of literature to be “committed”? And second, is there such a thing as over-commitment? Theodor Adorno in his essay “Commitment” speaks of a committed work of literature as one that has a “social contract with reality” (79). Drawing out the parameters of such a contract turns out to be a delicate matter for Adorno. While Adorno views it as dilettantish to claim an absolute detachment of the artwork from the society which surrounds it, on the other hand, he warns of and critiques tendentious or propagandist art. While outlining what an artwork absolutely should not be, Adorno also hints at what it *has* to be:

Commitment should be distinguished from tendentiousness, or advocacy of a particular partisan position. Committed art in the strict sense is not intended to lead to specific measures, legislative acts, or institutional arrangements, as in

narrator of the poem *about* these students’ past and present situations could be considered a removed witness. A thorough analysis of this poem follows below.

older ideological pieces directed against syphilis, the duel, the abortion laws, or the reform schools. Instead, it works towards an *attitude*: Sartre, for instance, aims at *choice as the possibility of existence*, as opposed to a *spectatorlike neutrality* (79, italics mine).

While later in his essay Adorno outlines a critique of Sartre, it is clear from the above quote that he endorses the idea that in order for an artwork to achieve any kind of meaning within a society, it has to be allowed to firmly root itself in that same society. In other words, *existing* within a society (in my case, the *witness*' very existence within a society) ultimately depends on an intentional lack of neutrality and detachment³⁷.

Adorno has very little use for *l'art pour l'art*, although he may be a lot more subtle in suggesting this: "An 'it [life] shall be different' is hidden in even the most sublimated work of art...As pure artifacts, products, works of art, even literary ones, are instructions for the praxis they refrain from: the production of life lived as it ought to be" (93). The important hint to sift out from this assertion is that Adorno may be a proponent of *l'art pour l'art with a difference*. Art should include a sampling of that which it is not. It should be primarily *for itself*, but in order to be responsible and true *to itself*, it has to rid itself of the arrogance of detachment so frequently present in the *l'art pour l'art* movement. In a way, *Adorno hints at the fact that part of the very definition of an artwork is that it needs to be at least minutely utopian about its intentions*. This means that a progressive committed work of art remains progressive when clearly realizing its separation from lived life (and thus refrains from becoming

³⁷ Czeslaw Milosz expresses a similar persuasion in his *The Witness of Poetry* when he argues, "What was at stake...was saving man [the reader] from images of a totally 'objective,' cold, indifferent world" (47).

a manifesto) *while at the same time not holding back from getting involved in that which it is not*. This, of course, is a difficult balance to strike³⁸.

Over-committed works (those Adorno calls “official works of committed art” [90]), run the risk of hollowing out one of the most important characteristics of any work of art: subtlety, the freedom to mean *and* evade meaning at the same time. Thus, the over-committed artwork that becomes a didactic piece of propaganda literally abuses the very definition of artwork as that thing that produces and confronts multiple meanings, that thing that thrives on nuances. The best kind of commitment according to Adorno (similarly to Davidson and Pinsky) is hidden yet steadfast, subtle yet relentless. As he says about the effect of Kafka’s work, “Anyone over whom Kafka’s wheels have passed has lost both his sense of being at peace with the world and the possibility of being satisfied with the judgment that the course of the world is bad” (90). While the position of the author here is described as one that should create ambiguity, it is very far from a typical impotent, idle ambiguity: it is an ambiguity that causes a stir, that calls to action.

Removed witnessing in Eastern Europe before 1989 was specifically aware of the characteristics of propaganda and the problems that came along with any work of art that was redefined as a tool. The negative role-models of how *not* to hollow out or abuse any form of art were laid out abundantly in plain sight. Thus, in this context it was easier to establish the kind of necessary barrier between passion and propaganda

³⁸ One should also note that while *l’art pour l’art* is a reaction against the commodification of art, it is also a reaction against the injection of utilitarian meanings into the artwork. Such meanings or missions are not at all concerned with the artwork itself, but only care about the message that is being injected. My reading of Adorno here is much more concerned with the latter interpretation of *l’art pour l’art* than with the issues regarding commodification.

Adorno alludes to. The characteristic of being overtly “partisan” would, in any Eastern European country, immediately allude to an association with the one leading party, and thus the lack of nuance that the word “partisan” alludes to would be very obvious.

Of course, there was also the given danger of being “discovered,” censored and even punished if any work of witnessing was too overt in its message. This was the guaranteed barrier against anything with the potential to become anti-state propagandist art. It is specifically due to this socially conditioned (and obviously mostly involuntary) “training” in nuance, that the Eastern European witness remained nuanced even after 1989. Due to this history, while still having a clear intent, the literary pieces of removed witnessing even today are less in danger of collapsing into the kind of didactic (and by extension worthless and dangerous) art that Adorno was warning about during the height of the Cold War in 1962.

Having alluded to the usefulness of defining poetic witnessing as a synergistic activity and having read Adorno’s discussion of art as a critique of *l’art pour l’art* (*l’art pour l’art* with a difference), I would now like to return to a further discussion of poetry as a form of witnessing. More specifically, I would like to approach some of the questions I asked at the outset of this chapter on poetry from a different angle: What is it (other than the already addressed figurative nature of poetry’s language) about the form of the poem that lends itself particularly well to a recounting and reworking of lived events, especially traumatic ones? Why is poetry as a form (as opposed to other forms) arguably *advantaged* rather than *disadvantaged* when it sets

out to witness? As Thomas A. Vogler argues in his essay “Poetic Witness: Writing the Real,”

If we want to find some function for a poetry of witness, where poetry is not handicapped by its limited ability to represent historical events and provide information, it makes sense to...focus on...situations of extremity, in particular...those situations whose horror exceeds the ability of any form of language or any genre to describe or communicate adequately. In such cases the subject matter is not identical with a specific historical event; it is rather *an idea of the event*, and an idea that evokes the magnitude of the event precisely through an inability to encompass it fully. In this case, the limitations of lyric poetry as history or description lead to *a failure that can succeed*, by showing that the enormity of its referent exceeds its grasp. It can also succeed by being pathetic, in the original sense of inducing an emotion and state of discomfort or suffering... (183).

Via a mention of the complicated failure of poetry as reportage, Vogler is referring to a more general failure of language. This general failure may have become more tolerable and also more productive after the reexamination of language that occurred throughout the 20th century. It is now acceptable to look *obliquely* at language and more specifically at any *forms and genres using language*. It is now just as essential to examine that which is not said, that which is only alluded to, that which is attempted yet failed, as that which is overt, literal, and undisputed. In other words, the very fact that an event is *on the way to being expressed* (with the author’s full intent to complete said expression), and yet this expression fails, says perhaps more about the nature of the event (and the nature of the author’s relationship to the event) than any kind of forced pseudo-scientific testimony would.

The important implications of this failure of language are two-fold. First, the “iron cage of language” is opened up if not broken: there is plenty to be described, defined and grasped that always remains just beyond the horizon of linguistic

expression. (Some of these aspects of human experience beyond linguistic possibility are trauma or the more concrete experience of pain. I will address this issue further a little later on). Second, perhaps *despite* this failure of language, the latter is still used, albeit suspiciously and carefully to continually express experience (and inevitably to also fail at this expression) as a repeated demonstration of the impossibility at the core of language's task. *Experience outside the cage of language is absolutely essential to witnessing. If everything was locked inside the iron cage of language, there would really be nothing left to witness but the cage itself.*

The definition of poetic witnessing as “a failure that can succeed” *liberates* the poem from any requirements to describe and encompass anything fully, thus freeing both the writer and the reader to concentrate on the particular spaces of “failure” and on the goals which could be accomplished via this failure. More specifically, part of why poetry's “failure” in transmitting *fact* is not such a huge handicap is that poetry as a form is better at transferring *feeling* (such as sympathy or empathy) than any other literary form.

Failure, awareness of it, and the transfer of feeling are closely related. (In fact, in a psychoanalytic setting, the two are inextricably linked to transference. After all, what is the therapeutic encounter if not a continued attempt at a narration of one's failures and ones feelings about those failures?) Vogler reinforces this relation when he evokes the original meaning of the word “pathetic” as “inducting an emotion and state of discomfort or suffering.” Following this, the removed witness' motto in writing poetry may be: ‘I can't quite narrate and document just what happened here, but I can attempt to convey how it *felt* to be swept up in the midst of these traumatic

events, most of which I did not understand at the time’ or ‘I can’t quite narrate these events I am referring to, but I still need to convey to you the utter frustration I feel at not being able to do the same.’ Vogler makes a similar point when he states, “Witness will always be a witness of its own inevitable failure, and it is that failure to represent – rather than the actual representation of specific events – that produces the witness effect” (197). One should also not neglect to add that the *current* meaning of the word “pathetic” is unthinkable without the undertones of failure.

Some peculiar *extremes of language especially in relation to the poetry of witness* have become apparent so far in this chapter. While, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the figurative language of poetry serves poetic witnessing by working overtime, by embellishing, etc., figurative language also becomes the ideal tool for poetic witnessing by *not doing enough*: by malfunctioning and breaking down. On the one hand, poetic witnessing is served by *dwelling in language*, by burrowing in it, while on the other it is served by *escaping language, by performing its failure*. It is the fringes of poetic language (the opposite extremes which ultimately may meet) which provide the (negative) space for removed witnessing.

It will be useful at this point to return to the paradox of a failed language as the tool of the poet in the 20th century. First of all, one would be justified in asking, ‘Has poetry not always thrived on pointing out that which is said in addition to that which is only alluded to? Has poetry not always functioned on the fault-line of – if not *within* – the coordinates of the failure of language? What, specifically, has changed in the 20th century?’ Of course, the answer has to give certain credence to these objections. However, it also has to point out that poetry, while being indeed the

most experimental linguistic form, was in fact *not* always comfortable with or up front about the failure of its tool, language, or about the failure of its star, the poet. Czeslaw Milosz addresses some of the issues surrounding the world of the 20th century – and poetry’s attempts to capture it – in his piece *The Witness of Poetry*:

Could we without perishing withstand a situation in which the things surrounding us lose their being, where there is no true world? Twentieth-century poetry answers the question in the negative. Its heroism is forced and offers no indication that we are on the verge of becoming superhuman. When poets discover that their words refer only to words and not to a reality which must be described as faithfully as possible, they despair...Poetry entered the twentieth century convinced of a fundamental antagonism between Art and the world, but Art’s fortress was already crumbling and the sense of the poet’s superiority to ordinary mortals had begun to lose its highest justification (48-49).

When Milosz evokes a certain loss of belief in absolutes (including the hitherto rarely questioned power of language) that characterizes the 20th century, he does not do so in a fashion that would suggest that he is mourning this loss. While this loss may be traumatic, it is nonetheless inevitable. Also, Milosz suggests that the traumatic events of the 20th century all but forced the poet, previously deemed an authority on art *and* the world, a figure communing with both on a higher level than his/her readers, a demigod, a “superhuman,” to step down from this pedestal. The notion of defining anyone as “superhuman” was no longer acceptable due to the Holocaust, while the notion of defining any poetry as pure art was also no longer acceptable due to the crumbling of the notions of art as pure and language as omnipotent³⁹. A new level of

³⁹ I am, of course, referring to the crisis of poetry which ensued after the Holocaust, with the most common claim (by figures such as Ellie Wiesel and many others) that language could never fully express what occurred. The most famous assertion proclaims the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, which is a misreading of a statement by Theodor Adorno. I am not interested in delving into this issue further, however, since critiques of these misreadings as well as close readings of Adorno’s piece are abundant.

communion and communication between the poet and his/her readers had to be found, one that could both admit these failures, and, if possible, capitalize on them.

As is evident from my first chapter, witnessing as such redefines the traditional notion of the event. In witnessing, the event is not considered stable; it is not an immutable ground-stone for its mutable expressions that follow later on. This brings one to a necessary clarification: What exactly is an event on the way to being expressed? While I addressed the concept of the moving event in the previous chapter, it is still important to ask: How is this obscure, moving event emblematic of the poetic witness' mission? And, if the poet is faced with the task of expressing the elusive event with elusive language, what, if anything, is left to latch on to? Is there anything left that is inevitably, irreducibly present, demanding to be named, demanding attention? According to Milosz, again,

There is a logic to modern art, in poetry, in painting, in music, and that is the logic of incessant *movement*. We have been thrown outside the orbit of language ordered by conventions and have been condemned to risk and danger, but because of that we remain faithful to the definition of poetry as a "passionate pursuit of the Real."...Is there really no "true world"? The twentieth century has given us a most simple touchstone for reality: physical pain. This happened because a great number of people were submitted to torments in wars and under the rule of political terror (66).

Paradoxically, the notion of continuous movement could be seen as the new constant in the latter part of the 20th century. Milosz clearly relates movement to mutability, elusiveness, and the constant possibility of failure *as well as* to potential and promise. He also suggests that the literal physical pain suffered throughout the 20th century makes any claims about the non-existence of a "true world" irresponsible and unconscionable. Returning to Kali Tal's assertions about the utter necessity of pain

as part of the core definition of witnessing, one has to insist, however, that witnessing should be a facilitator in *overcoming* this pain or at least making it manageable by externalizing and expressing it (and its causes) rather than a justification for a cathexis. If, as Milosz argues, pain is *the* aspect of the 20th century which provides proof of the “true world,” it is only so in as far as pain remains the common denominator of what a majority of thinkers set out to recount, denounce, and work through, *not* because it should be stubbornly and unequivocally dwelt on.

I would now like to briefly return to the notion that it is the experiences of trauma and pain that remain outside (or at least right at the door of) the linguistic iron cage. This trauma and pain are both the challenge of witnessing, *and* the source of an impetus to witness. As Milosz puts it, during traumatic times,

A great simplification of everything occurs, and an individual asks himself why he took to heart matters that now seem to have no weight. And, evidently, people’s attitude toward the language also changes. It recovers its simplest function and is again an instrument serving a purpose: no one doubts that the language must name reality, which exists objectively, massive, tangible, and terrifying in its concreteness (80).

The poetry of necessity here is a poetry stripped of most of its traditional attributes. Of course, a quote such as this opens itself up for numerous attacks regarding the necessity of any poetry or art to have a purpose (see my earlier discussion of Adorno’s “Commitment”). To ventriloquize Milosz, it is not the case that in times of no or little crisis, poetry has *no* purpose. Rather, it may be the case that in times of no crisis, poetry’s purpose is less *immediate, practical, or urgent*.

Milosz does acknowledge that the pressure of poetry to be purposeful makes it perhaps less artistic and less relevant in the long-term. Milosz calls this poetry’s

“documentary value” which is also exactly what Richter admits a lot of his poetry from the censored decade to be. However, this admitted limited documentary value does not make this kind of poetry any less important or necessary in the crucial moment. In fact, while, as Milosz admits, this kind of poetry can be “too talkative and blatant,” this may be the case because it sets out to “express ‘the new,’ which cannot be grasped by any of the available notions and means of expression” (80). According to Milosz, it is the poet’s *responsibility* to actually willingly *become* this kind of didactic poet at least for a short period of time, because in that particular historical moment, the only other two options (being silent and addressing irrelevant topics) are unacceptable.

As Milosz points out later on, even though many poets who do chose the documentary mode during times of crisis go back later and rework some of that poetry, the documentary poetry of the moment remains extremely important nonetheless, since this apparently chatty and undistinguished language “behaves like a mute who tries in vain to squeeze some articulate sound out of its throat; [the poet] is desperate to speak but does not succeed in communicating anything of substance” (80). Without this failure, no later successes (that can later address these failures, reformulate them in the luxury of distance) would be possible.

The juncture at which the poetic witness of the 20th century enters is extremely volatile: the definitions of who s/he is, what is to be depicted and how are all stripped of absolutes, are literally *on the move*. Milosz suggests that the crisis of any expression is “mankind[s]” division into “those who know and do not speak [and] those who speak and do not know” (66). *Thus, the challenge of the poetic witness is*

precisely to bridge this gap: not only to be one who both knows and speaks, but also to be the one who creates in his/her readers subjects who will both know and speak due to the poet's speaking. Since both the world that is being depicted *and* the tools via which it is being depicted are mutable, the poetic witness has to mimic this movement and mutability (move at a similar speed, so to speak) in order to produce a “failure that can succeed” (as Vogler puts it) when depicting this world.

While failure in/of poetry is not deemed important very often, it becomes clear just how irreplaceable a certain kind of poetic failure is when Milosz argues, “When an entire community is struck by misfortune...the ‘schism between the poet and the great human family’ disappears and poetry becomes as essential as bread” (31). First, one should point out that Milosz’s assertion about the importance of poetry in extreme situations dovetails very well with Vogler’s similar assertions above. The particular failure Milosz confronts in this part of his work is the accusation towards poetry’s loss of “purity” in the 20th century. To Milosz, it is in fact this very failure to be pure (i.e. poetry’s failure to abstain from topics such as “religion, philosophy, science, and politics” [29]) that ultimately allows poetry to once again become the voice of the people. It is obvious from the images Milosz chooses that poetry is no longer deemed a luxury, or status symbol. It is no longer (or not exclusively) a source of beauty or transcendence one muses over. Rather, it becomes *everyday* in every way: its concerns, its form, its tools and its target audience are (or should be) easily accessible. Making poetry part of a day-to-day routine does not diminish its importance. On the contrary: Milosz’s allusion to bread points out the fact that poetry (and thus vocalization, speaking and being heard),

while perhaps being less sublime than in centuries past, is now just as important as daily sustenance⁴⁰.

I would now like to return to one more brief point by Adorno in order to further address Milosz. Since one could mistakenly assume that Adorno's views on over-committed art might confront Milosz's encouraging reviews of 'impure' poetry, one should point out that these two authors are mostly addressing disparate parts of their respective societies. While Adorno is largely warning against art that would become the mouthpiece of the governing parties or leading ideologies in his society, a sort of covert ad-campaign under the guise of art, Milosz is promoting a sort of *dirtying* of art (in this case poetry) in order to give voice to the silenced minorities. As he says, "The truly *inspired* poet of the future will transcend his paltry ego...and would voice the unconscious longings of downtrodden people" (28). This is a view Adorno would certainly not be opposed to.

III. Milan Richter

In the poem "The Dream of the Man Who Dived," which I briefly addressed above, the Slovak poet Milan Richter discusses his – perhaps fictional – encounter with the leader of Prague Spring, Alexander Dubček. The location of this encounter is quite informal: a spa, more specifically, a pool with a diving board. The historical moment of this encounter is more telling, however: it is the summer of 1968, an ominous prelude of sorts to the Warsaw Pact invasion. Dubček is the only one brave

⁴⁰ Putting this parallel yet another way, while one may argue that poetry is like fine wine during times of relative calm (it is purely a matter of leisurely choice and speaks to the status of a connoisseur), during times of upheaval poetry becomes essential to "everyman" similarly to the way in which alcohol is necessary to the alcoholic who does not have a choice, who *needs* to get drunk.

enough to dive off the high diving-board and is admired by his onlookers until a crisis occurs, in which the circumstances would require the random onlookers to act.

(Although the most important part for my purposes here is the third stanza, I am including the poem here in its entirety. The caption under an enclosed photo reads:

The man who dived in summer 1968: / Alexander Dubček / The place: Spa Santovka, Western Slovakia):

One of the daughters had suddenly aged, she was twenty
like me (I'd suddenly grown younger by those years),
she's sitting with me on the edge of the pool,
we dangle our legs...

Who is that gentleman with the long nose,
why are they photographing him?
And why is he the only one to dive?

The man dived all the way to us,
the water splashed us, just as if it were
live water, all around us came to life,
at all the little tables, on the towels
there is discussion, and I see some friends
but they are very young,
my enemies, too, have become younger
and in their applause the diver
could have bathed...

For God's sake, Dad, do help him!
I can hear my daughter. And I see the diver
under the water, trying to swim up,
but the rippling surface has now turned
into smooth glass, he beats his fists against it,
he screams but no one hears him, no one helps him,
the people round us have all disappeared
or else have suddenly aged
and now pretend they've not seen anything,
the ones who kicked their feet in the pool
are fettered to the glass
I too, my daughter with me, have grown
into the surface,
the diver, that long-nosed gentleman,
is beating at the glass, ever more weakly,

ever more weakly,
and all the time he's looking straight at us,
he's motionless, but all the time
he's looking at us...
as we are growing old now in the falling dusk,
my daughter's getting younger, smaller, vanishing...

And for a long, long time there's nothing,
except grey twilight and grey glass,
and trapped in it hundreds of heads
and pairs of legs...

And the springboard is still trembling.

November 1988

The crisis here is not only the fact that Dubček is drowning. It is as significant that the onlookers find themselves unable to act, unable to transform their *looking* into *doing*. Having failed at this just as all the other onlookers did, the narrator makes a point of gaining back some agency from the terrifying event he and his daughter have just witnessed by retelling it.

It is clear that it is not the water which entraps Dubček. Rather, it is the onlookers' *unwillingness to see*, which hurts Dubček. It is just as important that this unwillingness does not just capture Dubček: quite poignantly, it entraps the onlookers themselves, draining them of agency. Dubček's inability to move, to act, is directly related to the onlooker's unwillingness to help. Richter's bold line "And all the time he's looking straight at us" is an unabashed, urgent *call to witness*, a call emphasizing the *moral responsibility of witnessing*: Dubček, this fearless leader, is frozen and "we" will remain thus as well unless we see and acknowledge the responsibilities that are implicated in active seeing. Richter points out that Dubček was in a state of *anticipatory commitment*, calling on the onlookers to participate in freeing him almost

as a practice run (exploration of potential) of the same onlookers *were* a revolutionary event to occur.

This poem also incorporates one of the most significant contradictions a witness has to deal with: there is always an irreconcilable juxtaposition of the everyday life (no matter how “exotic” by outsider standards) to the urgency and monumentality of the moment of change, transition or trauma encountered by the witness. There is a diametrical opposition between the nondescript flow of the witness’ (literally) uneventful life and the events which radically interrupt this mundane state; however, witnessing becomes impossible without an indivisible merging of these opposites, as can be seen in the poem at hand.

In this poem, as well as in other countless pieces of Eastern European literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, it becomes clear that the actual bodily presence at a particular event is not necessary in order for witnessing to occur. In fact, the poem, written in 1988, is a sort of post-script to the traumatic events of the Warsaw Pact invasion, while the moment of the poem’s narrative (Summer 1968) is *an anticipation* of the same event. What is narrated thus is a memory, but not a detached or closed one: this is a memory with a purpose, and in that sense, it is still unfinished.

To complicate matters further, the moment of the author’s willing confrontation with these sets of events and witnessings (November 1988) can also be viewed as an anticipatory moment to the events of 1989. The author is taking it upon himself to work through a set of promising potentialities as well as failings, in a year that was certainly a prelude to the most important changes in Eastern European

societies since 1968. Following this line of reasoning, a call to responsibility and action in fidelity to the events of 1968 can also be seen as a *rehearsal* for the same kinds of challenges the society would have to face only a few months after the poem at hand was published. Since the moment of writing is 1988, and thus after Dubček's removal from office and after the harsh period of normalization in the 1970s, Richter's intervention is more of a call to witness than a call to action on behalf of 1968. It *could*, however, be read as a call to action and witness on behalf of some of the gradually developing changes happening a year before the Velvet Revolution. As Harriet Davidson argues in her essay "Poetry, Witness, Feminism," "the witness, while perhaps speaking of the past, is most concerned with the future" (164).

With the complicated four-fold temporality of this poem (narrator's present, Dubček's impending future, author's present, the impending future of Eastern Europe), the event proper remains a "silent" subtext. The author manages to speak about it by speaking *around* it, more poignantly than he would if he provided a detailed narrative of tanks rolling and soldiers marching down the historical center of Bratislava while he stood on the sidewalk, observing. What occurs in the poem then is both a more direct (and better documented) witnessing of Dubček's day at the pool in the summer of 1968, as well as a more removed, anticipatory witnessing of the *failure of witnessing* (the onlookers not budging when Dubček remains trapped in the pool, drowning). Via the pool, more specifically, via the frozen water in the pool which reflects the passive attitude of the onlookers, all – including the narrator – have been transformed into one, powerless, stagnant entity. Significantly, the fact that the frozen water is referred to several times as "glass" is evocative of a window, or a

screen, where the possibility to watch is granted, but the momentum to act is taken away. The onlookers' refusal to act when they had the chance is now being punished – they have squandered their potential at becoming a true removed witness, which is a role that the narrator consciously took upon himself.

Any narrators' immediate presence at an actual event becomes unimportant and irrelevant, while the narrators' moral responsibility to recount, express and witness from within her/his specific cultural, historical, and political moment *about and around* these actual events becomes all the more important. It is here that a narrator of an event, an often uninvolved, ambiguous witness becomes a passionate *removed witness*: removed *only* in bodily presence – not in the ability to recount an event from a culturally literate position⁴¹. Shoshana Felman in her book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* introduces so called “second-degree witnesses,” a concept which has some aspects in common with my figure of the removed witness:

Like professional interpreters, although in very different ways, the filmmaker in the film and the historian on the screen are in turn catalysts – or agents – of the process of *reception*, agents whose reflective witnessing and whose testimonial stances aid our own reception and assist us both in the effort toward comprehension and in the unending struggle with the foreignness of signs, in the processing not merely (as does the professional interpreter) the literal meaning of the testimonies, but also, (some perspectives on) their philosophical and historical significance (213).

⁴¹ Rather than the more traditionally implied connections with class or a certain level of education, I am using the phrase “cultural literacy” throughout this piece to mean ‘knowledge acquired’ by decades of *lived experience* involving a fluency in the particular country’s language, investment – whether willingly or by force – in that particular country’s legal system, and the continuous exposure to the media. The issue here is not as much erudition as it is a cross between knowledge, experience and passion.

Felman's constellation of the "second-degree witness" alongside the translator and the interpreter is telling: this second-degree witness (like my removed witness) becomes a more sophisticated interpreter, one who facilitates the understanding of the "foreignness of signs" and "philosophical and historical significance." However, the removed witness is not only limited to be a "witness of a witness" or a "witness of ... testimonies."

A chain leading back to the original event is not necessary. While some may argue that this makes the removed witness less trustworthy or relevant because of the lack of connection to the original event, I argue that it is this very lack of connection which can potentially liberate the removed witness' point of view (provide a kind of birds'-eye view) as well as open up her/his potential to contextualize and interpret the original event. (According to a Slovak proverb, it is darkest right underneath the lamp). Based on this interpretation, the removed witness can have a lot in common with a medium: s/he is someone who channels messages and experiences, albeit in a less supernatural and more pragmatic manner. (After all, this removed witness is not furthering a "message" revealed or imposed in the manner of a *deus ex machina*; s/he is relaying his/her actively gathered and lived knowledges and experiences). As James E. Young argues in his essay "Between History and Memory: The Voice of the Eyewitness" when analyzing the Holocaust narrative of Saul Friedlander,

As a hidden child survivor whose parents were murdered at Auschwitz, Friedlander could have distinguished between those historians whose lives were directly affected by events and those shaped only indirectly by events. But he does not. Indeed, he seems also to be speaking for a generation of historians born after the Holocaust, as well, whose lives have been shaped not by the history of this time, but by the memory of others, as passed down to them (276).

What Young touches on here is an insertion of a kind of *oral quality* into written narratives (whether they are historical, autobiographical, or otherwise). This oral quality represents precisely a greater concern with a “passing down” (and in my specific argument also a “passing across”) of cultural literacy than cut-and-dry written narratives normally have.

While in the previous section of this chapter I discuss the fact that Milosz defines a responsibility for a very specific and essential “failure” of the poetic witness (a responsibility to both know and speak) in his *The Witness of Poetry* in prose, Milan Richter utters a similar *poetic* call albeit from a more negative vantage point. As Milosz describes the necessary attributes of the documentary poet, Richter expresses his frustrations with a particular poet who is unwilling to take risks, who is unwilling to be a faithful witness to her/his moment in history. In the poem “Ballad About the Genius of Slovak Poets,” he unveils the hypocrisy involved in being among (in Milosz’s terms) “those who know and do not speak” (66):

Mostly old sheep bleat in their poems,
snow sifts down from hilltops and crops form waves
just as fat salaries do into pockets
for poor shacks and for paternal pain.
They will walk all corners, everyone has been everywhere,
no eagle will escape from them,
a rose will understand their language, a bull, a nightingale,
Slovak poets are genius.

In every bar, their opinions you encounter,
irony is salt, politics is bread
They compete who has the larger harem,

the larger print run, more prizes, who can get drunk in b-minor⁴².
The winner is often the one whose fortune is made
on the verses about poverty and on secret congregations.
He doesn't drink, though he knows: Where alcohol is fed,
Slovak poets are genius.

I too want to write about the passionate Mara,
the bird⁴³ under the skirt, about Vojtech et al.,
for my own pleasure and for the fury of the rectory,
where plans are being made about the largest pole.
With self-criticism, I will admit I am a mule,
but I do my pulling at home, even in the bedroom during nights.
I am the benchwarmer on the team that shoots a goal
Slovak poets, those geniuses.

They often tell me: "If I had your energy
I would demand a stall in the first stables."
Instead, I praise them in that bar of theirs, weepingly:
Slovak poets are genius.

(Angel With Black Feathers, 94, translation mine)

Richter employs extremely strong imagery in this poem. This imagery would immediately be recognizable to the indigenous reader as representative of old, familiar and established high-brow poetry from the extremely influential period of Romantic nation-building. In Slovakia, similarly to many countries in Central Europe, literature during the time of Romanticism used natural imagery as well as folk tales and legends to essentialize regions (on their way to becoming nations) in order to establish the unique character of a nation, its God-given right to define and declare itself. Between then (the Romantic era) and now (early 21st century), a lot of

⁴² Richter is using a word-play that is not translatable: The Slovak phrase "opit sa na mol" figuratively means "to get wasted," while literally meaning "to get drunk in a minor key." Richter takes this phrase and adds the designator "b," ostensibly both referring to the somber musical key, *as well as* to the first letter in the Slovak word for poet, "basnik."

⁴³ The Slovak word Richter uses here ("vtak") means both a bird, and in very common Slovak slang is also a term for the penis. One also should not ignore that this "bird" is under a "skirt."

this imagery became easily recognizable (and thus also lazy, comfortable) short-hand references to notions of beauty, purity, innocence, profundity, etc.

In “Ballad About the Genius of Slovak Poets,” Richter saturates his language with such short-hand images, highlighting just how lazy, faded, and most importantly, irrelevant these kinds of images are vis-à-vis today’s particular historical situation. Images such as bleating sheep, waving fields of crops, eagles, roses, nightingales, snowy hilltops, etc. are all incorporated into a small space (the first stanza) to highlight the problem with the criticized Slovak poets while mimicking their style at the same time. Richter employs a bitterly sarcastic approach when, in the naming of typical Romantic figures of nature (the eagles, hilltops, roses, etc.), he includes *a bull* as one of the beautiful parts of nature that will “understand [the poets’] language.” While listing clearly also a part of nature that will immediately stand out to the indigenous reader as out of place, Richter highlights the ridiculous premise of imbuing *any* part of nature with oversaturated meaning: if a rose can be beautiful and inspire poetic musings, why not a bull?

To contextualize Richter’s sarcasm further, one needs to point out that “vol,” the Slovak term for bull is also a very common swear word, roughly translatable into dumbass, or asshole. Pairing the sublime with the debased in this manner, Richter reveals the arbitrary nature of the kind of imagery, and career-oriented nature of the kind of poetry he criticizes. In addition, the opinion of Richter’s narrator is revealed by the fact that the bull is added to a list of creatures which “understand [the genius Slovak poets’] language.” Thus, the sublime poetic creatures, the bull, *and* the genius Slovak poet are on the same plane of characterization; they, by proxy, have a lot in

common. The genius Slovak poets are not only majestic like an eagle or fleetingly beautiful like a nightingale. They are also dumb, headstrong and dangerous bullies like the bull.

While the first stanza deals with nature, the third stanza houses the generic Romantic ideal of the young couple (Mara and Vojtech⁴⁴) in passionate love, and at odds with the strict prescriptions of the church. This, and similar couples abound in various forms of Slovak folk songs, legends, and fairy-tales, and are read as paradigmatic and idealized symbols of the nation.

When Richter points out “the bird under the skirt,” what he may be suggesting is a union of sorts. Figuratively, the union of the primal Slovak couple (Vojtech and Mara) could be seen as the initial moment from which the entire nation springs forth. Thus, this gives the Slovak “genius poets” sufficient justification for waxing poetic about this union. This kind of poetry is lazy and not risky at all since it guarantees an easy, appreciative audience. The way in which Richter writes about Vojtech and Mara, however, is devoid of any sublime imagery, thus making the fictitious couple just a random couple whom the writer can use to get off on (albeit in a different way the “genius poets” use this same couple to get off on). The paradox that Richter points out in this instant is that while what the “genius poets” do causes no

⁴⁴ While Mara and Vojtech are probably intentionally a *generic* primal Romantic couple and while there are numerous such Romantic couples to choose from in Slovak literature, one of the most famous ones that Richter may be alluding to is Andrej Sladkovic’s lengthy lyric and epic poem *Marina* (1845). (This poem, concerned with negotiating the poet’s love to a woman and to his country, is widely considered to be the peak literary work of Slovak Romanticism). The name Mara (if it is indeed alluding to Marina) is yet another level of desublimation of the sublime, since Mara is a rough, unrefined, even slightly aggressive way to change a number of Slovak women’s names, such as Maria, Marta, Martina, and also Marina.

controversy, what the writer of this poem does – the de-sublimation of the sublime – causes “the fury of the rectory.”

After establishing both the commonality and specificity of images such as these (after establishing *what* the criticized poets are writing about), Richter continues to examine *who* writes this kind of poetry and *why*. The poets at hand are a career-driven horde with meticulously maintained lifestyles, reputations, and large egos. Referring to print volumes and prizes as the poets’ “harem” (and as a source of competition) makes the utilitarian intentions – namely fame and fortune – behind writing the kind of sublime, uninvolved poetry these poets are writing abundantly clear. Being everywhere is not as important as being *seen* everywhere (being thought of as a bohemian cosmopolitan). Richter reveals the hypocrisy that hides behind writing sympathetically about poverty (yet another trait of Romantic, nationalist poetry) while making a fortune off of this kind of posturing.

Finally, in the third and fourth stanzas, Richter inserts himself into this bleak scenario. Using the same biting sarcasm, Richter suggests that he, too, aspires to be a part of the horde, yet he does this in a subversive way. He brings back the Romantic figures of Vojtech and Mara. He also brings back nature in the form of a bird and de-sublimates it by putting it “under the skirt,” thus referring to the penis, the other meaning of the Slovak word “vtak.” In this manner, the flowery, detached terminology is brought down to a level that every reader will understand. The idealized couple is sexualized, and thus literally cut down from the pedestal of eternal meaning and innocence.

On another, more important level, Richter clearly points out and satirizes the masturbatory character of the careers of the poets he criticizes (all they do in their careers is only concerned with their image and satisfaction, nothing and no one else is relevant) by employing clear images of masturbation (“I do my pulling at night at home, even in the bedroom”). By describing a much more common, literal scene of masturbation, and by demonstratively *apologizing* for it (“With self-criticism, I will admit that...”), the narrator highlights the ridiculous nature of the figurative masturbation he criticizes. (Why is *he* the one who should apologize for the most common kind of masturbation, while all these poets do the figurative version of the same out in the open, proudly? Which one is more ridiculous?). Of course, by being much more literal in his masturbation, the narrator somehow fails. He is not conceited, not *figuratively masturbatory* enough. Thus, with faux regret, he announces that he is only “a benchwarmer on the team that shoots a goal,” on the team of the genius Slovak poets.

It becomes clear by the last stanza why the narrator’s regret is *only* fake. While – if one stipulates that “shoot[ing] a goal” is a metaphor for ejaculation – it may appear that the narrator is bemoaning his impotence vis-à-vis the fantastic Slovak poets, he is actually demonstratively *opting out* of the kind of race these poets are involved in. There is no deficiency involved in the narrator’s decision, and even the genius poets are aware of that: “They often tell me: ‘If I had your energy / I would demand a stall in the first stables.’” Rather, the narrator makes a conscious decision to *speak about* this specific breed of poets, to *become a witness* of the societal problems that the preponderance of these poets points to, such as a nostalgic

eneration of the past. Being a “benchwarmer” on this specific “team” proves to be the narrator’s asset rather than lack, even though when he “*weepingly*” praises the genius poets one last time it becomes clear that he is not very energetic or hopeful for this specific group’s potential as *the* voice of their society.

Richter’s poem is an indictment of his contemporaries’ unwillingness to give in to the kind of “failure” Milosz speaks of, a failure which would perhaps demand a temporary sacrifice of their reputations while giving a voice to the pressing events which surround them. These poets utterly fail in their responsibility to be witnesses, as they are too concerned with their reputations, and with keeping the tortured goal to insert themselves into the fictional image of a very specific kind of Slovak poetic tradition. While earlier I – via Vogler – discussed a failure that in fact is a kind of success (a success that is allowed to occur only if the witness is first willing to openly admit and demonstrate failure), here, these poets’ pretentious kind of “success” (and an utter unwillingness to practice self-effacement) to Richter is a full and complete failure. It is a refusal to take chances, a demonstration of hypocrisy, a refusal to produce “documentary” literature for a while, and thus a refusal to be a witness. These are the poets who *do* know but do not speak, the narrator in this poem is the one who both knows and speaks, and yet fails. His failure, however, is a lot more insightful and productive one.

Richter launches a similar, yet in important ways also a different critique in his poem “What Kind of Air are you Breathing, Comrade?.” While in “Ballad About the Genius of Slovak Poets,” he examines the failures of poetic witnessing and the reasons behind those failures, in “What Kind of Air are you Breathing, Comrade?,”

Richter examines the “comrade,” one of the sources of the repression (if not eradication) of witnessing. He also provides a small sample of what exactly needs to be remembered and witnessed about:

Wer spricht von Siegen?
Ueberstehn ist alles.
R.M. Rilke⁴⁵

Since morning, inversion on the radio
and a blue-gray fog on the way into town
dissolved in a morning soup.
On the way back, a blue-gray cloud,
dragging behind me, frightening.
Starting tomorrow, announcements in the newspaper
about the surpassed tonnage of plastics
used to manufacture coffins.

One will rot more cheerfully. With verve.
In a plagued ground
without oxygen and worms.

And you, comrade representative,
what kind of air, the air
of which ages are you breathing?

Is the nation saving up for your head-stone,
or do you, as a secretive monk⁴⁶,
want to mute your own breath
and live out life with gods, without us, the witnesses?

Like a pole in a fence with holes,
only with fellow-poles, alone?

Who speaks of victories?
Surviving you is everything.

November 16th, 1989

⁴⁵ This quote by Rilke roughly means: “Who speaks of victory? / Survival is everything.” Richter lists this motto in the original German, without translation.

⁴⁶ The loose translation of the Slovak word for “representative” is “tajomnik.” Richter utilizes a word play here that is untranslatable. He changes the word “tajomnik” into “tajomnich,” which is a combination of two words: “tajomny” meaning secretive, and “mnich” meaning monk.

(Roots in the Air, 41, translation mine)

Just as in the previous poem, Richter uses the traditional expectations of Romantic, perhaps even transcendental poetry to draw in his reader. He starts out the first stanza with a description of a very peculiar kind of morning air. Frequently, Romantic poetry which sets up the mood of a specific time of day can be expected to provide lofty portrayals of an ambience in which the reader would want to partake – it is that portrayal itself which is expected to suture the reader in, it is expected to make the reader envious of both the writer’s location and time, *and* his/her ability and luxury to commune with the surroundings and with the reader. By setting up a morning (and an afternoon) mood (perhaps during a commute to/from work), Richter traces out just a semblance of such a mood in order to immediately destroy any potential for the sublime. Yes, there is a mysterious soup-like fog surrounding the commuter, and yes, there is a blue-gray cloud following him. However, it is not the kind of cloud Wordsworth would be excited about. Richter destroys its mystery right away, in the very first verse, by explaining that the reason for this “mood” is an inversion, which is often one of the signs of environmental pollution. This specific sign of pollution causes smog, which of course makes breathing tougher. And, since being able to breathe freely is one of the common symbolic markers (if not requirements) of freedom, the sense of entrapment and constriction is made more obvious.

Also, rather than being mysterious and slightly pleasant, the situation the narrator finds himself in is “frightening” as well as greatly annoying. This is evident when he states, in the last three verses of the first stanza, “Starting tomorrow,

announcements in the newspaper /about the surpassed tonnage of plastics / used to manufacture coffins.” If a complete desublimation of the Romantic mood was not accomplished via the mention of inversion, it is certainly accomplished here, with the mention of manufacturing “success,” a success which, rather than being productive, is destructive – it produces death. It is quite likely that Richter here is referring to one of the traditional directives of the communist economy, i.e. the so called “Five-Year Plan.” These plans set out very specific and very unrealistic goals mostly for the industrial and agricultural fields, which were then expected to be “overcome” by even more unrealistic numbers.

For instance, if the Five Year Plan called for a 50% increase in the production of rye, agricultural collectives were expected to increase this production by 100, even 150%. The more exaggerated this charade with numbers became, the more it also turned into a source of collective and personal pride, *and* a masquerade in communication of sorts. Everyone knew that the numbers used by their neighbor, those reported by party leadership and the press were untrue, yet still everyone repressed that common knowledge and continued to use it as a common denominator. Arguably, the ability to provide very specific, *numeric* answers to simple questions such as “How are you?” freed the respondent from having to provide an ambiguous, perhaps even potentially negative answer. Ambiguity, of course, was always the enemy of the communist regime, and the personal was only allowed in as much as it contributed to the collective. Thus, the ability to have innumerable statistics at one’s fingertips served several desired goals: an impersonal answer, feigned specificity, and productivity.

I would now like to return to the last three verses in Richter's first stanza. The "report" that the narrator of the poem gives witness to is the – normally positive – fact regarding the "surpassed tonnage of plastics." It is this production, however, which pollutes the air to the point where the normal death-rate is also surpassed, and thus an increased number of coffins is needed. And, since these coffins are often made out of plastic, an odd and morbid production cycle of death is completed. In this cycle, the communist subject becomes the ultimate product by becoming a part of the numbers for the next subject to use, a part of the numbers for the party to flaunt.

It is also evident from the first stanza that priority is not given to the narrator who has to commute in an unbreatheable environment and who will also end up in one of the mentioned coffins. Death is acceptable; it can be even "cheerful" and energetic, as long as the god of the Five Year Plan is appeased. Sadly, the subject here is robbed even of the proper process of death and decomposition, since s/he has to accomplish this "without oxygen and worms."

In the third and fourth stanzas, where the narrator directly addresses the "comrade representative" for the first time, both the reader *and* the comrade are reminded of the fact that while the comrade may strive to, it is impossible for him to breathe a different kind of air from the polluted one which is causing all of the less fortunate subjects of the system to die. The narrator asks the comrade whether it is the same nation who is being killed off thanks to his deeds who should be saving up for the comrade's head-stone, or whether he, in his imagined position of a demigod, imagines that he will escape the fate of these subjects altogether. This is an attempt to address the conscience of the comrade.

The appeal to the comrade's conscience is clearest when he is asked if he is planning to accomplish everything he set out to "without us, the witnesses." This call is a desperate appeal to responsibility and accountability which is not given much hope by the narrator. The comrade is given a choice between communing with gods, thus saving his life, but remaining alone ("Like a pole in a fence with holes, / only with fellow poles, alone") and between dying perhaps, but dying with the nation, with a new community, a community of witnesses who will ask for accountability. Significantly, the comrade is not given a voice to respond, and while this may be a revenge of sorts on the part of the poet, from a different vantage point, this lack of response may be the comrade's response in itself.

One should also add that if, as I discussed earlier, part of the definition of a poetic witness is the fact that the material witnessed to is frequently unpoetic, then it is certain that by writing this poem, Richter fulfills this requirement. The two main topics addressed here, namely the looming ecological catastrophe and the utter corruption and lack of accountability of the comrade, are not only easily defined as unpoetic based on the expectations of – by now standardized – notions of Romantic poetry. More importantly, they are even unpoetic based on the very different directives of the art of Socialist Realism: nature in this poem is not the bottomless resource or repository of productivity that it should be. Rather, it is polluted, harmful, ugly and potentially barren as a result of that requirement of productivity. Also, the "comrade representative" is not an idealized and trusted god-like figure. Instead, he is questioned and satirized as selfish, and disconnected from the people. Rather than *being* a god himself, he is seen serving questionable gods.

By the end of the poem, the comrade remains alone, and the grade of his loneliness is multiplied. “Like a pole in a fence”⁴⁷ refers to a traditional Slovak saying which aims to illustrate a person’s lonely position. Richter gradates this lonely position by adding “holes,” i.e. even the fence which might possibly connect the comrade to “fellow-poles” (fellow comrades) has holes in it. This grade of loneliness illustrates also the faux and problematic kind of community that was fostered under the political system of communism.

The very last stanza does significant work in transforming the original motto by Rilke. This work reflects the message of the poem. While the first verse, “Wer spricht von Siegen?” is left untouched, the second verse has subtle but important changes. Roughly translated, Rilke’s “Ueberstehn” does mean a kind of survival. However, more literally it means “to last through something.” (The word “Ueberstehn” includes the root “stehen,” which in German means “to stand.” Thus, literally, the meaning is “to stand through, to stand above”). Significantly, Richter changes this word from a milder “to last through” to a much stronger “to *live* through, to live *past*.” (The original Slovak word is “prezit,” the root being “zivot,” “life.” Hence, to “prezit” someone means to literally live longer than that someone, to *outlive* them).

Amplifying this meaning further, Richter adds the personal pronoun “you” to the second sentence, which is not present in Rilke. The “you” (“vas”) Richter adds is also the formal (or plural) version of “you”, i.e., the version one would use either with a stranger or a fleeting acquaintance. Thus, what to Rilke amounts to “To live

⁴⁷ In Slovak, the phrase is “ako kol v plote.”

through is everything,” is changed by Richter to “To live *outlive you* is everything.” One should point out that while this kind of amplification and personalization may make the narrator seemingly more aggressive than the speaker in Rilke, it is essential here that Richter’s narrator assigns *a specific source* of crisis (in this case the comrade[s]) which necessitates survival. Knowing who the proverbial enemy is in any situation adds not only agency (i.e. the will to survive), but also essential information (i.e. insight into *how* to survive).

The poem’s date (November 16th, 1989) is again essential to the understanding of the historical significance and witnessing potential of a poem such as this. Since the first major, publicized demonstrations against the communist state in former Czechoslovakia broke out on November 17th, 1989 – in fact, this date is a national holiday (The Day of the Fight For Democracy) to this day in both the Czech and the Slovak Republics – one could see Richter’s poem as the last possibility, the last challenge for the comrade(s) to become witness(es). (There are questions addressed to the comrade, thus, at least an attempt at communication is still present). It is more likely, however, that this poem is an indictment of the comrade, a brief enumeration of his “sins” (the most grievous of which is the attempt to ignore or silence the witnesses). Thus, “What Kind of Air are you Breathing, Comrade?” should be seen both as the epitaph to an era in the very last seconds of its death-throes, *and* a radical finding of a witness’ voice (pointing to “you” also strongly asserts “me”), a testimony not to victory, as Richter suggests, but to a survival which is nonetheless an equally impressive achievement.

Paradoxically, it is the comrade's failure to lead with a conscience and to witness which feeds, defines and, even supports the witness' success. As I argued earlier (when discussing Davidson and Blanchot), passivity has a lot in common with passion in poetic witnessing. To be passive, and via this passivity to simultaneously insist on one's presence is often the best one can do in a given political situation. As is evident also in "What Kind of Air are you Breathing, Comrade?", the witness does not always have to be proactive and on the move in order to see what needs to be seen and tell what needs to be told. The above poem suggests that sometimes in order to be a responsible witness, waiting is sufficient. This waiting, however, is not a comfortable activity, and it does *not* amount to being complacent with the current political system. The narrator in the poem points out the inadequacies of his surroundings in a biting sarcasm, however, he does not muster an aggressive call to action in the very last stanza. He does not demand a regime change. Rather, the mood of the whole poem, especially amplified by the last stanza, suggests that the "comrade" does have his dues coming to him and that all the poetic witness needs to do is to be present and vigilant in the right place at the right time. Something as grandiose as "a victory" is not even striven for. Surviving, living past the comrade is a grand enough task for the poet⁴⁸.

In both of the poems discussed above, Richter spends some time defining what a witness should be by discussing two major, opinion-forming figures (the poet and the politician), who could have been essential witnesses yet willingly failed.

Discussing *how* they failed facilitates the creation of a mosaic of attributes of desired

⁴⁸ This is also what distances my concept of the removed witness from the more proactive (if not aggressive) figure of Tal's effective witness as political activist.

poetic witness. Having dwelled with Richter's examination and criticism of the failure of poetic witnessing (the "genius Slovak poets") and the failure of historic and political responsibility (the "comrade"), I would now like to move to a couple of examples of poetic witnessing in which "the benchwarmer," the poetic witness does some heavy lifting in bearing witness and pays attention and tribute to those who did heed the call to witness (and frequently paid a high price for it).

In "Our Hands are Bare," Richter portrays the – by now – mythical figure of the Velvet Revolution, the non-violent student demonstrator. By paying attention to more than just the snapshot of an image which traveled through the media of the world in late November of 1989, he both personalizes this figure, and puts it in its complex historical context. A witnessing about the witness occurs, in which the poetic witness helps the popular witness (the student) resist the facile fetishization so well liked and used by the media as well as by third parties less familiar with the political and historic situation.

(To students in Prague on November 17th, 1989 on the Narodni Trida Square)

The shadows of leather coats have not faded yet,
a hastily scribbled note smolders somewhere still:
"Mom, two men from the Gestapo came and got me."⁴⁹

And suddenly: "Our hands are bare."⁵⁰
In front of cameras, in front of the world's eyes.

⁴⁹ This part as well as the titular phrase of the poem are in Czech in the original. The rest of the poem is in Slovak.

⁵⁰ This phrase reads "Mame holy ruce" in the original Czech. While the word "holy" in this phrase is traditionally translated as "bare," its more literal translation is "naked." Insisting on this literal translation allows the reader to see a larger vulnerability of the student, and connects this chanting crowd to the larger image of the fragile child. Children are born naked, and are, of course, much more willing to be naked. The difference here is, however, that the demonstrating students are *not* "naked" *willingly* due to some care-free game. They realize that being "naked," i.e. a vulnerable, easy prey (literally raising their arms up in a gesture of surrender in order to prove that they are *not bearing arms*) is an absolute necessity in order to prevent being hurt and/or killed.

Illuminated by hundreds of candles on the pavement,
by reflections from shields in the hands of armed men,
hands over children's faces,
hands over heads, which only yesterday
were caressed by mom's hand
which now are caressed by a night-stick.

Invisible night-sticks beat us for twenty years,
on mouths, which wanted to speak,
on eyes, which wanted to see,
on heads, which wanted to know,
invisible night-sticks, canes of those blind ones
who only see backwards...

And suddenly: "Our hands are bare."
Those hands are not empty.
Today already they are afraid of dark days
which could last until the end of their days.
Those hands beseech, cure wounds.
Thanks to them, brontosaurus age faster,
thanks to them they will be extinct before
they destroy this earth.

Children's hands without shackles
are breaking our bonds.
That is a cheerful truth.
And it is a truth that is cruel.

November 23rd and 26th, 1989

(Roots in the Air / Two More Bitter Epilogues, 71, translation mine)

A poem such as "Our Hands are Bare" informs of a very specific revolutionary event (it functions as a pseudo-historic document), *and* resists the (currently so frequently used) attribute of the hero⁵¹. The witness may have heroic traits, but s/he may have many others, including anti-heroic ones. Assignations of heroism freeze contemplation and critical thinking not only about the person who gets this

⁵¹ Here, I am referring especially to the innumerable, and often times questionable figures who (frequently all too easily) have been given the title of a "hero" in/after the events of 9/11.

description, but also of the event in which they are involved. Such descriptions facilitate an easy labeling with the goal to “understand” and to quickly move on.

The first stanza comes as a complete surprise to the reader. The poem is called “Our Hands are Bare,” which of course evokes the most popular chant used by the demonstrators of the Velvet Revolution on squares of larger cities in former Czechoslovakia. The dedication makes it also very clear to the reader as to what s/he should expect: “To students in Prague on November 17th, 1989 on the Narodni Trida Square” unmistakably locates both the time and the place of that which will be addressed in the poem. What follows, however, is a brief description of a situation from World War II.

As the temporal designations prove, the message in the first stanza does not allow the events of this war to be considered a part of an irrelevant past. “The shadows of leather coats have *not faded yet*,” and the note scribbled by someone who could be a member of the organized resistance (in Slovakia, these members were called “Partizans”), still “*smolders*.” This is a past that to Richter informs the present and is still a part of it. It is also significant that the speaker in the first stanza is *not* portrayed as a weathered soldier, an independent hero. When he is given a voice, it is in a letter is to his “mom.” (The word for “mom” in the original Czech is “maminko,” a diminutive or endearing way to address a person. This is not translatable into English.) Even if not a child anymore, the suggestion is strong that this figure, who could possibly be a Partizan, is at the very least fragile, *child-like*.

The motif of time (time which has not completely flown into the past yet, time which is surprising and out of one’s control), is still present at the outset of the

second stanza with the word “suddenly.” This word does not only suggest an element of surprise, but, more importantly, it suggests that the events which are happening are occurring too soon: both too soon after the events of World War II, and too soon in the life of those who are demonstrating on squares, those who the poet suggests are still children. What the poet describes in this second stanza could be called a premature exposure to the complexities of the world which surrounds these children, a sort of premature, traumatic birth where the mother’s caress is literally replaced by the “caress” of a night-stick.

The second stanza short-circuits the tender image of the child with images of state-imposed violence in an intentionally unexpected manner. Candles, for instance, in the context of the demonstrations of the Velvet Revolution are a symbol of peace and community, but their shine is multiplied with the help of “shields in the hands of armed men.” Here, Richter is referring to the frequent Candle Demonstrations which occurred throughout 1988 and were all fiercely repressed by the police. He is also certainly referring to the fact that the peaceful student demonstration in the afternoon of November 17th, 1989 (which was initially started to commemorate International Students’ Day) was stopped by riot police in the evening hours. Police beat the demonstrating students viciously. The students were not beaten because they would not leave the square. Rather, they were beaten even as they *could not* leave it, as the police blocked all exit points. The practice of and hope for peace was accompanied with the looming threat of and acts of violence, which is fulfilled in the poem when the night-stick strikes for the first time.

Even though the Velvet Revolution was hastily interpreted as a non-violent turn of events, Richter points out the large (and ignored) amounts of violence (sometimes emotional, sometimes figurative, but sometimes also literal and very physical), which these students with “bare hands” had to live through *before* something like the Velvet Revolution could even occur. Even if it is possible that – as it is incessantly advertised around the world – the Velvet Revolution occurred without a single gunshot, this does not mean that there was not enormous violence (starting with World War II, through censure, wrongful imprisonments, beatings, all the way to a simple thing like forcing a “child” to grow up too soon) before, behind the scenes, and in preparation of this Velvet Revolution.⁵² Richter points to this – as he puts it – “invisible” violence in stanza three, where he speaks of the “twenty years” of age (and notably very rarely more than that) of those students who were the witnesses and the victims of such violence, simply for wanting to “speak,” “see,” and “know.”

In stanza four, Richter describes the student demonstrator further, and specifies why this figure is such an essential witness of the Velvet Revolution. As he says, the students’ hands which are “bare” are not “empty.” They are mindful (mind-full) of the history of their homeland, a history which could get even worse before it gets better, especially if no one can be found to formulate and stand behind the need for a radical change: “Today already they are afraid of dark days / which could last until the end of their days.” The poet witnesses here the symbolic birth of a new

⁵² One should also note that the title “Velvet Revolution” was assigned to the events of 1989 after the fact by the Anglophone West. In Slovakia, the revolution was and still is referred to as “Nezna revolucia,” which translates into “Tender Revolution”.

social force, the very first stirrings of a new social order, and while he is fearful for it and protective of it, he is also hopeful about it.

The hands of the student demonstrators “cure wounds;” they are juxtaposed to the “brontosaurus,” who can possibly only be read as the communist political leaders. Those communist leaders, those “brontosaurus” are the defenders of the “dark days” the students are fighting against. With heavy imagery evocative of an ancient saga rather than of a recounting of very recent history, Richter manages to further accentuate the grandeur and importance of the event which is happening in the poem, and even more specifically, of the students’ role in it.

What exactly was the students’ role in the Velvet Revolution? And why exactly was it the *students* – from among all the other better “qualified,” established, and more influential parts of society – who had to muster up the initial momentum of the protests and bear most of the risk? The poet provides a possible answer in his last stanza:

Children’s hands without shackles
are breaking our bonds
That is a cheerful truth.
And it is a truth that is cruel.

Here, the poet is describing a feeling commonly but secretly shared by many of those adults who agreed with and secretly supported the demonstrating students. These members of society “allowed” (or rather due to their own passivity, *forced*) the students to fight this dangerous battle for them because they were too afraid of the consequences of their possible involvement if the revolution were to fail. The thinking was (not too different from those “genius” Slovak poets Richter criticizes)

that they, the “adults” had too much to lose, and had to think of themselves (their careers, their families, etc.) first. Based on this thinking, the students were a safe bet, because even if the revolution did fail, there was not too much that the communist regime could take away from the students: they had no (or very little) property to take away, and most had no families of their own to threaten. In other words, their hands were “without shackles.”

The last stanza of “Our Hands are Bare” harshly criticizes this type of thinking, and points out the hypocrisy behind it. It is a highly problematic notion that a society uses its “children” to fight out its most dangerous battles. While there may be some poetic beauty behind the *élan vital* of the young generation fighting for its own brighter future, Richter suggests that such an idea (an idea widely accepted and regurgitated by the West) is highly problematic and an oversimplification of the status quo. Thus, the – by now – fetishized moment of the crowds in the streets standing up for their need for democracy is painted in a much more complex light. The poetic witness is thus in this case a witness to both bravery and cowardice – the bravery of some parts of Eastern European societies, and the cowardice of others. The fact that one of the weakest links of society was sent to the front lines because of an otherwise cowardly society is the “cruel” truth. The fact that despite all the odds stacked up against this group, their goals were – at least in the immediate future – fulfilled, is what Richter calls “cheerful.”

The act of the student demonstration should certainly be seen as a very specific act of witnessing; the kind of witnessing Smock and Pinsky speak of when they stress that being a witness has everything to do with allowing a passionate act to

also be a passive, patient, and insistent act. Standing in squares for hours, willingly allowing for one's personal space to be invaded and rarely being able to move may seem like one of the smaller inconveniences of demonstrating. However, if one is to add the cold weather and the possibility of being photographed by the secret service and mysteriously disappearing the next day, or being trampled or beaten to death, one can see that for this specific kind of witness, the demonstrator, passion and patience are indivisible assets.

Witnessing on the part of the student demonstrator is not primarily of the removed kind as I defined it (removed witnessing) in my first chapter. Rather, this kind of witnessing – a loud, insistent witnessing about the crimes of the system – is as connected to the original event as the removed nature of human experience (which I also discussed in my first chapter) allows. (The students may be slightly removed witnesses of the failures of the political system; however, they are direct witnesses of the protests against that system – of the demonstrations which are happening even as they are standing in the squares. In a way, they are partly witnesses to *themselves*, to their own involvement).

In this scenario, *removed* witnessing comes in precisely through the figure of the poet, who in the case of the last poem, is obliquely present in *and* absent from the event he evokes. The presence is simulated via the dates (both at the beginning and end of the poem), and via the location. This suggests a feeling of immediacy and connection that the poet may or may not have had to the students on the square. There is no first person presence in the poem, which is significant, and should be read as a kind of distance or absence. At the same time, however, the attitude of the

speaker towards the students is very clearly a protective, loving one. Was the poet there on November 17th, 1989? Was he physically present on the Narodni Trida square? Did he take notes even as he allowed himself to be sucked into the avalanche of that particular historical moment? The answers to these questions are unknown. More importantly, however, the answers to these questions are irrelevant for the project of removed witnessing.

What is highly relevant about the poetic witness is his/her ability to be a mirror of sorts. If the student witness is brave enough to “speak,” “see,” and “know,” as Richter puts it, the least the removed poetic witness can do is to take up the burden of *telling* the complicated truth behind the outwardly visible and simple experiences of the student. A chain of responsibility is at stake: while the student is responsible to the event which needs to be created and sustained for a while, the poetic witness is responsible both to the event *and* to the student. First and foremost, the poetic witness in this case “has the back” of the more directly involved student witness. Being a mirror of the events around him/her, s/he reflects them (in our specific case) Westward and future-ward⁵³.

As in the poem above, in the last poem which I will discuss by Richter, the poetic witness is again hard at work with bearing witness not necessarily to his own experience, but rather to the experience of numerous layers of witnesses, spanning through historical events of over two decades. All of this is accomplished in a single long stanza. Yet again, in “Never at the Horse at Two” the questions about the identity of the witness or the historical event witnessed to do not have simple or

⁵³ I will further discuss the way in which writers address (and become removed witnesses to) the demonstrations of 1989 in my next chapter, when I discuss Thomas Brussig’s novel *Wie es leuchtet*.

unanimous answers, and that is precisely the point. The author does offer *some* guidance and contextualization by providing a note immediately following the poem in the English translation (see footnote 37).

If we were to meet once
don't say At two, at the Horse
on Wenceslas square, don't say At five either
You⁵⁴ might get there already plucked
by the past ten years, for the next ten years
and I would be burning, combusting even
and immediately there would be curious faces
and beating hands and rain would douse us
from all sides and from above
the hand of the god of lovers would shield us
and I would want to give you a flower
or a kiss or a book
but obedient men in plain clothes would arrive
and tear up that flower that kiss that book
and while they would lead us off
all TV crews would be shooting it
and it would be aired that same night
and no one would believe
that we came there announced
but with fear that we wouldn't recognize each other
because it was supposed to have been our first date
in ten years

January 16th, 1989

The very day, January 16, 1989, Vaclav Havel with some friends was arrested at the memorial of Saint Wenceslas on horse in the upper part of the Wenceslas Square in Prague when they tried to lay down flowers in commemoration of Jan Palach, a student who had burnt himself to death then 20 years ago, in January 1969, in protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion to Czechoslovakia (Author's note)⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ This "you" is clearly feminine in the original Slovak.

⁵⁵ This poem is originally from Richter's collection *Roots in the Air*, p. 58 (in original Slovak), the translation is mine. The author's note is included after the same poem in *Five Seasons of Life*, a collection of translations of Richter's poems into several world languages, p. 9. This note is *not* included in the original (Slovak) version of the poem, thus further illustrating the fact that Richter is employing his poetry in order to witness to a Western reader, a reader who is less informed about the more recent historical events in Eastern Europe.

“Never at the Horse at Two” is clearly a love-poem. It is full of tenderness, pain and melancholy. The entire poem is a note of sorts, addressed from the “I” of the narrator to the “you” of the vaguely present female. The narrator’s protective attitude towards his object is clear when he warns her of possible dangers facing them at the location of their date (“You might get there already plucked” or “beating hands and rain would douse us / from all sides...”). The fragility of the described moment is also clear when the narrator predicts:

I would want to give you a flower
or a kiss or a book
but obedient men in plain clothes would arrive
and tear up that flower that kiss that book

The narrator takes great care in planning out and imagining the event of the date, yet at the same time he has to already imagine the ways in which it would be threatened. Along with a promise, he has to expect impossibility. It is in coupling the everyday with the exceptional, the safe with the dangerous that Richter accentuates the *hopelessness* of the everyday. The everyday ceases to be thus when something as casual as a date may become a part of the evening news: “and while they would lead us off / all TV crews would be shooting it / and it would be aired that same night.”

It may be the case that by planning this date, these two main characters inadvertently expose themselves to the danger of becoming witnesses to an event of political turmoil. Viewed in this manner, Richter’s poem is a manual on why and how to avoid the dangers of witnessing even while realizing that complete avoidance is impossible. The poet is in a problematic situation trying to both protect his “characters” (and by extension, I would argue, the entire young generation of 1989)

from harm while at the same time allowing them to have as normal a life as possible. These two opposing inclinations are evident in Richter's language. For instance, a verse like "the hand of the god of lovers would shield us" is evidence of the young lovers' need for protection, while words like "plucked," "burning," or "beating" clearly indicate the violence from which the couple needs protection.

Interestingly enough, it is not just the "men in plain clothes" (i.e. the secret service agents) that the couple needs protection from. The years that have passed since the couple's last date (based on the poem that "distance" was quite far, ten years) have also done them violence. Significantly, it is "by the past ten years, for the next ten years" that the female is "plucked,"⁵⁶ and the male is "combusting." Thus, it is clear that there are two kinds of violence here. The first is the obvious, bloody kind, which it is easy to see, record, and report on the news. This first kind is threatening the lovers if they show up "at two, at the horse." The second is far less obvious, yet no less painful: it is the violence of fear and prohibition and ultimately perhaps also of regret that keeps them from showing up "at two, at the horse." Richter describes the former much more literally, while allowing the latter to only subtly frame the poem by including the phrase "ten years" at the outset and conclusion of the poem.

It is also important to point out that this love poem is not exclusively, perhaps not even primarily addressed to the female object of the narrator's affections. The

⁵⁶ The word "plucked" in Slovak is "osklbana," which gives this word a clearly violent connotation (perhaps closer to "shred" in English). The way in which the female character is "plucked" by the most recent history is similar to the way in which a chicken is plucked. She is being worn down, she is being stripped of a protective layer, she is being abused. The only difference is that while this is done to the chicken after death, the character at hand has all this done to her while still alive.

description of a moment that is anticipated, yet at the same time described with a clear sense of impossibility gives one a hint as to who (or rather what) else this love-poem could be addressed to. “Never at the Horse at Two” is a love-poem addressed to the moment that was never to be, as well as to the location, “the horse” (more generally Wenceslas Square, Prague, Czechoslovakia), which made this anticipated moment both so profound, and so impossible. *The carefree attitude that is normally required in order for dates to happen and for love poems to be successful is not possible in the particular historical and geographical location specified by Richter.* In a place which was and is the center of centuries of political battles, violence and bloodshed, it becomes impossible, even irresponsible to casually utter a phrase like “I’ll see you at the Horse at two.”

Richter’s note, more specifically, its two important years (1969 and 1989) anchor the time of the fictional poem. Significantly, the place remains the same. The place, the monument, is the only constant throughout the poem. Via this note, “Never at the Horse at Two” can no longer be read (by the Western reader) as simply the story of a couple struggling with their relationship in the backdrop of some vague political upheaval. Rather, it becomes clear that the couple’s struggle for free movement is a symbol for the struggle of *any* citizen of then Czechoslovakia (a strong example being Vaclav Havel and his friends) for the ability to appear even at the most charged of political monuments whenever they please. Similarly, the young couple’s struggle to remember, or rather, their fear of forgetting (“we came there announced / but with fear that we wouldn’t recognize each other”) should be read in tandem with

the struggle of any subject of a totalitarian political system to remember (put more specifically, *to have the freedom to remember*) anything they would like.

The reasons for picking a monument (such as a sculpture, a fountain, a famous building, etc) as a meeting place for a date are quite apparent. These locations are easily recognizable and reachable center-points in large cities that may otherwise be difficult to navigate. In addition, the chosen monument (with the help of its picturesque characteristics) may provide the ideal backdrop for a romantic encounter. What is more, unlike coffee shops and bars, one does not have to spend money while waiting for one's date. But why are monuments (such as the statue of the King Wenceslas on a Horse) picked as locations for charged political protest? Jenny Edkins might have part of the answer, when she argues:

Such landscapes have been chosen as the site of protests by movements challenging the sovereign power of the contemporary state. Cityscapes...are sites of memory and landscapes of political power. It is at these spots that, in a return of the repressed, we find political *protest brought directly to the sites of state memory*...these sites and the protests that take place there are symptomatic of the *centrality of memory and trauma to the production of political space*. At the point at which changes in the political ordering of the state are demanded, protests move to the sites that are central to the current structure. *The protests reclaim memory and rewrite it as a form of resistance. The story is never finished*: the scripting of memory by those in power can always be challenged, and such challenges are found at moments and in places where the very foundations of the imagined community have been laid out. They play on, and demand a recognition of, the contingency of political community and its structure as social fantasy (216, italics mine).

As Edkins points out, these locations are not picked randomly. The monument serves as a multi-layered prop always ready and waiting for the masses, where, helped by the “silent” presence of this monument, the protesters may remind the public of both: what the protest is for, and what it is against. The sculpture of King Wenceslas on a

Horse is an obvious choice, because it is the location of positively viewed aspects of the “social fantasy” that was Czechoslovakia – this was, for instance, the location of the reading of the proclamation of independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918 from Austria-Hungary. At the same time, however, it was also the setting for mass demonstrations by the Nazis during World War II, massive May-Day worker’s parades during the communist regime, *and* the self-immolation of Jan Palach on January 16th, 1969, one of the events central to the poem at hand.

Palach’s act as well as Havel’s attempt at commemorating it were both acts of *guerilla reappropriation* of a space deemed central to the Czechoslovak identity. This reappropriation was necessary because St. Wenceslas Square was appropriated by the ruling political system, a political system which was intent on demonstrating its power by making frequent use of this space. In their very different protests against the system, Palach and Havel (and many others before and since) took advantage of the always present *potential* for resistance that monuments such as that of St. Wenceslas on a Horse provide.

This potential, according to Edkins, is constantly present, a sort of promise of things to come, an always looming challenge to the status quo. That is what Edkins means when she says that the story of the state and its subjects is “never finished.” Monuments such as the one at hand do not only give voice to the repressed. More importantly, they *amplify* the voice – whether literal or figurative – of anyone who decides to stand next to this monument in order claim it or identify with it. Thus, monuments such as the statue of St Wenceslas on a Horse have the potential to

function as catalysts for any grassroots effort⁵⁷. *Seeing* or *finding* the potential for counter narratives within memorials of the state is thus a way of witnessing, a way of being oppositional even in the most oppressive of regimes.

The “treatments” of the monument discussed above only extend its original intended purpose, which is two fold. First, the statue is meant to commemorate Saint Wenceslas’ martyrdom⁵⁸. Second, this patron saint of the Czech lands (and by extension also his monument) is expected to provide protection for his faithful subjects, which is evident from the following inscription on the statue base: “Saint Wenceslas, duke of the Czech land, prince of ours, do not let us perish, nor our descendants” (translation mine).⁵⁹ Since it may be the case that various returns of the repressed took place in the specific location of St Wenceslas Square in part due to a deeply ingrained expectation of protection and safety, it is bitterly ironic that this is also precisely where innumerable events demonstrating the lack of protection and safety took place.

If one goes back to Agamben’s suggestion that the only complete witness is the dead witness, then it is certainly the case that Palach (and a few others, who in the subsequent months followed his lead) intentionally chose, via their acts of utter hopelessness, *to become complete witnesses* to the repressive regime in which they

⁵⁷ It is perhaps in an act of reciprocity for the monument’s endless promise and gift of a voice that Richter gives the monument, the place a “voice” via his poem.

⁵⁸ The statue of King Wenceslas on a Horse is a monument to the first Christian ruler of the Czech lands, Duke Wenceslas I (907-935), who, after his conversion to Christianity (by saints Constantine and Method) set out to convert all Czech nobility, with very limited success. Wenceslas I also commissioned a large amount of the (still) most recognizable architecture of Prague (Hradcany castle hill, St. Vitus Cathedral, etc.). After his murder (arranged by his own brother), Wenceslas was canonized as a saint, and has ever since been considered the patron saint of the Czech Republic.

⁵⁹ The original Czech inscription is: “Svaty Vaclave, vevodo ceske zeme, knize nas, nedej zahynouti nam ni budoucim.”

were living⁶⁰. Following the implications of Richter's poem, Palach and Havel were only a few of the thousands of ghosts which make up the identity of this specific location. The poet here becomes a removed witness by paying respects and giving voice to the "ghosts" of the square (the more direct witnesses), and thus by extension, to the square itself. In this manner, removed witnessing is also a witnessing to the "return of the repressed."

The memory that Richter desires to evoke was, of course, *not* the memory sanctioned by the state. Such sanctioned memory preferred the self-immolation of Jan Palach to vaguely be remembered as an urban legend, if at all. Thus, any individuals attempting to commemorate this event (and hence to personally witness to its authenticity) would have to be silenced by the state. The couple in "Never at the Horse at Two" also goes through a kind of silencing at the very end of the poem, when it becomes clear that the date the narrator so meticulously planned is really an impossibility: "it was *supposed to have been* our first date / in ten years" (italics mine). The monument of the horse is carefully approached and imagined (as an essential part of the date itself), but it is never quite reached, never quite accomplished.

Based on the poet's persuasion (which becomes apparent both through the poem and through his additional note) it is especially the multiple layers of *the most recent historical events* around the statue of St. Wenceslas on a Horse (one of the

⁶⁰ These "followers" were Jan Zajic, who burned himself alive on the very spot Palach did, and three months later, Evzen Plocek, who self-immolated in Jihlava. While sadly, these "complete witnessings" did not have a large immediate effect, they did produce a large effect exactly 20 years later, when a series of large anti-communist demonstrations took place. These demonstrations were originally organized as "Palach Week" gatherings commemorating the 20th anniversary of his self-immolation.

many epicenters of the tumults of history) which negate the statue's other possible identity as the casual meeting location for lovers. Richter's repetitive use of the conjunction "and" formally reflects the overwhelming nature of the location, in which one can never at any single moment say that only one thing happened, or that only one thing is happening. In other words, one might attempt a date at the horse after the events of 1918, 1939, 1968, 1969, and 1989, but it would always be a date *and* a confrontation with a series of different "dates." It would always involve a significant other *and* a confrontation with a series of different, ghostly "significant others."⁶¹

After the events of the 20th century, using the location of "the horse" as a backdrop, as merely an aesthetically pleasing setting used to create a certain mood would reveal a problematically simplified attitude. It would ignore, as Richter writes in his note, the chain of events (the Warsaw Pact invasion, Jan Palach's ultimate protest, and Vaclav Havel's arrest) through the prism of which the place is transformed into a monument much more multifaceted than the original monument to King Wenceslas

Besides the suggested impossibility of luxurious simplicity of the romantic love poem in the particular place and time at hand, Richter also rises to Robert Pinsky's challenge of the poetic witness to be unpoetic⁶². Specifically, the challenge is not only to be unpoetic, but more importantly, to signify and illuminate *why* this impossibility of being poetic persists, and why this impossibility is not only inevitable but also *desirable*, and *necessary*. In this poem, Richter does *precisely* what the

⁶¹ While the objection that all places have histories (and thus that the location of the St. Wenceslas statue is no different from any other place) is understandable, it is certainly also true that most places do not have histories that are this thick or combated.

⁶² I have discussed Pinsky's challenge at length earlier in this chapter.

poetic witness should be doing according to Pinsky, namely “answer for...the unpoetic.” He becomes the speaker not only for the masses of people who were at the horse for innumerable occasions in the past, or for the melancholic lover who realizes that one of the ‘functions’ of the horse is irretrievably lost. Significantly, the poet becomes a voice of the location; he enables the monument to no longer simply be the traditional ‘silent witness.’ The statue of King Wenceslas on a Horse was witness to violence and a large number of political injustices, none of which could be defined as poetic in the prettified sense of the word. This is precisely what Richter gives voice to. In this manner, he does not only “answer for...the unpoetic.” He also answers *to* it, he speaks for it.

The “problem” of “Never at the Horse at Two” also does not have an automatic “solution.” In this case, the possible quest for a “simple” love poem (intentionally ignorant of its location) may initially appear desirable, may appear as an innocent longing for a kind of utopia, and thus may seem as one possible resolution. It reveals, however, an unconscionable dystopia: were one to write a “clean,” light and pretty love-poem in this specific case, one would reveal literal ugliness of the poet (similar to the pretentious poets Richter criticizes in “The Genius of Slovak Poets”) who searches for an expression for an eternal absolute of love in a socio-historical condition which does not have the luxury or the space to muse over such things. Regardless of whether or not an initial untainted setting for love was present at some moment in the past, a “return” is not something that interests Richter, and it is certainly not something Richter would envision as a goal. Rather, it is up to the removed witness to replace the willfully pretty and trite by material which

acknowledges violence and misery, and by acknowledging it, takes a first step *away* from it.

Instead of a looking “back” towards this traditional poetic utopia, the poem inadvertently feels its way towards the very near future. It is written in January 1989. Almost exactly in 10 months to the day (on November 17th, 1989), yet another layer of political events (the mass protests of the Velvet Revolution) would await this exact place, proving Richter right in his understanding of the impossibility of any simplicity or nonchalance on St Wenceslas Square.

IV. Conclusion

Removed witnessing rejects the idea that less is always more, that simplicity and minimalism are always the most desired artistic techniques. It allows for the idea that works of art, such as even the shortest of poems *can and should* be complicated (in their figuration, their levels of meaning, their levels of reference, their multiple imagined audiences, the multiple addressed cultures, etc).

If it is important to point out that the goal of poetic removed witnessing is *not* to aestheticize or romanticize the issues it deals with, it is essential to assert that the goal is also *not* to redefine poetry as journalism. Removed witnessing allows the artwork to literally be a sign of the times that house it and helped produce it. Removed witnessing allows for the artist to be a responsible citizen in his/her society without compromising the nature of his/her artwork. In removed witnessing, the very requirement of staying “true” to one’s art also *demand*s an active rootedness of that artwork within its socio-historical setting.

Removed witnessing's overt references to historical occurrences (be they guerrilla externalizations of repressed issues, or more common ideas) do not taint the value of the artwork. In order for an artwork to be successful, it has to "speak" to its audience. Removed witnessing is one of the ways in which this speaking, this mediation, can be achieved. In addition, it is generally true that the impact and echo of an *artwork* – in this case the poem – tends to last longer than that of a journalistic style of witnessing. *Removed witnessing prevents any "news" it conveys from instantly becoming "yesterday's news."* It is always relevant (even when the issues it is dealing with may have been resolved), because it is always about the event at hand *and more*. There is always a remainder in removed witnessing. While the immediate event was witnessed to and the most pressing questions were answered, removed witnessing is always also about the other cascading events that the initial event caused, the issues caused by the event seen elsewhere (outside of the event's "home" location), and the *consequences* of the original event.

Thus, removed witnessing about 1989 is never just about the events of the Velvet Revolution. As I discussed in Chapter One, and as I will continue to discuss in my subsequent chapters, removed witnessing about 1989 is also always about addressing the unresolved issues that led up to this massive return of the repressed, *and* about the *consequences* of this event both "at home" and in the world. Removed witnessing speaks to how these multifarious events were and are seen and *not* seen, acknowledged *and* ignored, understood *and* misused for more recent political goals.

The poetic removed witness often had to function in times and locations (such as in pre-1989 Czechoslovakia) when other more mainstream forms of witnessing –

such as journalistic accounts – were silenced. The poetic removed witness can, via the shield of poetic figuration, remain a direct eye-witness and/or a more removed cultural witness at times when literal and open witnessing is punished by violence (whether physical or less tangible) and death. As my analysis of the poems in this chapter demonstrates, the poem as a form can also fool censorship and slip through the more porous “borders” of literary censure even as the field report or article is stopped and silenced completely by more severely imposed news embargoes.

The poetic witness is not interested in closure. S/he is not interested in finishing up/accomplishing a topic or task the way a business executive would. S/he *is*, however, interested in approaching and continuously attempting to give voice to the people, material, and events which need it. This is another significant way in which the work of poetic witnessing differs from the kind of work journalism does. Unlike the journalist, the witness is not limited by her/his inability to participate in the situation s/he is witnessing. Quite the opposite: the fact that the poetic witness is – literally or figuratively – *involved in* what s/he is witnessing, the fact that s/he has a personal stake in the outcome rewrites the very definition of witnessing, and redefines the role of the poem.

Chapter Three:

The Eastern European Novelist as Witness: Dorota Maslowska and Thomas

Brussig

Trauma writers urge readers to become empathic witnesses to testimony such that they can recognize and perhaps transmit information dulled by time and repression and thereby revise their own assumptions. These writers also acknowledge a responsibility to reveal the uncertainties, complexities, and paradoxes of telling and to recognize that traumatic experience is driven by alienating and terrifying aspects of it that resist speech, resolutions, and categories of analysis more common in normal contexts. Readers are challenged to enter into a multifaceted examination of the past that is a dynamic, uncertain, and always-unfinished process, one that recontextualizes traditional historical, psychological, and narrative boundaries.

- Laurie Vickroy

MC Doris...she would love to forget all about the terrible land she is living in, the one oddly named 'Poland,' where forgotten wars are still fought out of oversight...MC Doris rides her bike swallowed by bitterness: Did you move to this neighborhood [Praga] to cast careless glances like wreaths onto these sad altars, onto this not-at-all quiet life, this kaleidoscope and biotope of pathology? Dreams here become a parody.

-Dorota Maslowska

Nicht, wer vom Schreiben leben kann, war...ein Schriftsteller, sondern jemand, der sich einmal oder fortwaehend, mit gleichen, mit aehnlichen oder mit ganz anderen Worten fragt: Kann mein Buch die Welt veraendern?

-Thomas Brussig

I. Witnessing as a Challenge to Realism

As I argued in my previous chapter, it is in part due to the complicated and always somewhat impossible nature of the narration of traumatic events that poetry as form lends itself so well to their representation. The form of the poem and the limitations it exhibits vis-à-vis any potential for exhaustive and conclusive expression is precisely what qualifies it so well for the similarly choppy, inconclusive, and often inevitably metaphoric nature of any recounting of traumatic memory. The spaces between one verse and the next and between one stanza and the next are useful in

reproducing and mimicking the gaps between that which is laboriously remembered and that which is left out or forgotten. Similarly, the spaces between any poetic figuration and its literal meaning are akin to a kind of remembering where the full story cannot be told. The metaphor, the simile, or the pause become the protective shield for the subject from her/his own trauma providing the safety of the ever-possible retreat from remembering via a misreading (or a passing over) while always also providing for the boldness of the ever-impending recall via a very particular reading.

The content and style of literature that I am concerned with always influences and shapes the form that it is delivered in. Regardless of whether the literary form at hand is a drama, poem, novel, etc., when recounting traumatic events (events that are only partially remembered, recountable, or intelligible), the literary form of memory will always retain aspects of the poetic style. Hence, the novels discussed in this chapter disrupt their traditional form due to the poetic style they retain. I contend that a literary piece which closely adheres to the prescriptive nature of its realist literary form cannot serve as a satisfying vessel for the purposes of witnessing. The novels I describe here are expansions (not exceptions) to the argument I pursue in Chapter Two about the necessity of the poetic style for the literature of witness. Literature of removed witnessing has to always be poetic with respect to its style, even if it is not always poetic in its form.

In using the word “realist” here, I am referring less to the conventions of psychological realism (such as stream of consciousness writing), which might actually be a productive form for the purposes of narrating memory. Rather, I am

referring to the common idea that if a form is called realist, it has succeeded in expressing an exhaustive fullness and conclusiveness of its subject matter with scientific accuracy. The notion that all has been said and that all has been said perfectly is at direct odds with any kind of remembering and working through that the literature of witness is concerned with.

I will now briefly discuss Georg Lukacs's definitions of the reportage and portrayal methods in his essay "Reportage and Portrayal" in order to further flesh out the not-always-realist literature of witness at the center of my project. Lukacs stresses the importance of portrayal, which is commonly seen, even among some materialist literary critics, as less realist and thus less reliable or true to the social and material conditions which produced it. It is this requirement of absolute realism from the proponents of reportage as literature that Lukacs criticizes. According to Lukacs, reportage, originally being a journalistic method, is "fundamentally different...from what happens in creative literature" (49). It is its formulaic "clinging to a method of objectivity that can serve in literature only as a surrogate" (51). Lukacs sees the reportage novel as that which "conceives a social product as ready-made and final, and precisely describes it as such ('objectively' and 'scientifically')" (54).

Lukacs posits portrayal as the creative method which accomplishes that which the method of reportage cannot. It is specifically portrayal's relationship to the depiction of reality which is significantly similar to my discussion of the relationship of the literature of witness to the depiction of reality. With the portrayal method,

If...[a] case is something to be portrayed in fiction, then it is quite immaterial how many details may not coincide with the underlying empirical reality. They may all agree exactly, and yet the literary result may be quite worthless;

on the other hand they may not agree at all, and yet the literary result may still be perfect. And this alone is what matters here. For the creative writer does not create in perfect freedom, simply out of his own mind...He is on the contrary closely tied to the reproduction of reality in a manner faithful to its true content. This tie, however, means that he has to reproduce the overall process (or else a part of it, linked either explicitly or implicitly to the overall process) by disclosing its *actual and essential driving forces*. The reality of a particular character, a particular destiny, etc., now depends on the expression of this overall process and its driving forces – the degree to which this is successfully achieved, its truth and penetration, concreteness, palpability and typicalness...*Whether the particular features appear in the same combination as in the empirical reality is completely immaterial* (51-52, italics mine).

With his description of the portrayal method, Lukacs accomplishes a juxtaposition of two different attitudes towards the depiction of reality. To Lukacs, the reportage method prioritizes facts and exactitude in details while the portrayal method prioritizes the *spirit* of the reality which is being depicted. In other words, laboriously insisting on depicting every single detail of an event may actually do a disservice to the event at large. This is the case since first, reality is heterogeneous and often contradictory, and second, since when composing a narrative the author has to choose an extremely limited slice of it.

Rejecting the tie of the writer to, as Lukacs puts it above, the “overall process” as the reportage method tends to do, can be equivalent to fetishizing and freezing the detail, often a detail which is potentially not an accurate representative of the overall process. This detail may even be misleading. What is more, putting a deaf ear to the writer’s overall process or context is evidence of not only a general misunderstanding of the craft of creative writing, but also of a general disrespect of the capabilities of the writer to discern and explain that which is essential and representative rather than that which is accidental and irrelevant.

Barring the fact that depicting reality exhaustively and faithfully is impossible (or, as I put it in my previous chapter, we can never know “what *really* happened”), the small slice that the author intends to depict always already has a meaning attached to it. In merely having a beginning and an end, any piece of literature is already different from the reality it is depicting, since that reality conceivably started long before the depiction started, and similarly, is going to continue long after the depiction is over. In addition, the slice of reality any given author chooses has to be given direction if that slice is to have any meaning for the reader whatsoever.

For instance, a mere nuts-and-bolts observation of the daily routine of a secret service agent who is shadowing his/her subject for the day will mean infinitely less if the observation remains purely on the level of physical movements, locations, etc. In fact, a casual reader may not have any reason to suspect that this character even is a secret service agent, let alone whom they are shadowing and why, with what psychological results left on the one being spied on, in what political system, etc. This is also where the method of reportage (as Lukacs defines it) kids itself, so to say, in its claim to merely be presenting evidence as in agreement “with empirical reality” (52). As Lukacs suggests, it is precisely in trying to be true exclusively to the observations of the eyewitness (as happens in journalism) that reportage as a literary method betrays the complexities of the situation the eyewitness saw. The best reportage, according to Lukacs is the one that starts leaning towards portrayal in its methodology.

The above reasons as to why exactitude and details are not essential for a good piece of literature (“good” is defined here as, among other things, faithful and

responsible to the socio-historical situation which the work of literature stems from) also shed more light on why it has little relevance to me whether the pieces literature of removed witnessing are strictly fact or strictly fiction, whether they are autobiographical and to what extent. In fact, closely examining pieces of controversial literature for the strict purpose of determining which sections of a novel are “true” and which are “lies” (with the goal of legitimating or discrediting the author) are doing any given piece of literature a great disservice. The membrane which divides the autobiographical from the non-autobiographical (and thus fictitious) is very flexible and porous, and though many authors (especially in the current post-James Frey world) now preemptively declare what their works are or are not, I contend that this kind of practice (while potentially a safety net beneficial for the author’s reputation) is not at all beneficial to the reader, whose encounter with a piece of literature gets limited and de-mystified (in the sense of lacking mystery) before s/he even picks it up.

While immersed in a strictly realist text, the reader has the advantage of feeling at ease, of feeling secure in the narrator’s omnipotent hands. Traditionally, there is no confusion as to what the reader should and should not know; there is no confusion about the constellation of the main characters, or the evolution of the plot. This promise of an eventual knowing (while not really yet knowing) that occurs immediately when a reader opens a work of prose written in the realist (i.e. reportage) style can not and should not be afforded to the reader of the literature of witness (regardless of the level of trauma that is being recounted). *Knowing in this case is a luxury which the subject of the narrative of witness did not have, and thus, if the goal*

is to produce a sympathetic witness-by-proxy in the reader (as I have established in my previous chapter), knowing is also a luxury that the reader should not be afforded.

There is always a potential for knowing in the literature of witness, the hope (ideally on the part of both the writer and the reader) that by the time the reader's sojourn with a particular work is over, s/he will have *some* kind of knowledge and understanding for the events depicted in the work of witness. However, even then, the understanding of some situations or emotional complexities depicted in the work may be based on moods or blurry, insufficient facts rather than on exact facts and figures.

As I have suggested above, what it means to know in literature of witness is very different from what it means to know in science and journalism. This, however, does not mean that one form of knowledge should be considered better or more reliable. The knowledge that is amassed is always reflective of its subject. As Laurie Vickroy suggests in the passage I used as the epigraph to this chapter, trauma writers by definition cannot deliver information that is in any way complete. Since the material they deliver has "terrifying aspects...that resist speech, resolutions and categories more common in normal texts," the reader is always confronted with a text that is "dynamic, uncertain, and always unfinished" (*Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, 34-35). It is for these reasons that realist literature using the reportage method as Lukacs defines it does not do justice to literature in general, but even more specifically, the realist style more hinders than helps the potential for truth of any narrative of witness. It is often when the reader knows comparatively less and

imagines more (based on the context of the work, based on an emotional connection) that a work of witness is most successful in creating a witness-by-proxy in the reader.

The question about whether or not this kind of literature of witness works against its own goals in intentionally alienating its reader is only justified at first glance. While it is certainly a risky move to compromise a possibly seamless suturing in of the reader by disallowing him/her the sense of a safe “journey” with interesting questions and conclusive answers ahead, it is also the case that just as with poetry, the gaps and pauses that are created in narrative accounts of witnessing also provide for multiple spaces for the reader to insert her/himself into the narrative. While these spaces may not be as safe and comfortable as those provided by the omnipotent and/or omnipresent realist narrator, they certainly do give the reader more room and more freedom. It is also the case that one of the very goals of the literature of witness is precisely alienation. A frequent connection between the subject of the work of literature and its reader is based on the empathy of the reader towards the trauma or injustice that subject suffered. Thus alienation, seemingly paradoxically becomes one of the tools suture of the literature of witness.

It is essential to allow the reader more freedom within the narrative in order for the reader to approach the characters, locations and disposition of the narrative. It is also important that the reader chose to approach the world of the narrative rather than going there because the straight-jacket of the narrative did not leave her/him any other option. While one particular metaphor may not work for the reader, chances are that one of the subsequent ones might. While one particular pause may cause one reader to withdraw from the reading, that same pause may help another reader find

her/his own agency and voice within the text, in relation to the text and its subjects. Thus, while for realist literature as I define it here, the goal may be to set up one cohesive task and provide the journey of that tasks' accomplishment, for the literature of witness, the journey may be a series of tasks and a series of attempts, only some (or maybe none) of which may get finished by the works' end. This is one way – albeit removed and derived – in which the experience of the reader can approach and at least for a short while approximate the experience of the subject of the trauma at hand. This is also one way in which the “safety” of the reader of realist literature is sacrificed for very specific and understandable reasons.

The difference between a more passive, catered-to, and thus also more comfortable reader and the more active, free, and thus also more independent reader of the text of witness is akin to Roland Barthes' concepts of the “readerly” and the “writerly” text. As he argues in *S/Z*, the readerly text produces a reader who is at ease consuming the kind of world s/he is accustomed to. Similarly to my definition of realist or more specifically reportage texts, Barthes also argues that the typical readerly text is a realist text (or “classic text” as he calls them). The comfort and safety of the reader in this kind of text is effortless. The writerly text, on the other hand, puts more agency but also more responsibility into the hands of the reader. The text will not “work” for the reader unless s/he makes it work, unless s/he becomes the *co-creator* of it. Ideally, this kind of redefinition of the readers' function blurs the clear dividing line between the writer and the reader, thus giving the reader a stake in the success of the work.

As I argued in my previous chapters, the success I am interested in in my project is achieved by an *extension* of the author's knowledge, goals, and passions onto the reader. The ultimate writerly text is thus the one that makes a *community of witnesses* out of all the readers of a particular text of witnessing. As Vickroy states, "The nature of these [trauma] narratives encourages readers to become more aware, to adopt a new consciousness of history, even if it is one that is fragmented, ambivalent, and at times inconclusive" (33). Barthes takes this reader awareness even further when he specifies the imagined reader of the writerly text:

Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text...The writerly text is *ourselves writing* before the infinite play of the world...is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system...which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure (4-5).

Barthes is trying to forego the finality and completeness of the text because his goal is to resist the idea of the text as a commodity – this is certainly a goal that Barthes and Lukacs have in common. Also, by resisting textual closures Barthes' goal is to provide an opening for the reader to find a voice and gain agency *within* the text, i.e. before the reader even finishes the text, and definitely afterward. By providing agency for the reader, the writerly text allows the reader to co-create the text.

As Barthes suggests in the last sentence of the block quote above, it is when the form imprisons the content that the multifaceted potential of a piece of literature is betrayed. It is also apparent from the same sentence, however, that to Barthes, form and content are not irreconcilable opposites. There are instances, specifically the

instances of the writerly text, when a piece of literature can be “novelistic without the novel,” meaning that the content (the “novelistic”) can be such, i.e. it can have aspects of what normally is identified as a novel, without being decidedly grouped under the form “novel.” While the text may not have ended up under the firm designation “a novel,” it was certainly influenced in its formulation, organization, progression, etc. on the way *towards* the novel as form.

The writerly text according to Barthes also highlights its own process of becoming. It highlights the mechanisms that went into producing it, whether they are questions of style or content. The goals of a writerly text overlap with the intentions and modes of functioning present in a text of trauma witnessing. The additional level that trauma literature brings onto the writerly text, however, is also essential: while the writerly text calls attention to its own status as a text (and that is one of its primary goals), the text of trauma witnessing additionally intends to reflect the trauma victim’s confusion and problematic memory within the very structure of the text. As Laurie Vickroy puts it,

The complex internal conflicts, the ‘bifocal visions’ and movements from avoidance to fear to helplessness that characterize trauma also suggest a multiple view of self in reaction to extraordinary circumstances. Therefore, trauma writers position their readers in the similarly disoriented positions of the narrators and characters through shifts in time, memory, affect, and consciousness (28).

The text of witnessing on the topic of trauma is thus a writerly text with a difference, where in addition to the resistance of the text, an inevitable and perhaps also unintentional resistance on the part of the author is also easily discernible.

As Vickroy argues in the epigraph I use as well as elsewhere in her work, “trauma writers,” as she calls them, cannot (and *should* not) provide the kind of safe haven, omnipotent narrators, neat plotlines, etc. that many other kinds of literature can:

Writers have created a number of narrative strategies to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory, including textual gaps (both in the page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states (29).

The narrative strategies Vickroy lists here are exactly the techniques found in the prose I am analyzing in this chapter. The Polish author Dorota Maslowska employs every single one of the strategies Vickroy mentions in her work. In her novel *Snow White and Russian Red*, Maslowska’s most prevalent tool is the “affective state” of excessive drug and alcohol use, which influences every other aspect of her novel. *Snow White and Russian Red* is also a novel heavily reliant on the disruption of visual images. Rather than embellishing the content of the narrative, these comic-book-style images function as interruptions; they accent the frustrating incompleteness of the information the reader is getting. Maslowska’s second work, *Die Reiherkoenigin*, certainly fits Barthes’ definition of a writerly text. It has the size of a novella, the appearance of prose, yet it rhymes, and is subtitled *Ein Rap (A Rap)*. This genre-bending work is at times “novelistic without the novel,” and at other times “poetry without the poem.” Also in line with Vickroy’s characterization of trauma writer’s work, Thomas Brussig’s *Wie es leuchtet* (and to some extent also his *Helden wie wir*) attempts a conclusive novel about the events of November 1989 and performs

interesting failures. In *Wie es leuchtet* this failure is in part due to the unmanageable multitude of characters and thus also, as Vickroy describes, “shifting viewpoints.”

Finally, the most important affective state in all of the aforementioned works is a sense of humor. This sense of humor sometimes facilitates the witnessing to a tragedy. At other times it allows for traumatic witnessing to be postponed until a more convenient time. The affective state of a strong sense of humor allows for extremely hurtful historical and personal events to be narrated perhaps without re-injuring the narrator (possibly also author) or offending the reader. This sense of humor both in Maslowska and Brussig is also the protective buffer that allows these authors to use very obviously autobiographical aspects (i.e. their life experiences) without being obligated to enlist their works under the label “autobiography” or “non-fiction.”

II. Dorota Maslowska: Witness to the Worst of Both Worlds

Expanding on Vickroy’s points, one might state that the primary allegiance of a trauma writer is not to the form of the text, but to the content. The form is in flux, just like the content. Thus, it is quite possible and common that while the writer does set out to narrate in the form of a standard realist or classic novel, the end product, via its departures from the traditional style of a realist novel, may acquire aspects of the poetic or dramatic form. It is also quite possible that while the writer does initially intend to write within the traditional constraints of the genre of testimony, s/he may end up merging into the genre of autobiography, biography, or abandon the realm of

non-fiction altogether. Dorota Maslowska's work, which intentionally makes obvious its' self-disruptive autobiographical references, is a perfect case in point.

Maslowska's work is a work of witness. While it may be less easily definable as such than for instance a memoir, it testifies nonetheless. First, Maslowska pays attention to the socio-political status quo of her country/region of origin. Second, she demonstrates a knowledge of the emotional world of her characters, and this is an intimate knowledge if for no other reason than the fact that incarnations of herself are a frequent character. And third, she exhibits a compassionate intent to spread awareness of the situation in Eastern Europe via her small, turbulent, but intimate stories.

Maslowska intentionally alienates her reader in order to achieve specific effects in her literature. As I have discussed above when referring to Vickroy, authors of testimonial writing frequently put the reader into uncomfortable, disoriented positions in order to evoke and simulate the effects of the trauma they are depicting. In this manner, the demand for empathy becomes a tool of suture. Maslowska uses this kind of technique in her work in numerous ways, especially in the way she treats herself and her characters. The reader is immediately alienated as the author frantically moves from one character to the next while barely having introduced any of them. In addition, Maslowska frequently has her characters express self-conscious confusion about their location and function within the novel.

Maslowska's most frequent – albeit minor – characters are various reincarnations of herself, whether it be MC Doris, as is the case in *Die Reiherkoenigin* (roughly translatable as *Queen of the Herons*) or Masloska (with only the “w”

dropped), as is the case in her debut novel *Snow White and Russian Red*. In *Die Reiherkoenigin*, for instance, in a sudden introduction to one of Maslowska's alter egos, the narrator inquires: "Da ist noch eine Person zu sehen...ist sie das nicht, MC Dorota? Doris Maslowska?...Was macht sie doch da, im Dezember abends auf dem Balkon...? Was sucht sie in diesem Buch, was ist das wieder fuer eine Schnapsidee?" (74-75). This is exactly what Vickroy speaks of when she mentions that trauma writers frequently use "multiple view[s] of self in reaction to extraordinary circumstances" (28). Maslowska's various incarnations of self point to a confusion on the part of the narrator. They also point to a multiply split consciousness: There is the narrator who does at times have a handle on the world of the narrative and is inside it, there is the narrator who frequently loses this handle and thus steps outside commenting on the narrative, there is the narrator who at times becomes a character, and there is the narrator who only ever steps in as the voice of the author. In addition, the characters do not have a clear handle on whom they are encountering, as can be seen in the above thoughts of a character/narrator from *Die Reiherkoenigin*. This confusion also suggests possible shifts in memory, since the character/narrator is obviously unsure if she truly is seeing "MC Dorota," and is definitely unsure about how this "MC Dorota" appeared in this particular setting. The shifts in memory, in addition to a disoriented point of view are frequently characterized as results of trauma.

In another instance, in *Snow White and Russian Red*, the author constantly highlights the differences between the author, the narrator, and a character named "Masloska". In addition, as the novel continues, the main character, Andrzej "Nails"

Robakoski gradually becomes aware of his status as a character in the novel. He becomes dissatisfied with how he is described, he becomes critical of his author's talents, and he repeatedly expresses his distrust and resentment towards his author: "I know that as soon as there's some diversion, an attempt to move on my part, it's bam, and they'll take me back to that room where Masloska drives a compass into me and draws ever larger circles around me, and the audience applauds loudly, because it knows that I deserved it" (264). The author here is not the omnipresent and omnipotent God of her universe; she becomes the fallible and incompetent god tinkering with a universe she is unable to sustain. The author, however, is also aware of the legacy of traditional authorship she finds herself in – after all, nothing can really be written without at least somewhat willingly casting oneself in the role of an author – and works against it in part by allowing her own characters to critique her.

What are the effects of an out of control narrative which recounts many small events in the hyperactive world of a slew of characters? The reader feels a lack of depth, familiarity and comfort. The reader becomes unsure how to navigate the unstable and treacherous world of the novel which moves at unusually high speeds, reminiscent of drug-induced hallucinations. One can call this kind of connection to the world of the novel a negative-suture, where the uncertainty and frustrations of the world of the novel are symbolic of and connect to the uncertain and frustrating experience of the Eastern European subject. Maslowska's work reflects the destabilized status of subjectivity in a post-Enlightenment (and post-enlightened) world of younger generations of Eastern Europeans. This youth may no longer remember the world of communism without escape, yet still it is experiencing the

combination of left-over symptoms of this system with the claustrophobia of the frequently racist, poor, and nationalist incarnation of the new Polish world of capitalism. As Maslowska herself puts it in an article written for England's *The Guardian* entitled "Instead of Caramel Sweets We Have Werther's Originals, but Where are the Jobs for Poland's Baby Boom Generation?":

We are Poland's baby-boom generation, conceived in the 80s, probably as a consequence of all the power cuts. And if from dawn till dusk everything you see tells you that "you are what you've got", then one day you wake up to find you don't exist anymore. Although we're in the European Union now, the west is still a fairytale in Poland. It is the attitude we have absorbed from our parents, for whom the term "abroad" meant luxury, excellence, impossible dreams: the promised land. In Poland, this idea seems to have turned into a weird kind of genetic complex. We have inherited the notion that everything real is happening somewhere else: that life itself is somewhere else. There's another thing, too. In Poland, now, the people of my generation have the sense of escaping from a sinking ship, where it's "every man for himself..." (www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1825576,00.html)

Maslowska's characters, just like the teens, twenty-, and thirty-somethings of Eastern Europe find themselves in a double bind: they yearn to approach the west as closely as possible by consuming what they deem to be the right products, by creating what they see as the right (i.e. desirable, western) lifestyle, and by speaking English as much as possible. Yet they repeatedly fail to buy the right products, whether due to a lack of knowledge, a lack of availability of the product in the newly west-like world, or most frequently, due to the lack of funds. They demonstrate significant misunderstandings of the western lifestyle by imitating those parts of it which are available to them. These can frequently be snapshots of fads from a decade or two ago which just arrived in Poland (Maslowska refers to *Dynasty* being very popular on Polish television in 2004). The following is a conversation between two characters,

Angela and Natasha, on a drug-induced high in *Snow White and Russian Red*. Both are in their late teens/early twenties:

What kind of music do you listen to?...What kind of fast do you like? - Different kinds, for the most part I like music videos most – ...Hip-hop, for example, English songs about how terror happens, that we live in the ghetto, you know. –I like that, too – Angela says. And what kinds of books do you read?...Or newspapers?...-Ha, I could say a lot. A bit of everything. The TV guide. The teletext. A bit of adventure stuff, Conan the Destroyer, Conan the Barbarian, Conan in the Big City, I read that whole series once. I love posters. Jokes. Anecdotes. Programs. –That’s cool – Angela says. Just like me. And do you like to diet? (146-148).

Angela and Natasha are hypostasized symbols of Polish youth who realize that, as Maslowska puts it, “you are what you’ve got,” or, further complicating the idea a bit, they realize that “you are what you can *pretend* you’ve got.” In this case, this possession is the access to and fluency in Western pop-culture and lifestyles. It is clear that there is a lot more posing than truthfulness in the above exchange. Starting with just the most obvious lie, *Conan in the Big City* does not exist. Not mentioning that one might be listening to Polish music or that one might be reading long European novels – if only to be able to pass high school courses – becomes an easy price to pay for a new kind of belonging. The resulting situation is a surreal one, since in competing for the best West-like demeanor, these kinds of “characters,” whether fictional ones like Angela and Natasha or the real ones Maslowska speaks of who live according to the dictum “every man for himself,” end up competing for the prize of the clearest disconnect from their homeland, culture and history. Thus, this competition is in having the “best” combination of ignorance and ego. Ironically, perhaps the one way in which these characters are most Western without even realizing it is due to the fact that they live in Praga, which after 1989 gradually

became the worst neighborhood in Warsaw, truly degenerating into a ghetto, complete with gangs, prostitution and rampant drug trafficking. This is what I mean in the subtitle of this section when I state that the youth Maslowska describes has the *worst of both worlds*: the refuse and dangers of Western culture without many of its benefits, along with the various hangovers of Communist culture without many of the benefits of a valued, comfortable, and comforting home-turf.

Just like Angela and Natasha in *Snow White and Russian Red*, Katarzyna Lepp in *Die Reiherkoenigin* also does her best to belong. Perhaps the most obvious way all three of these characters seek belonging is by insisting to speak English whenever possible. In fact, the bad English they speak becomes that much worse because these characters are convinced that any mistakes they are making are due to their mastery of English slang. Katarzyna, a sales clerk at a bakery has a lot riding on her ability to connect with the main character of the novel, struggling pop star Stanislaw Retro, who also spends most of the novel trying to maintain Western appearances: “O Jejku, Jesulein, [she thought while trying to conjure up the coolest way to say hello], warum [ist es] nur...heute, dass die beruehmten Fernsehleute alle nur Englisch sprechen?‘ ...’How do you do so much,’ probierte sie in Gedanken und beschloss dann endlich ganz normal zu sagen, ‘I do you.’” (51).

While both Katarzyna and Stan try to connect on a level that is considered cool and accepted, they worry about appearances so much that they end up not connecting at all, and remain alone with their thoughts. Stan leaves mystified without making a purchase (Katarzyna tries to warn him about the old bakery items by alternating “This old” with “This is not” [54]). Katarzyna is left with her thoughts

while reading a *Cosmopolitan*: “Das sind im Grunde die positiven Aspekte der freien Marktwirtschaft...Im Allgemeinen ist das Teurere besser, dafuer ist das Billigere geil, also auch wieder gut...[Ich] traem[e] permanent von Sex like Cosmopolitan, und cosmopolitischen Spielereien, Cosmotricks, und Cosmopraktiken, das waer so schoen, doch frag mich mal mit wem” (52-55).

These are the words of an Eastern European subject who, as the Ukrainian author Juri Andruchowytch puts it, has experienced “Initiation by the Supermarket, this special ritual of raising the Homo Sovieticus towards Western values, [which became] the turning point of [their] lives”

(http://www.nzz.ch/2005/07/01/fe/articlecxn6o_1.154359.html?printview=true). The sudden traumatic experience of the nature of this “ritual” is certainly abstract and unknowable to a Western subject. Katarzyna’s attempts to communicate and her musings on, as she puts it, “cosmopolitical” changes are also the words of a character who realizes that the utopian dream of a perfect “promised land” of Western Europe is dying. As the Croatian author Slavenka Drakulic put it many times, the personal is never more political than during and following a regime change. Through characters like Kararzyna Lepp and many others, Maslowska illustrates the disenchantment of Eastern Europeans. They have now abandoned the European dream, and with more and more time passing between 1989 and the present, they are concentrating more on navigating their new(ish) everyday life. There is a sadness, a loss of momentum that is connected to this move from the utopic to the everyday (if not the dystopic). As J.F. Brown states in his book *The Grooves of Change: Eastern Europe at the Turn of the Millennium*, “For Eastern Europeans globalization means that most of their

industry worth having, now or in the future, will become Western property, run mainly for Western private profit...It is not surprising, therefore, that globalization has provoked wrath, suspicion, or unease” (70).

Maslowska symbolizes this disenchantment by the opposite of a general slowing down often associated with disillusionment. She highlights the high speeds of the changes going on in Poland in the late 1990s and the 2000s, as well as the high speeds and chaotic ways in which her characters choose to deal with those changes. One such way frequently involves the use of alcohol and drugs. The confusion resulting from both experiences – those of being “on” capitalism and “on” alcohol or a drug such as speed – is depicted similarly in Maslowska’s characters.

In *Die Reiherkoenigin* for instance, Stanislaw Retro throws a New Years’ Eve party for a group of acquaintances and contacts in the music business whom he hopes to befriend. Even upon their arrival, these “friends” are so “alcoholisch schwer geprueft” (126) as Stan puts it, that they are utterly discombobulated and uninterested in connecting with Stan. When he leaves his newly IKEA-furnished apartment in order to get even more alcohol, these acquaintances steal his furniture and appliances, and attempt to sell these off to passers-by even as they walk down the street. They are clearly so intoxicated that they do not recognize Stan on his way back to his apartment, and try to sell his own appliances back to him. Stan is so intoxicated that it takes him a very long time to piece together what exactly happened: “Wo habt ihr diesen Kuehlschrank aufgetrieben?...Ich hab...zu Hause auch so einen” (136).

Maslowska observes these drunk, confused, nascent capitalist entrepreneurs with a keen eye. She sees these peddlers also as a subtle symbol of the confusion any new

(in this case Eastern European) subject might be facing when learning and practicing a capitalist technique.

Throughout Maslowska's *Snow White and Russian Red*, the main character Nails uses speed in part because it is more widely and affordably available due to the regime change. One of the paradoxes of his situation (as well as of the situation of most other characters in the novel) is that they use this speed and other drugs to deal with the challenges of the capitalist system, the very system which made those drugs available. Nails gets introduced to and supplied with drugs by his girlfriend Magda: "I ask her where she got that speed from, since on her face and in her look in general she's really flushed, unhealthy, to tell the truth..." (18). Magda and Nails take a trip to the north of Poland, where they spend some time at the beach. Having gotten quite high on the way, Nails' thoughts turn to the inefficient distribution of drugs in Eastern Europe. Looking at all the sand surrounding him on the beach, he comes up with a new, more efficient, capitalist system of portioning and distributing drugs.

In another paradox, Nails' new drug-trafficking system uses the same methods that were (and still are) used to improve the post-1989 Polish economy, such as the outsourcing of the least popular labor to countries which were/are in an even greater economic crisis than Poland. Unfortunately, it is precisely because Nails is high that he forgets his new system:

I...don't really know what was going on when my vision of economic nature had already vanished for a time, when I was doing something, before I woke up here. It's worse, more than – forgive the phrase – blacking out. I see all the sand, which I take for economic squander, which, I must confirm with regret, totally pisses me off...I figure it's necessary to collect ...all [the sand] as quickly as possible. Because if it doesn't end up in our hands, that's it. It will all be snatched up by the traitors (20-22).

The traitors Nails is referring to are the westerners, more specifically western investors “Who finally want to sell our country out, like some old second hand crap, a bunch of rags and ancient coats,...sweaty old belts” (20). This is the kind of (frequently justified) anger that produces the strong Eastern European nationalist sentiments which Maslowska critiques in her novels. And, as J.F. Brown argues, when a subject feels that the very land they live on is being pulled out from beneath their feet (i.e. radically changed, damaged, or literally sold to foreign/transnational corporations), resentment towards the new owner is not too far behind. On his high, Nails does not only see sand as a metaphor for speed; in his inhibited thinking, sand is actually completely *replaced* by speed.

Adding yet another paradox, Nails muses on a way in which drug trafficking could become *the* dominant industry in Poland, thus transforming its economy from a failure to a success. Nails’ speed-induced idea again symbolizes the short-sightedness of new inductees of capitalism who, much like the characters Angela and Natasha, define their self-worth by (the ambition towards) financial gain at any cost. Realizing perhaps the uncontrollable and dizzying speed of the new system Nails finds himself in, he muses, “You’re writing for yourself in the sand” (22). Alluding to the elusiveness, mutability, and fragility of sand, Maslowska highlights the fact that Nails’ ideas, no matter how revolutionary, cannot withstand the speed and force of the post-communist movement of history. This speed and force are all the more shocking for the Eastern European subject who used to live in a region where history seemed to have stood still for over 40 years.

It becomes clear here how in both of Maslowska's novels, the effects of, and behavior exhibited while "on" a shockingly new and furiously fast system such as capitalism have a lot in common with the confusion, inhibited thinking, disillusionment and erratic behavior that is caused by mind-altering substances such as alcohol or drugs. This disheveled, confused, and often times depressed subject is reflected in a disheveled and confused narrative by Maslowska. She realizes that she is more fortunate than her character (Angela) in *Snow White and Russian Red*, who, even in a repressive environment proclaims the need to be an active participant and recorder of her history: "I write poetry. Various poems. Sometimes I can sit endlessly. All wrapped up in jotting things down and re-jotting. Writing over and over. Straight into the drawer. Later for a wider readership made up of the whole world, who knows, maybe of the American Polish community" (70). In Sonja Zekri's interview entitled "Poland's Gloomy Wonder-Lady," Maslowska proclaims her goals similarly: "I would most prefer it if literature functioned like a virus, if it would establish itself and infect others" (http://www.buecher.de/shop/Ma-Md/Maslowska-Dorota/Die-Reiherkoenigin/products_products/detail/prod_id/22501318/). Maslowska's spreading of the message in the fashion of a virus has interest, knowledge, empathy, and ultimately a European unity *via* this knowledge and empathy as its core goals.

In tinkering with the traditional format of the novel, Maslowska multiplies the potency of the "virus" she intends to spread. At the very first glance, *Die Reiherkoenigin* is identifiable as a novel which challenges the traditional definitions of this form. Maslowska subtitles her novel *Ein Rap*, thus questioning the very status

of her novel as a novel before she even delves into the plot. She then follows through by comfortably moving in and out of rhythmic, repetitive, and rhyming language, while still visually maintaining the appearance of prose. As Stefanie Peter puts it in her article “Der Reiche frisst, der Arme hat es satt,” “Mal fließt [Masłowska’s] Prosa gleichmaessig dahin, mal nimmt sie Fahrt auf, wird dicht, wo es sich reimt, das Ganze bekommt einen Rhythmus, einen Beat. Laut gelesen, schreit dieser Text geradezu nach starken Temposchwankungen. Und ein Vorleser waere gut beraten, Markierungen fuer dramatisches Accelerando und beruhigendes Ritartando einzutragen.” (http://www.buecher.de/shop/Ma-Md/Masłowska-Dorota/Die-Reiherkoenigin/products_products/detail/prod_id/22501318/vnode/8063/lfa/richtcontent-0/selection/1221311/#richtcontent_1221311). If rap as a genre is successful, it can act like a virus by grabbing hold of the listener’s ear and thus recurring in the reader’s mind even when the reader is away from the text. Also, rap often allows for a memorable impact of oration much more so than a traditional novel, and it does often call for action.

Tinkering further with the form of the novel, Masłowska allows both of her novels’ narratives to frequently be interrupted by comic-book-style illustrations in the most unexpected and inconvenient locations, sometimes even allowing the illustrations to interrupt her narrative mid-sentence. However, unlike most comic books, these illustrations do not depict the heroic exploits of supernatural beings. Instead, the illustrations are frequently inserted at the most vulnerable, pathetic, disenchanted moment of a particular character’s development, as if to briefly pause, accentuate the characters’ loneliness, and thus underline such characters’ desperate

need for a voice. The two illustrations used for the aforementioned New Years' Eve party thrown by Stan (in *Die Reiherkoenigin*) are excellent examples. The first one (129) depicts the miserable mood of Stan's party even before he decides to leave to buy more alcohol. In the foreground, one can see Mac Robert, a music-business journalist and editor who, contrary to Stan's belief, is utterly disinterested in Stan's musical talents. Mac is depicted sitting on the floor, eating Ramen noodles, looking bored and angry. In the background of the drawing, one can see bottles of alcohol strewn across the floor, as well as two drunken figures: one is depicted asleep on a mattress, while the other one is hunched over, perhaps vomiting. The second illustration (140) is a close-up of Stan's hand, as he examines the washing machine his party-goers are attempting to sell back to him. He finally identifies it as irrefutably his by the scratches his ex-girlfriend left on the machine as an act of revenge.

Maslowska's destabilized, rarely eloquent, and often times depressed characters are another way in which the author resists the easy traditional suture of realist works. Only fragmentary identification is possible with characters who themselves are collages of various fragments. And, one of the reasons these characters are such fragments is precisely the speed of life amidst which they now find themselves. Stanislaw Retro's thought process, for instance, is depicted as a stream of consciousness which mimics the life that rushes past him, complete with an overwhelming barrage of visual and auditory stimuli. While having sex with his girlfriend whom he does not love and to whom he is not even attracted, his thoughts wonder through various topics such as his career, the current political situation in

Poland, impotence, porn, the World Trade Center, and the latest DJ releases. Finally, he reflects on his experience: “Woher die Stille, war das real oder die virtuelle Welt der Glotze?” (36). Stan’s character is clearly experiencing some of the pains of a postmodern subject who at times becomes incapable of differentiating between his lived experience, and viewed material. This is another way to get high, another way to achieve an altered state of consciousness – via the interaction with new technologies which are supposed facilitate connections between people, but instead create, as Guenther Anders argues, mass produced hermits (Anders, 15).

Extreme states of consciousness – whether drug induced or not – both facilitate (i.e. help induce) experiences of extremely lonely over-stimulation, and are illustrations of the heightened, fragmented and often times scrambled ways of perceiving in the postmodern world. While overwhelming for any subject of the postmodern era, the experience of the fast, highly globalized and technologized world is even more overwhelming for the postmodern subject of Eastern Europe, where the transition from the limitations of a few newspapers and one or two TV channels to infinite choices in information and consumption did not happen gradually, but rather in traumatic fits and starts over only a couple of decades since the late 1980s.

Maslowska draws a strong parallel between the disenchantment of her characters – their struggle (and ultimate failure) to connect to one another, and the disenchantment and loneliness these characters feel vis-à-vis their homeland. Perhaps the strongest example of such a parallel (which is present in all of Maslowska’s work) is in *Snow White and Russian Red*, when the main character, Nails, describes his (still) girlfriend Magda, and her friend Angela:

[Magda] looks like she'd been fighting the Polish-Russki war, like the whole Polish-Russki army had trampled her, running through the park. All my feelings come back to life within me. The whole situation. Social and economic in the country. It's the whole her, it's all of her. She's drunk, she's ruined. She's hopped up on speed, she's stoned. She's never been so ugly. Black tears are running down her chin, because her heart is as black as coal. Her womb is black and tattered. A tear is running through her whole womb. From that womb she'll give birth to some Negro kid, black. Angela, with a rotten face, a tail. She won't get far with that kind of kid. They won't let her into a taxi, they won't sell her white milk. She'll lie down on the black earth of vacant lots. She'll live in greenhouses. Eaten by grubs, eaten by worms. She'll feed that kid black milk from her black breasts. She'll feed it garden soil. But it'll die sooner or later anyway (9-10).

This passage has a multitude of meanings, each applicable to both Magda/Angela and Poland. Nails describes his girlfriend as entirely a victim of the Polish-Russian war in her body (she is ugly and drunk) and in her emotions (she is crying). The reader also gets to see the results of this drug-/frantic capitalism-induced effect on the body/"body" of the character/country. Magda is almost barren, and when she does give birth, it is a "Negro," whose description is suspiciously similar to the stereotypical devil. (It has a "rotten face, a tail"). This is not seen as a victory for Magda, but rather as further proof of her barrenness. Nails' country is hollowed out quite like a drug addict ruined by his/her habit, with communism (symbolized by the war with Russia) functioning as Poland's drug. In addition, by using the image of the devil and the color black, Maslowska also points out the quickly growing racism spreading across Poland, a country which had almost no racial diversity until 1989.

Maslowska further destabilizes the traditional homogeneity of her novel by enlisting her readers as co-authors: "Eine schwere Textpartie haben *wir* geschafft." (*Die Reiherkoenigin*, 125, italics mine). She acts as a literary critic of her own work, as well as a cultural critic of her readers. In addition, she often reviews her

authorship, her talent, as well as her physical appearance in the manner of tabloid magazines:

Dieses Lied entstand aus Mitteln der European Union. Es enthaelt praktische Informationen zur maximalen Erleichterung seiner Rezeption... Wenn der Zwang zur Lektuere bei dir grossen Widerwillen und Unlust weckt, dann war das insofern bezweckt, als es von einer ausgesucht untalentierten, vor allem aber absolut unattraktiven Autorin stammt, damit du nicht lang ueberlegen must, ob das Buch gut oder schlecht ist (125).

It is clear from this passage that the times of the independent, infallible author are gone. Maslowska comments on the fact that in a consumer society, it is not only the talent of an author, but also his/her physical appearance which matters. This fact is well illustrated by publishers' requirement for increasingly larger and larger photos of the author on the backs or inside flaps of novels, especially if the author is considered attractive. In addition to the loss of authority of the author, Maslowska highlights the political interests that may be hidden behind plenty of literature, especially literature written, funded and promoted today in Eastern Europe.

Just a few pages before she describes her so-called shortcomings as an author, Maslowska uses strong sarcasm to describe the ideal author of a consumer society, the ideal author of a readerly text, perhaps even the ideal author from the point of view of the European Union:

Zum Schreiben wurde eine schoene, ausgesprochen langbeinige Autorin bestellt, damit das Buch den Leser lockt und ihm gefaellt. Ihre Koerperoeffnungen wurden mit Lancôme-Kleber gefuellt. Dadurch menstruiert sie nicht, schwitzt nicht, naesst sich auch nicht ein, was das Buch noch spannender und viel verstaendlicher macht. In der Hand haelt sie einen Gummisaegling Marke *My Baby*, 153 Zloty. Den must du dir holen, dann bist du wie sie. Dieses Buch entstand aus Mitteln der Europaeischen Union. Sein Ziel ist die intellektuelle Integration der duemmsten anzunehmenden Leser in Polen" (119).

The author that is “chosen” here – it is unclear by whom, maybe by the European Union – is chosen precisely because she fits the image of a physically attractive author. While already being a product in this way, this author is gradually transformed even more into a product by being denied her bodily processes. Furthermore, in being denied her ability to reproduce (and in having it replaced by another product), this author is denied her humanity completely, and becomes an efficient, but sad robotic mannequin-author. What is more, trade marked products (Lancôme, My Baby) are used to achieve the status of a total product that others should also emulate. Via this description, Maslowska highlights exactly the kind of author she does not want to become, but at the same time, the kind of author who is seen as desirable by the society in which she lives. In this way, her often harsh self-criticism about her own short-comings as an author (her lack of feminine wiles, for instance) becomes a thinly-veiled compliment.

Considering the fact that funding for culture in post-communist countries is still very limited, the European Union is one of the few potential sources of financial support. But, as Maslowska alludes here, this support does not come without subtle requirements as to the identity of the author or the content of her/his literature. In this case, she alludes to the requirement for practicality and easy reader-reception. This is clearly the definition Barthes would use for a readerly text⁶³. It is here that a

⁶³ Another way in which Maslowska seemingly fulfills the requirements of a readerly text is by including a list of characters and their mutual relationships at the end of *Die Reiherkoenigin*. She also includes a list called “Samples und Travestien” where she lists the names of the famous personalities she mentioned throughout her work. With the word “travesties,” she also suggests that her use of these names (or their works) was intentionally not always accurate or respectful. While a list of characters is normally supposed to facilitate an easy reader-reception, the way in which Maslowska uses it highlights the readerly text’s general assumption/creation of a stupid or lazy reader. In addition, including a list of characters at the end of a work is common practice for drama. Including such a list

difference between what the author states directly (i.e. acknowledging the funding and influence of the European Union) versus what the author *does* (i.e. writing a highly self-aware, multifaceted writerly text) comes to the fore. Via this cunning approach, the author manages to have her literary cake and eat it, too. Of course, by doing that, she also highlights the bind most current authors in Eastern Europe are facing. This is the way in which what is written and how it is written is influenced by forces other than the author. As a result, these influences may bring about a less than mediocre quality of work.

Via an exaggerated critique of herself, Maslowska does her best to strip off the automatic privilege and authority that comes with being an author. In doing so, she manages to forge a much more casual and familial relationship with her readers. Her novels are not a monologue spoken *at* her readers but rather an informal, chatty, sometimes depressed, sometimes enthusiastic dialogue spoken *with* her readers. It is a dialogue that can house conflicting dispositions: despair and humor, anger and hope, often times within the same sentence.

Maslowska chooses to conclude *Die Reiherkoenigin*, in the following way:

Eh Leute, es gibt Aerger, sie schreibt angeblich wieder was! Mensch Kinder, das muss man verhindern, wir wollen das nicht, wir verbieten das, wir lassen uns nicht wieder veraepeln, nein und nochmals nein!! Soll doch der Lem Karriere machen, soll der Milosz oder der Gombrowicz, andere talentierten Poeten aus Polens stiller Provinz, die viel begabteren Jungautoren in Blogs und Foren, aber nicht *die*! Wie stehen wir denn in Europa da mit der? Mit der, da schaffen wir hoechstens den Anschluss an die Russische Foederation...Pferdchen lauf Galopp, Doris mach HipHop...jetzt verkauft sie uns als Rap ihr Gequassel. Die Alte reitet jede Welle, das Pferdchen muss man zuegeln, die Braut hat 'ne Delle, die muss man mal buegeln (187-188).

at the end of a work which at least initially appears as a novel, further illustrates Maslowska's intent to blur generic divisions in literature, and thus to further raise the reader's awareness of the arbitrary nature of literary genre guidelines.

In using the “inside” of her novel to highlight the gossip and potential objections of traditional, old fashioned Polish literary critics and readers, Maslowska preempts the possible negative impact of these “outside” critiques, and uses her awareness of these critiques in her favor. Her humorous approach also highlights the obstacles any Eastern European author faces when he/she chooses to write about anything other than the beauties of their land in any other style but the approved traditions of realism and romanticism. Currently, one of the most biting critiques any Eastern European artist can get is that they are “approaching” the former USSR in their work. This kind of critique automatically brands any work of art as backward and politically suspect. Maslowska is very crafty in using such a self-criticism, because by employing what is only a self-critique on the surface, she actually manages to expose the practice of a very facile and frequent public criticism. What kind of literature exactly works towards the “Anschluss” to the Russian Federation? What are the characteristics of such a literature? If any characteristic can be grouped under such an accusation, then all literature that does not currently reflect the dominant opinion can be ostracized as backward.

Throughout her work, Maslowska uses herself and the various incarnations of herself to illustrate and perform the de-stabilized status of subjectivity of the author, the narrator, or even the average citizen in the post-communist, postmodern, globalized Eastern Europe. In addition to these obstacles, Maslowska also makes the reader aware of the newer “dictator” in the world of Eastern European culture: the dictator of profit. The form of Maslowska’s novels (*Die Reiherkoenigin* and *Snow*

White and Russian Red) on the arrival of this political and cultural maelstrom reflects the departure of the self-assured, omnipotent and omnipresent author. Maslowska also demonstrates that a journalistic, reportage-like style is not necessary, and is sometimes even an obstacle to providing a clear picture of the socio-historical situation in Eastern Europe. As Laurie Vickroy clearly explains, “The nature of ...[trauma] narratives encourages readers to become more aware, to adopt a new consciousness of history, even if it is one that is fragmented, ambivalent, and at times inconclusive” (33). This is the unique effect of trauma writing that Maslowska wanted to allow for in her works.

The author/narrator/character “Maslowska” writes about a world that is too fast, too elusive, and too volatile in order to be controlled, whether in real life or within the confines of the novel. She cannot provide her readers with much continuity or comfort because she does not have much of it herself. Feigning control would go against the goals of her autobiographical project of witnessing about Eastern Europe to the West, a West which frequently thinks that the transformative process in Eastern Europe is under control, if not completed. What Maslowska *can* do is to treat her literary work as a fertile ground for the beginnings of a discussion rather than a series of closed texts ending discussion. Maslowska’s literature as rap, as a comic book, as a diary, a manifesto or a virus, wants to jumpstart not only a process of learning, but via this new knowledge also a process of empathy and emotional involvement in her readers. These readers, whether Eastern Europeans or Westerners, whether well traveled or not, will become witnesses by proxy and thus ideally will develop a passionate involvement with both: the slow- and the fast-paced life in Eastern Europe.

III. Thomas Brussig: Witness to Memory

Whenever Thomas Brussig publishes a new work, he awakens a set of high and multi-faceted expectations from his reading public, from literary critics, politicians, historians, even from the German film-industry. Will his new work be easy to navigate? Will it be innovative? Will it finally be *the* long-awaited Wenderoman? Will it use Ostalgie again as one of its main tools of remembering and humor? With this many expectations, it is inevitable that the work satisfies some and disappoints others.

One of the most successful, paradigmatic, but also most controversial tools Brussig uses to witness to the events around 1989 in both Germanys is a particular sense of humor. It is a humor that is filled with sarcasm, irony, and exaggeration. Brussig frequently caricaturizes his characters. However, none of these tools are employed with a lack of compassion or a sense of malevolence. As Jill Twark suggests while analyzing the works of several German “Wende” authors in her essay “‘Ko...Ko...Kolonialismus,’ said the giraffe:’ Humorous and Satirical Responses to German Unification,”

Humor here... helps the narrator to come to terms with his new situation, while entertaining and enlightening the reader...[These authors] all evoke humor through exaggeration and the repetition of similar, epic narrative sequences...By taking a humorous and/or satirical approach toward their protagonists, [these] authors encourage the reader to sympathize with and to understand the particular East German predicament after unification (155-157).

As Twark formulates earlier, the German “Wende” authors’ use of humor is much more complex than the traditional assumption that “A person who uses humor or

satire distances him or herself from the object of this humor” (151). Just like the authors Twark analyzes (Rosenloecher, Shirmer and Sparschuh), Brussig also uses humor to *approach* his reader than to distance himself from her/him.

The author applies his tall-tale-like exaggerations to allow his characters to speak loudly enough about the political and socio-historical circumstances they find themselves in even before the plot proper begins. Humor is used as a tool of description allowing the reader to connect with the characters, to be entertained. At the same time, humor is used as tool to slightly veil or transcribe the traumatic events that would otherwise be too abrasive for the reader to relate to. Thus, while this sense of humor makes Brussig’s stories about often violent, traumatic, revolutionary events more accessible to his intended readers⁶⁴, what is more important, it frees Brussig – an author who insists that his works are works of fiction – from the role of a historiographer who only is allowed to represent “what really happened” in somber tones⁶⁵.

An excellent example of the fact that sharp humor and compassionate insight are by far not mutually exclusive in Brussig’s writing is Leo Lattke, one of the roughly two dozen flawed main characters in *Wie es leuchtet*. Lattke is a reporter for a western magazine sent out into East Berlin in order to capture the changes of 1989 as they happen for his western audience:

⁶⁴ I will address the question of Brussig’s intended readers later in this chapter.

⁶⁵ This is a specific requirement of roughly a whole generation of German writers. No matter what their preferred subject matter, those who were born early enough to still remember the GDR and the revolutionary year 1989 and who were also born late enough to live a large chunk of their adult life in the unified Germany, frequently face demands to speak to their readers about the fall of the wall, and to speak to them about it “truthfully.” This generation of writers to whom Brussig certainly belongs is also judged much more strictly should it fail in this constantly looming task that it never asked for.

Leo Lattke war ein Mensch, der sich ausschliesslich fuer sich selbst interessierte. Als sein amerikanischer Studienfreund Eric einst bei-laeufig und mit der groessten Selbstverstaendlichkeit sagte: Das interessanteste ist der Mensch, dachte Leo Lattke mit derselben Selbstverstaendlichkeit: Das interessanteste bin ich. Zugleich aber beneidete er Eric, und um auch sich eine solche Wachheit aufzuzwingen, wurde Leo Lattke Reporter. Dieser Beruf, diese Daseinform verlangte es, das Selbst abzustellen, es bewusstlos zu schlagen – um sich in andere hineinzustuerzen. Leo Lattke hielt sich fuer genial, und so musste er die von ihm Dargestellten gross aufladen, sehr interessant zu machen, um ihnen *vor sich selbst* die berechtigung zu verleihen, von ihm dargestellt zu werden...Er schreckte vor nichts zurueck, was als unserioes verpoent war. Aber seine Reportagen hatten Kraft, Spannung, Groesse, Persoenlichkeit, auch Pomp. Seine Reportagen waren desshalb so auffaellig, so energetisch ueberproportioniert, weil sie von Leo Lattke im Zerrspiegel der eigenen Groesse gesehen, geschrieben, wiedergegeben wurden: er hielt sich fuer den GroeRaZ, den Groessten Reporter aller Zeiten. Und nun durchlebte er die Groesste Schreibkrise aller Zeiten. Um ihn herum wogte Geschichte, und ihm fiel nichts ein (142-143).

As is clear from Brussig's initial introduction, Lattke has the kind of arrogance that frequently inhibits his ability to be a useful witness to the times speeding by around him. Even so, Lattke is also more complex than just a caricature. Were it not for his large ego, his successful stories would not have the sizeable impact they end up having in the world of the novel. Lattke may care for himself very much, but because he chose to be a journalist, caring for his stories and the characters involved in them becomes an extension of caring for himself.

Since Leo Lattke's characters and stories become a part of him, it is that much more heartbreaking both for Lattke and the reader when the two key stories Lattke decides offer to his editor as illustrations of the events of 1989 fail. The first story is that of seven transsexuals stopped in the middle of their transformation process due to the fact that their doctors left for West Germany. This event has both literal and figurative meanings. These are seven lost people in-between many worlds, without

any guidance. They are no longer men, but not yet women. They are no longer citizens of a communist country, but definitely not yet citizens of the west. When their sex-change transformation stops, their mutability, their fragility, and their very bodies become sad symbols of the chaos of political transformation.

The second story Lattke follows is that of Sabine Busse, a young woman born blind, who, thanks to funding and medicine from West Germany gets her sight back via an experimental surgery. Lattke and his editor expect an uplifting story, a story symbolizing the “labor” division between the two Germanys as the helper and the helped, as well as the symbolic unification of the two countries achieved by Sabine’s brand new gift of sight. Instead, Sabine can not process the barrage of new stimuli to which she was never before exposed. She becomes depressed and angry as she realizes that she is even more limited than she was before the surgery:

Die Operation, bei der ihr Schaedel in der Naehe des Ohrs geoeffnet wurde, aber auch die Fleischwunde unterhalb ihres Auges hatten die hochempfindliche akustische Landschaft ihres Gesichts zerstoert. Mit den Ohren hoerte sie zwar – doch frueher horchte sie...Niemand will ihre Geschichte als Ungluecksgeschichte hoeren, ohne Chance auf ein Happy-End....Das sehen bereitet ihr keine Freude, und die Blindheit beherrscht sie nicht mehr. Sie ist blinder als sie je war (537).

Sabine Buse becomes a seeing blind person, who no longer belongs in the world of the blind, and who knows that she will never belong in the world of the seeing. Leo Lattke finishes his report on Sabine with an interview with Dr. Sternhagen, the doctor who performed the surgery. His last question is: “Herr Professor, produzieren wir Unglueck, wenn wir allen geben, was fast alle haben?” The doctor answers, briefly, “Das ist die Frage” (538). Brussig, via Lattke, is using the ability to see as an overarching metaphor for the process of democratization and unification in Germany.

The larger point that Brussig invites the reader to ruminate on is the question whether or not there is a possibility of a different way of “seeing.” In other words, whether, like with Sabine Buse’s expanded sense of smell, touch and sound, there is a third, happy alternative to blindness and seeing. Of course, with the same breath, Brussig, someone who is/was openly critical of the reunification, is quietly asking whether there is a third way of being for Germany: one beyond East and West, one beyond communism and capitalism. He expresses a similar idea in his short piece “Die Luege, die Deutsche Einheit heisst” when he asks: “Warum Einheit, wenn sich im Westen fast nichts und im Osten fast alles aendert?” (2). In this case, it is East Germany that represents the minority and West Germany that represents the majority, and Brussig dares pose the figurative question (via Dr. Sternhagen) whether forcing ‘seeing’ onto East Germany is a good idea only because ‘everybody else does it.’

Neither of Leo Lattke’s stories gets published. As Lattke’s editor puts it,

Leo, verstehen sie uns nicht falsch...wir wollen Sie doch, wir halten Sie fuer den besten Reporter des Blattes, aber was Sie da geschrieben haben – es passt einfach nicht in die Zeit; Deutschland ist Fussballweltmeister, die Wiedervereinigung kommt noch in diesem Jahr, das Land brummt vor Staerke – und Sie kommen da mit so einer, ich sags mal etwas Zugespitzt...*Waschlappenreportage* (540).

As arrogant as Lattke may be, Brussig stresses here that Lattke remains true to his stories, and true to the times he is immersed in, even if what he sees does not reflect what his employer wants to see. At the same time, Brussig hints at the inaccurate manner of reporting on the part of the western (particularly West German) media, who reported on what they *wanted* to see rather than on what was actually occurring. Thus, rather than facilitating the communication between East and West Germany

which were very quickly melting into one disjointed unity, the media, based on this example, were hindering it. The need for excitement and optimism was so great that it trumped compassion. On the other hand, Brussig shows a lot of sadness and compassion for Lattke as he realizes that his stories will not be heard, as well as for Lattke's characters whose futures depend on the public's awareness of their fates. In this way and in many similar ways, Brussig proves those critics wrong who argue that the larger-than-life humor he uses prevents him from feeling with and truly connecting with his characters.

Unlike Lattke's publisher, Lena, whom many consider to be the main character of *Wie es leuchtet*⁶⁶, really appreciates Lattke's stories, and only allows herself to sympathize (and start a relationship) with Lattke after she reads Lattke's two "Wende"-stories:

Das Glueck schmeckt fad inzwischen. Und wenn man das einem von euch erzaehlt, das wollen die nicht hoeren. Immer nur, wie schlimm es damals war und wie phantastisch jetzt. Aber so einfach ist es nicht. *Ich werde nie dazugehoeren*, das habe ich noch nie so deutlich sagen koennen. Erst jetzt, durch diese Reportage (543).

When she speaks of "euch," Lena is describing the western media, whom she accuses of a kind of dependence on the depiction of happiness. It is also quite a paradox that a western reporter (and by this point in the novel, for all intents and purposes, a *failed* western reporter) is the one who helps Lena, a young character from East Germany, to understand how she feels amidst the political and historical turmoil. She finally realizes that she will "nie dazugehoeren" because she, also due to Lattke's reporting,

⁶⁶ I personally would be hard-pressed to designate a main character in *Wie es leuchtet*, since there are so many characters who get the same amount of space as Lena. There are at least a handful of characters (Alfred Bunzuweit, Daniel Detjen, or Werner Schniedel, just to name a few) who also get descriptions and stories that are a lot more detailed and spirited than that of Lena.

does see the situation as more complex than just an accomplished utopia. This is one big way in which Lattke succeeds amidst his failure.

There are ways in which Lattke's ego does not hinder the telling of his meaningful stories; he manages to do exactly what he sets out to, namely "das Sich Bewusstlos zu stellen" (142) in order to completely immerse himself in the objects of his reports. In addition to pomp, Brussig also ascribes strength and greatness to Lattke's reports. Both Lattke's successes and his failures are larger than life and this exaggerated level of emotions enables to suture in the reader (both Lattke's and Brussig's) that much more.

According to the critical consensus, Leo Lattke is only a slightly fictionalized depiction of Matthias Matussek, a significant reporter of the magazine *Der Spiegel* who spent a large chunk of time in Eastern Germany reporting on the fall of the Berlin Wall⁶⁷. The most obvious parallel between Lattke and Matussek is the alliteration in their names: in both cases, both the first and the last name start with the same letter. In addition, one should note the repeated "t's" in their respective last names. Even though Brussig likes alliteration in general, a naming that is this obvious has to be intentional. There is also a second – albeit more vague – connection between Matussek and Brussig's Lattke: both the person and the character travel to New York to write and publish there. However, while Matussek spent time in the US at the height of his career, Lattke takes the trip to New York as the last-ditch effort to save his career.

⁶⁷ Brussig had the opportunity to observe Matussek during the key period immediately following the fall of the wall. Brussig worked as a doorman in Berlin's Palasthotel where Matussek was staying during the time he was reporting on the GDR.

It is important to note that not too long after the publishing of *Wie es leuchtet*, Matthias Matussek actually writes a review of Brussig's book in *Der Spiegel* magazine entitled "Der Balzac vom Prenzelberg." In this review, he acknowledges the parallels between himself and Lattke with a gracious attitude and humor. And, although he states that "Es ist merkwuerdig, sich als Horrorfigur in einem Roman zu begegnen," (192) he later does acknowledge that Brussig's handling of Lattke was more complex than might have appeared at first glance.

In addition to the more obvious parallels between Lattke and Matussek, I suggest that there are – albeit perhaps more subtle – parallels between Lattke and the author Brussig himself. Both Lattke and Brussig favor a larger than life writing when approaching their characters. They employ this exaggeration to highlight strong emotion in their characters because they are depicting a time when emotions were extreme, perhaps to a degree that would make these emotions seem unrealistic during a calmer period.

While it is tough to deny Brussig's very critical stance toward his character Lattke (and by extension toward Matussek), Brussig's attitude toward Lattke/Matussek is much more complex when one steps outside of the (not-quite-)fictional world of *Wie es leuchtet*. In the introduction to a new edition of Matthias Matussek's book *Palasthotel – oder Wie die Einheit ueber Deutschland hereinbrach*, Brussig writes:

Die Wende war eine aberwitzige Zeit, und es ist ein Gluecksfall, dass es einen Reporter im rasenden Deutschland gab, der alles festgehalten hat, was er zu fassen kriegte: Hoffnung und Irrung, Absturz und Chaos, Blendung und Luege, Laerm und Pracht. Zum Reporter muss man geboren sein – und Matthias Matussek ist es (13).

When it comes to reporting in this case, it is not that the ends justify the means.

According to Brussig however, the times justify (or maybe even create) the kind of reporter who is ready, cutting-edge, and strong enough to report (and thus at least to momentarily hold close [“festhalten”]) the “raving” times surrounding him.

Matussek returns the favor of critique with appreciation to Brussig, when he states about Lattke: “Lattke, der Ruepel...wuerde sich...vorallem stets daran erinnern: an das Leuchten jener Wochen, das Brussig in seinem Roman eingefangen hat wie niemand vor ihm” (192). Still referring to Lattke, Matussek adds immediately with a wink, “Von gewissen Verzeichnungen abgesehen” (192).

Even though Brussig insists on the fictional nature of his novels in general, he never insists on this fact more than in *Wie es leuchtet*. The reason Brussig sees the necessity to insist on the fictional nature of his writing in this novel and not in his other writings like the novels *Helden wie wir* or *Am kuerzeren ende der Sonnenalle* is precisely because this is *the* novel with the most numerous ties to real persons and events⁶⁸. Thus, he feels the need to not only shield himself from speculations about the truthfulness of his representations, but also from potential lawsuits. As he declares ahead of the text-proper of his novel,

Dies ist ein Roman. Er ist bevoelkert von Romanfiguren. Deren Handlungen beruhen auf Erfindungen des Autors. Aemter, Funktionen und Positionen, die in der Wirklichkeit vorkommen, sind hier lediglich Huellen, die ueber

⁶⁸ Just to name a few, many critics argue that Waldemar Bude, the struggling writer and doorman in Palasthotel is an autobiographical reference by Brussig. Further, the young, attractive lawyer Gisela Blank has several life-events which are similar to those of Gregor Gysi. In addition, her nickname in the book is “Gisi.” Valentin Eich, a high-positioned authority on the GDR foreign-exchange market has many notable parallels to the life of Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski, Werner Schniedel, the young man who successfully infiltrates the Volkswagen company by posing as the son of the chairman of the board for motives of personal gain shows parallels with Gert Postel. Finally *Der kleine Dichter*, as Brussig only ever calls him, exhibits parallels with (and even uses the poetry of) Volker Braun.

Romanfiguren gestuehlt werden, welche mit den realen Personen in besagten Aemtern, Funktionen und Positionen nichts, aber auch gar nichts, zu tun haben (4).

The way in which Brussig words his declaration is unusual. It does have some of the phrases that would normally be expected in such statements, however, it also has language which stands out. For instance, Brussig states by implication that his characters *do* find themselves in functions or positions that are inspired by (or as he says using the word “Huelle,” *wrapped in*) reality. Thus, the question arises: If these wrappers or covers which correspond to reality are not enough for the work to have elements of non-fiction, what would? Does Brussig resolve this and other related questions with his opening statement/denial? Based on the author’s last sentence in the statement where he insists that his fictional figures have “nichts, aber auch gar nichts zu tun” with real persons, I argue that the author protests a little too much. In other words, he is protecting the fictional nature of his work so strongly precisely because it is not as fictional as he claims, or as he would like it to be. It may be that Brussig set out to write a complete work of fiction, but as is the case with a lot of witnessing (whether removed or not), the need and passion to relate a situation faithfully came through via sometimes subtle and other times less subtle references to the author’s lived experience.

It is also important to stress that a resistance to historiography (to the demand to relate what really and exactly happened) does not mean that the author is disinterested in what happened. Brussig certainly is interested, but he is even more

interested in how “what happened” made the subjects of these events *feel*⁶⁹. He is also interested in how to successfully communicate events, feelings, and the consequences of these events and feelings to those readers who were not present. Brussig’s unique kind of humor is the tool via which he intends to make his readers (even the most remote ones) feel at least some of those feelings that the participants of the 1989 demonstrations or the fall of the wall also felt.

It is in writing *for* the West Germans rather than just about them that Brussig separates himself from the authors Jill Twark is analyzing. As Twark states when summarizing her authors’ attitude towards Western Germans,

By satirizing Western Germans, these authors erect a boundary between their narrators and Western Germans, whom the narrators see as intruding outsiders, contrary to official unification rhetoric that Western and Eastern Germans are *ein Volk*...In making this division, these narrators (and authors) assert their identity as a defense against the larger, dominant Western Culture (160).

As I have stated before, Brussig frequently offers scathing critiques of many of his West German characters (Valentin Eich in *Wie es leuchtet* or Onkel Heinz in *Am kuerzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* just to name a few). Brussig is also far from a fan of German unification. At the same time, however, his West German characters, even those with the harshest lens pointed at them, have redeeming qualities, and are depicted with sympathy when they face challenges. Leo Lattke is a prime example of such a character. Instead of depicting a need for a “defense against a larger...Western Culture” (Twark, 160), Brussig continuously and with varying methods invites an interaction between the west and the east. A telling instance of

⁶⁹ I will elucidate below how Brussig’s understanding of “Errinerung” further informs his interest in feelings *about* events more so than events proper.

such an interaction is the very form of his novel *Helden wie wir*, which is written in the form of an interview between the main character Klaus Uhltzsch and a New York Times reporter, Mr. Kitzelstein. In this and in several other ways, Brussig inhabits the role of the witness, whose primary goal is never just critique, but always also communication.

There are numerous lines of criticism directed at Brussig's writings, especially since he wrote his first critical and commercial success, the 1995 novel *Helden wie wir*. Interestingly, the most aggressive indictments always in some way have to do with Brussig's humor. According to these criticisms, Brussig's humor functions as a buffer which always prevents the reader from having the "proper" literary experience. First, the question repeatedly arises whether Brussig is coddling his readers with his humor, whether he is facilitating his (eastern or western) readers' comfortable rejection of any responsibility they may have regarding the long-term functioning of the GDR, regarding the (as Brussig sees it) failed reunification of Germany, or the current disinterest in, and forgetting of recent history.

Second, Brussig is frequently accused of representing a regressive line of *Ostalgie*, a concept which emerged due to various literary, filmic, and now also televisual works approaching the demise of the GDR with nostalgia. Just as with Brussig's humor, the same criticisms are put forth vis-à-vis his use of *Ostalgie*, namely that the reader is allowed to escape into a cocoon of an idealized past, and thus is rendered stagnant. This *Ostalgie* is supposedly escapist, and prevents the reader from dealing with the issues facing him/her today. And third, Brussig, just like many

other authors of his generation, is under constant pressure to write *the* definitive *Wenderoman*.

Depending on the critic and the momentary political mood when the novel is published, Brussig's novels (especially *Am kuerzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*, *Helden wie wir*, and most importantly *Wie es leuchtet*) are hailed or denounced as successful or failed *Wenderomans*. This is an incredible pressure which forces the author to alternately stand up to it while also trying to satisfy it due to the fact that the *Wende*, its' causes and effects are Brussig's primary subject matter. This was also the case before *Helden wie wir*, which made the public aware of his work. As I will argue below, Brussig's use of humor, his employment of and resistance to *Ostalgie*, as well as his confrontation with the requirement for *the Wenderoman*, have everything to do with the way in which remembering and memory function in Germany today.

Brussig differentiates between remembering ("Erinnerung") and memory/memorization ("sich merken"), and he stresses that he is only interested in the former. The author is a (sometimes) removed witness to the events of 1989 and the reunification of Germany, yet he qualifies the kind of remembering (and thus the kind of witnessing) he wants to foster.

As Helene Cixous or Mikhail Bakhtin argue, there are many challenges which humor and laughter can meet. Other than the working through of traumatic events, one of the main reasons Brussig uses this tool so frequently is in order to familiarize the (frequently western) reader with the subject matter of the former Eastern Block and the GDR. As Brussig puts it in "Die Luege die Deutsche Einheit heist," "Viele im Westen assoziieren mit Deutschland ungefaehr alles zwischen Rhein und Elbe –

dahinter ist Osten, und das ist unheimlich. Selbst dem deutschen Kanzler rutscht im Osten mal ein ‘bei uns’ heraus, wenn er den Westen meint”(3). When I use a form of the word “familiar” here, I mean literally the translation of the German word “heimlich,” which means ‘of the home’, ‘known’, or ‘comfortable.’ The German word meaning the opposite, “unheimlich,” is used more frequently. Interestingly though, it does not only mean ‘foreign’ or ‘strange.’ It also points to the scary aspects of that which is unknown: the unknown can be intimidating and uncanny. Laughter to Brussig becomes *the* tool via which his readers can work through events (whether they happened directly to them or not) and familiarize themselves more with the land and the people. This can only happen via more information about that which is “unheimlich.” And, of course humor is *the* tool via which the interest of the reader is raised so that the “unheimlich” can gradually become “heimlich.”

The perfect example of humor as a catalyst on the road from “unheimlich” to “heimlich” in *Wie es leuchtet* is the way in which Brussig introduces and treats one of his main characters, Alfred Bunzuweit. Bunzuweit, the director of the Palasthotel is introduced by Waldemar Bude, an aspiring writer who is arguably Brussig’s alter-ego within the novel. Bude initially introduces Bunzuweit as pompous, brainless, and unattractive:

Alfred Bunzuweit stand in der Halle, als gehoeere er zum Inventar...Waldemar kannte seinen Direktor als ein dickes, schnaufendes, hyperaktives Wesen mit geroetetem Gesicht und ohne Hals. Der Kopf schien uebergangslos in den Nacken ueberzugehen, das Kinn in die Brust...Als Luxushoteldirektor kommt man auf die Welt – oder wird es nie, dachte Waldemar. Kein Wunder, dass wir ihn heimlich den *Tankwart* nennen (45-46).

Were the attitude toward Bunzuweit to remain the same throughout the novel, it would be all but impossible for the reader to see Bunzuweit as anything but an arrogant villain. Only a page later, however, Brussig uses humor in order to create a more complex character and thus allows the petty and venomous hotel director to become a character to whom the readers at least at times can relate. This transition is possible when the point of view changes from that of Bude's to an omniscient one:

Alfred Bunzuweit produzierte in seinen Gedaermen unablaessig Blaehungen, und die mussten raus. Solange er stand oder umherlief, konnte er Dampf ablassen, wann immer die Ernte Gereift war. Doch im sitzen wurde es tueckisch. Die Masse seines Koerpers lastete zwar auf dem Anus und verschloss ihn sicher, und egal, wie lange er sass – Alfred Bunzuweit blaehete wie ein Hefekloss, aber er liess kein Lueftchen fahren. Doch bereits nach zwanzig Minuten wurde der Gassdruck staerker als sein Schliessmuskel: Wenn er sich dann erhob und damit das Gewicht wegnahm, reichte die Kraft des Schliessmuskels nicht aus – und Alfred Bunzuweit entwich mit Getoese das Gas, das sich in seinem Darm gestaut hatte. Diese extreme Koerperchemie blieb ein Geheimnis, das er sorgfaeltig huetete. Kein Arzt wurde mit dem Problem konfrontiert. Selbst Sibylle Bunzuweit kannte nicht das ganze Ausmass (46-47).

The above manages to be a description of a slapstick situation surrounding only one character. This description, which follows immediately after the character is initially introduced, puts Bunzuweit in a new light. Granted, Bude's introduction only lists Bunzuweit's weaknesses, and, following that logic one could assume that nothing changed with the switch to the omniscient narrator. The weakness the omniscient narrator introduces, however, is one that every reader can relate to, while it is very unlikely that s/he can relate just as well to Bude's description of the ugly, tyrannical hotel director. In addition, the entertaining way Brussig executes the above description aids suture: we (i.e. a large group of readers) are not only revealed a very embarrassing fact about Bunzuweit. What is more, it is made clear that this is a secret

that he finds so embarrassing, he even keeps it from his wife. Suddenly, the reader feels almost a conspiratorial connection with the character. There are few better ways to guarantee a dedicated reader and a witness by proxy.

Roberto Simanowski is one of the critics I mentioned above who takes issue with the way in which Brussig employs humor in his work. As he states in his essay “Die DDR als Dauerwitz,”

Was aber bewirkt Brussig mit seinen bagatellisierenden Uebertreibungen? Was empfindet der Leser, wenn alles im Ulk endet? Wenn nichts aufgearbeitet, sondern alles niedergelacht wird. Er fuehlt allmaechlich, dass es in Wahrheit gar kein Vergangenheitsproblem gibt. Es gibt keine Geschichte zu besichtigen, es gibt nur Geschichten zu erzaehlen, und die enden alle frueher oder spaeter unter der Guertellinie. Im Obszoenen liegt die Erloesung. Brussig hat den Wenderoman geschrieben, weil er die “systemkompatible Spaetlings-Generation”... von ihrem schlechten Gewissen und vom Nach-Wendetrauma der Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung befreit. Man wird ihm irgendwann vorwerfen, dem grossen Vergessen gedient zu haben (161).

Simanowski misses the point of Brussig’s literature on multiple levels here. One of Brussig’s biggest priorities, as he has repeatedly stated, is to encourage his readers to assume personal responsibility for whatever they did or neglected to do before and during the Wende. The first problematic assumption Simanowski makes in the above critique is that laughter is somehow incompatible with a working out or working through of the past. Brussig uses humor precisely *because* it helps his readers (and with high probability also him) confront the past. Brussig states this himself in his essay “Wir sind nostalgisch, weil wir Menschen sind” when discussing his use humor in *Helden wie wir*:

Mein Held spricht nicht nur mit ungehoerter offenheit ueber sein Versagen – nein, sein Versagen (seine Dummheit, Feigheit und seine Verblendung) uebersteigt auch alles, was es in der DDR an Versagen gegeben hat. *Ich hatte die Hoffnung, dass ein solches Buch dem begeisterten Leser (weil lachendem*

Leser – das Buch ist ueber weite Strecken eine kraftvolle Komoedie) zeigt, dass eine ehrliche Konfrontation mit dem eigenen Versagen “reinigt” ... Und ich dachte: Wenn der Leser spuert, dass selbst dieser Held, der eine aeusserlich betrachtet, sehr, sehr laecherliche Figur ist, wenn der also ueber sein Versagen reden kann, obwohl dieses Versagen das des Lesers uebersteigt – ja, warum soll dann auch nicht der Leser ermuntert fuehlen, sich endlich auch mit seinem Versagen zu konfrontieren? (4, italics mine).

That which was the case in *Helden wie wir* is also definitely applicable to *Wie es leuchtet*. Brussig’s goal as he clearly states is an enthusiastic, involved, accountable reader, and the tool he chooses to achieve this goal is humor. Brussig also accomplishes a purification (which he also openly lists as one of his goals) via a kind of performative, exaggerated “dirtying” of his characters and thus by proxy also his readers. The end result of such writing is similar to the effect of medieval spectacles and carnivals, where due to these events’ high potential for the release of pent up energies, the participant is left with a cleansed, calmer feeling.

Further, it is not the case, as Simanowski alleges, that Brussig’s far-fetched stories silence or somehow lie about history. Remembering history and telling stories are intertwined for Brussig. As is clear from Brussig’s explanation, he uses his stories not only to point out his readers’ responsibility for their passivity or failures as subjects of their own historical moments. He also uses his stories to draw attention to responsibility in a light, accessible, non-judgmental fashion. And, as can be seen above, exaggeration is the perfect tool for this goal. If characters like Leo Lattke, Alfred Bunzuweit, or Brussig’s above example Klaus Uhltzsch (the anti-hero from *Helden wie wir*) can develop into more complex and likeable characters because of their confrontations with the fast progression of history, then the reader will also

gather courage to do the same. It is thus a great oversimplification to equate exaggeration with lying or a lack of responsibility towards history.

In addition, as Jill Twark suggests while citing the literary historian Wolfgang Preisendanz,

[Preisendanz] argues that literary versions of historical events often appear humorous simply because they provide details of everyday life not normally included in official historical records. In striving to write objective chronicles of the past, historians focus upon broad socio-political movements, creating an abstract, one-sided view. Literary texts can fill in the gaps left by scholarly historical accounts by depicting details historians have rejected. One can thus conclude that nearly any detailed literary presentation of a historical event will appear *komisch* in the eyes of readers used to learning about history from books and newspaper articles (153).

Brussig, much like Dorota Maslowska, does not aim at depicting reality, or, what German critics seem to repeatedly call “wie es wirklich war” or “wie es wirklich geschehen ist” especially in relation to the *Wende*. Simanowski, for instance, launches a critique of *Helden wie wir* in “Die DDR als Dauerwitz” based precisely on the false assumption that Brussig makes a promise of an exhaustive explanation of the *Wende*: “Das Versprechen, auch aus diesem nicht ganz ernsthaften Buch schliesslich zu erfahren, wie es denn nun wirklich gewesen ist, mag ausserdem verkaufsfördernd sein” (160). Simanowski demonstrates a lazy reading of Brussig’s book. Nowhere does Brussig state that *Helden wie wir* is a historical document, and the author also never (not even after having written *Wie es leuchtet*) claims to have written a *Wenderoman*, let alone *the* definitive *Wenderoman*. The accusation of writing for profit is also aimed at discrediting Brussig, particularly his authority and integrity as a witness.

Instead of the impossible “wie es wirklich gewesen ist,” Brussig concentrates in all of his writings on that which, as Twark puts it, is “left out by scholarly historical accounts” (153). If and when one notices the everyday, the mundane and the intimate aspects of life especially amidst a political and historical maelstrom, these aspects do, as Twark argues, seem comical and odd. There is, perhaps, even a sense of guilt associated with those who are interested in recording anything else but historical facts, since that could be seen as trivial during revolutionary times. Brussig, just like Maslowska, Richter or Slavenka Drakulic, recognizes unapologetically that the personal is political, and that the political can very rarely be usefully understood if the personal is ignored. Just like Maslowska (and unlike many others, for instance Drakulic), Brussig depicts the personal – which in his work is always very much political – in an accelerated fashion. This fact is one of the many reasons Brussig’s and Maslowska’s writings make for such a useful pairing.

The question whether or not it is possible to depict anything “wie es wirklich war” is not even of interest to Brussig, because he sees this as an impossibility. Rather, as I suggested earlier, he *is* interested in feelings the events around 1989 evoked in those who lived through them. He says this best in “Wir sind nostalgisch, weil wir Menschen sind” about his approach to storytelling in *Helden wie wir*. I argue again that his description is just as applicable to *Wie es leuchtet*:

Die...Erzaehlung sagt...nichts ueber die DDR, aber eine ganze Menge darueber, wie das Errinern an die DDR arbeitet. Dazu passt auch, dass in der Erzaehlung eine Paradoxie steckt: Die vielen Episoden die in leicht zu lesender Abfolge immer wieder vorgreifen oder zurueckspringen, sind, wenn man es genau wissen will, auf keinen Zeitstrahl zu legen, ohne dass Widersprueche auftreten. (Auch hier ist das Exakte nicht moeglich! Und: auch hier muss man genau hinsehen, um den Fehler, der beim Erinnern

produziert wird zu erkennen) Aber so arbeitet auch das Erinnern: Wir koennen uns an Episoden erinnern, wir wissen oft ganz genau, wie es war, als wir einen Menschen oder einen Ort das erste mal gesehen haben. Aber wir koennen nicht sagen, ob wir zuerst diesen Menschen oder jenen Ort gesehen haben und in welcher Reihenfolge ueberhaupt sich unsere vielen, vielen Erlebnisse unserer Erinnerungen zugetragen haben (6-7).

Here, Brussig points out exactly that which he deems less important in recording history: exact dates, sequences, etc. It is also important to mention that unclear, overlapping, temporally inaccurate memories are precisely the sign of a subject who has experienced a traumatic event. In stating his contentment with these inaccuracies, Brussig in yet another way declares his commitment towards the subject/witness of the *Wende* as opposed to the historiography of the same.

Brussig is also suggesting above that he constructs his narratives based on how he believes “Erinnerung” functions; he wants his narratives to reflect the process of memory not only via their content but also in their form. “To remember” (“sich erinnern”) is not at all as static as “to memorize”⁷⁰ (“sich merken”). This is a key point to Brussig. While “sich merken” is set and static, “sich erinnern” is much more fluid, and expresses a person’s relation to and interaction *with* history rather than history itself. As Brussig puts it about the therapeutic effect of memory, “Erinnern macht es moeglich, einen Frieden mit der Vergangenheit zu schliessen, in der sich jeder Groll verfluechtigt und der weiche Schleier der Nostalgie ueber alles legt, was mal scharf und schneidend empfunden wurde. Glueckliche Menschen haben ein schlechtes Gedaechnis und reiche Erinnerungen” (“Wie sind nostalgisch weil wir Menschen sind,” 6). Brussig is suggesting here that memory (as opposed to “sich

⁷⁰ “To memorize” is not an adequate translation of “sich merken.” Another (also unsatisfactory) option is “to learn by heart.” Thus, I will continue using only the German version of this phrase.

merken”) is impossible without some degree of nostalgia. Nostalgia is the glue here that connects, involves and implicates the subject in the process of history; nostalgia connects names of abstract figures with friends and loved ones. Nostalgia in this case makes history mean and makes it mean in a personal if not intimate way.

In relating nostalgia to a productive kind of remembering, Brussig intends to free the concept of nostalgia from its frequent negative connotations. In the case of the former GDR, the concept of nostalgia got further stigmatized with the term *Ostalgie*. Only a few, especially very few from the west could see anything productive in this concept⁷¹. *Ostalgie*, a product of the combination of the words “Osten” (east) and “Nostalgie” generally means “homesickness for the east”. Since, however, this “east” is not only a place but rather in this case a designator for a time period, this return home is impossible other than via various works of fiction. One should also point out that many intellectuals from the former GDR who would call themselves *ostalgtisch* would not at all claim that they miss the totalitarian political system. Rather, they might miss a particular magazine, a particular brand of soap, or the typically GDR-style pop music. It is thus an oversimplification – and Brussig demonstrates this fact continually in his writings – to equate all products of *Ostalgie* with a yearning for the return of the communist political system. To many, *Ostalgie* is just another retro-trend; to others, it is a search for a homeland that was not exclusively defined by the political system that reigned over it⁷².

⁷¹ The German comedian Uwe Steimle first used the term *Ostalgie* to name his 1994 TV show.

⁷² Those *Ostalgiker* who become so blinded that they take enjoyable details such as a favorite GDR product as proof that the political system itself should be mourned are of course a different group altogether, and should indeed be criticized.

Perhaps the most interesting definition of *Ostalgie* is a discussion of some of the reasons for its' coming into being. Interestingly, the German journalist Michael Rutschky defines *Ostalgie* without even naming it when he suggests that the GDR could only come into being after its end. As Joerg Magenau analyzes (while referring to Rutschky) in his essay "Literature as a Generation's Medium for Self-Understanding," the implication is that while any sense of group belonging was forced during the GDR, after the fall of the wall, "[The GDR] emerges...as a common cultural denominator and a basis for communication amongst those left behind. Only in its recollection does the GDR become a possible *Heimat*; it turns into a 'community of experience and storytelling' in a society that has become alien" (99). It is of note that, just as with all the authors/removed witnesses I analyze in my dissertation, a distance is evoked in order to create closeness. In other words, the community Rutschky and Morgenau speak of is impossible without a distance from where that community originated, and again, this distance and a detailed knowledge about the subject matter are not at all mutually exclusive.

Brussig's relationship with *Ostalgie* is more complex than it might seem at first glance. On the one hand, Brussig sees and frequently critiques the former Eastern Block countries' complete disinterest in their most recent history. As he states about his homeland, "Die Fragen, die der DDR-Totalitarismus hinterliess [wiegen] laengst nicht so schwer wie die Geschichtskatastrophen des 20. Jahrhunderts. Wozu Analyse? Die DDR ist zur Verklaerung freigegeben" ("Wir sind nostalgisch weil wir Menschen sind," 7). Based on this lack of attention to the events around 1989 which he critiques extensively also in *Wie es leuchtet*, it is

understandable that Brussig finds several aspects of *Ostalgie* useful, the most important one being that the GDR era is being given at least some – albeit sometimes questionable – attention. Also, when Brussig writes using the by now established style of *Ostalgie* (Brussig was one of the first authors who helped establish this style), he frees himself a little more from the requirement of historiography, since one would be hard-pressed to find someone who would expect an openly *ostalgisch* work to also be a serious historical document.

On the other hand, Brussig is very self-conscious in those moments when he himself gets overly nostalgic since he recognizes just how seductive these feelings can get:

Ich [beobachtete] mich sogar dabei, wie ich oft und gerne Geschichten von “damals” erzählte, wie belebend solche Erinnerungen waren. Es war mir einfach nicht mehr möglich die DDR so zu hassen, wie ich sie am Ende der achtziger Jahre gehasst habe... Es ist fuer einen Schriftsteller eine Herausforderung, wenn er spuert, dass sein Fuehlen nicht von den Fakten gedeckt ist (“Wir sind nostalgisch weil wir Menschen sind,” 5).

Brussig demonstrates here the functioning of *Erinnerung* (with nostalgia) on himself, where, as he puts it, his own memory’s “sharp and cutting” edges get smoothed out. In other words, the danger proper is not in *Ostalgie*. Aspects of *Ostalgie* can be entertaining and even useful. The danger lies in the lack of self-awareness in those moments when one does get *ostalgisch*. Brussig’s most striking example is when he describes how the lack of a sense of shared responsibility *creates Ostalgie*. The (probably not completely conscious) thinking here is that if one believes – or at least pretends to believe – that the GDR was not ‘that bad,’ then one need not feel guilty for having stayed complacent with the regime. In this case, *Ostalgie* becomes a tool

of self-deception, a tool which calms the conscience of the guilty, and indeed also a tool which aids forgetting rather than remembering. In juxtaposing the latter regressive form of *Ostalgie* with the knowledgeable community and storytelling that Rutschky and Magenau evoke, it is clear that the concept of *Ostalgie* houses conflicting practices.

As we have seen by now, Brussig does not espouse the kind of *Ostalgie* that facilitates self-deception. Thus, Simanowski's assertion that Brussig will one day be accused of having aided the "great forgetting" is out of place. Also, Brussig is very clear that not all (not even most) texts that use the stylistic techniques of *Ostalgie* accomplish the goals which he sets out for his own works of *Ostalgie*. He, much like many critics, believes that there is a large group of 'ostalgic' works which range from kitsch to an, as he puts it in his essay "Der Brechreiz ist ein aktueller," "ausgewachsene Scheusslichkeit" (2). As an example of these "Scheusslichkeiten," Brussig mentions the TV show of a certain Dagmar F. on the German TV channel ZDF. According to Brussig, these shows misread the concept of nostalgia so completely that they transform their space in front of the camera into a kind of perpetual past *in* the present. This does a great disservice to any positive results that could come of nostalgia proper: "Zur Nostalgie gehoert, dass es weg ist, vorbei, verschwunden, erledigt. Und eine Dagmar F. ist auch heute Ostfernsehen" (2).

Positive *Ostalgie*, i.e. the kind of *Ostalgie* that Brussig respects and aspires to, "holt [etwas] nach, was 1990 nicht geleistet wurde: Den Abschied von der DDR. Sie wird mit Anstand unter die Erde gebracht" (2). According to Brussig, this is accomplished for instance in the film *Goodbye, Lenin!*. Judged by the way in which

Brussig formulates the above, it is clear that he sees a lot of tangible, practical, political, and especially therapeutic value in the literature of witness. This kind of literature (Brussig uses the example of a film, which can also certainly testify) can finish – at least temporarily, within the world of the work and the mind of the viewer/reader – what politics or even history could not yet accomplish: it can provide closure without blame or taboos. Works of positive *Ostalgie* are perfect examples of what exactly a removed witness can accomplish: s/he can influence an entire culture and even readers/viewers outside it by insisting on a working out and working through of issues which may not be fashionable in her/his given socio-historical moment. S/he can point out specific needs which should be met, and s/he can point out moral responsibility that needs to be taken. And, just as Brussig does with the discussion of his own struggle with nostalgia, the removed witness-author can lead the way by discussing any struggles that s/he may have⁷³.

Brussig maps out the relationship between *Erinnerungen*, *Nostalgie*, and *Ostalgie*, when he states:

Die Erinnerungen sind...ein Organ der Seele, wie der Magen ein Organ der Verdauung ist; Erinnerungen verarbeiten das Erlebte so, dass wir einen "Lebenssinn" oder eine "Lebenserzaehlung" herstellen koennen. Erinnerungen interessieren sich nicht dafuer, wie es "wirklich" war. Sie tauschen, betruengen, schmeicheln, unterschlagen. In der Regel wollen sie uns heimlich beim Gluecklichwerden helfen. Die Ostalgie unterscheidet sich nur in einem wesentlichen Punkt von der ueblichen Nostalgie: das Objekt der Verklaerung ist in seiner Deutung schwer umkaempft ("Der Brechreiz ist ein aktueller," 2-3).

Brussig describes here a kind of useful, good lying. *Erinnerungen* are already a kind of therapy. They are an "organ" that makes sure that the human being can be a

⁷³ I will address this aspect of witnessing further in my next chapter when I discuss Christa Wolf's *Was Bleibt*.

healthy, uninhibited, productive “organ” in the flow of history. Thus, ideally, a work of witness using *Ostalgie* can expand on or magnify the effects of *Erinnerungen*.

I would now like to briefly return to Roberto Simanowski’s critique one last time. Simanowski explains away Brussig’s popularity by stating that Brussig comforts and appeases the “system-kompatible Spaetlings-Generation.” The mocking tone used to name what one assumes are Brussig’s contemporaries is quite obvious. It is not at all Brussig’s goal to help his contemporaries make a smooth, problem-free transition into a unified Germany (Simanowski calls this the “Nach-Wendetrauma der Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung”). In fact, as Brussig states many times, his goal is to move away from his readers’ all-too-easily-assumed identity of a victim. Brussig discusses his disappointment with the fact that *Helden wie wir* did not have the full range of effects he was hoping for: “*Helden wie wir* kam ueber das Gelaechter zum Erfolg, die moralische Botschaft wurde noch wahrgenommen, die Debatten hingegen nicht im erhofften Sinne beeinflusst...Der Versuch, mit “Helden wie wir” eine in den Ansaetzen steckengebliebene Schulddiskussion neu zu beleben, scheiterte” (“Der Brechreiz ist ein aktueller,” 5). In other words, Brussig is aware here that he accomplished a goal, but not his final goal. This is probably *the* reason why Brussig keeps coming back to the same themes, and develops them even further in *Wie es leuchtet*. Acknowledgments of one’s own failures coupled with a keen awareness of the current socio-political situation are not one-time events that can be accomplished and then checked-off. They are both life-long processes that need to be renewed and reinvestigated continuously, especially if one willingly assumes the role of witnessing for and about one’s culture.

Using the tool of *Ostalgie* Brussig managed to openly speak about what he considers the three most egregious sins of his compatriots vis-à-vis the events surrounding 1989: their stupidity, their blindness⁷⁴, and their cowardice (“Wir sind nostalgisch weil wir Menschen sind,” 4). Considering that these are very serious issues he brings up to his own contemporaries, it should certainly be considered a significant success that Brussig’s work became widely heard and discussed. *I argue that it is precisely via his tool of humor aided by the softening lens of Ostalgie that Brussig can indict many without angering them, and inspire many to action without overwhelming them.*

Despite the multitude of characters, settings and plotlines in *Wie es leuchtet*, and despite the fact that Brussig admittedly intends to not have plots, dates, etc. match up perfectly, he is quite organized and direct about why he writes and what his writing should accomplish. In a novel 607 pages long, he can only wait until page 13 to express, via Lena and her photographer friend called “Lena’s grosser Bruder,” the pressing need of the times:

Lena liebte meine Fotos...Es waren nur bestimmte Fotos, die auf sie solch starke Wirkung ausuebten – jene vom Herbst 89 und dem *Deutschen Jahr*. Lena ist laengst nicht die einzige, fuer die jene Wochen und Monate eine einzigartige, aufwuehlende Erfahrung war. Trotzdem gibt es kein Buch, in dem die Erfahrungen jener Zeit fuer alle gleichermassen gueltig aufbewahrt sind, so wie “Im Westen nichts Neues” die Erfahrungen der Frontsoldaten des Ersten Weltkriegs versammelte. Lena suchte nach Bestaetigung, nach Reflexion des Erlebten – und fand sich letztlich immer ueber meinen Fotos wieder. “Alles, was ich ueber diese Zeit weiss, weiss ich von deinen Bildern.” Die Bilder sind verschwommen, und die Geschichte beginnt von neuem (13).

⁷⁴ Brussig uses the word “Verblendung” here, which has different implications than the German word “Blindheit.” The latter one is more literally translatable into “blindness,” while the former one indicates with certainty that there *used* to be sight where now it is blocked.

In this somewhat removed manner, Brussig states his ideal goal at the very outset of his novel. He aims to create material that would facilitate the remembering (Erinnerung) of 1989 in a similarly important way to the remembering that *Im Westen nichts Neues* accomplished for the events of the First World War. Due to the multitude of characters in *Wie es leuchtet*, Brussig shows his readers vignettes, snapshots of various fates at a turbulent time rather than in-depth, smooth storylines like those in Erich Maria Remarque's book. Perhaps one of the messages here is that with the changing times, the way in which a story is depicted also has to change. The speed of lived experiences is so fast that the act of writing prose has to approximate the speed with which pictures are taken, as well as the immediacy which photography possesses. This is why "Lenas grosser Bruder" is a key character, and the settings of various events are often more important in *Wie es leuchtet* than the plot proceedings.

Brussig accomplishes depth by returning to particular characters, locations over and over, not by lingering with them for long periods of time. While Maslowska uses actual images (cartoon-like illustrations) to make her novels do extrageneric work, Brussig is more subtle. Yet, as Lena says, it is still from the pictures of her "big brother"⁷⁵ that she learns the most about her present historical moment. This sentence is the very first sentence of the novel, and it is repeated several times. It is these pictures (Lena's "brother's" pictures, but ultimately pictures of the revolution in general) that Brussig wants to capture and emulate in his prose so that they do not disappear or get blurry ("verschwommen"). Thus, frequently, Brussig manages to snap a picture via his words.

⁷⁵ I put the phrase "big brother" in quotation marks because this character is not related to Lena.

According to Brussig, in order to effectively depict the turbulent history he is interested in, in order to both be faithful to this history and produce a successful story, prose needs to incorporate a multitude of stylistic approaches. As he states in his article “Filmboard-Beitrag,”

Ich glaube, dass eine Geschichte eher dann erfolgreich ist, wenn sie mehrere Lesearten erlaubt. Es schadet ihr nicht, wenn sie vielschichtig ist, auslegbar, raetselhaft...Es liegt in der Natur des Geschichtenerzaehlens, dass Geschichten eine unausgesprochene Essenz in sich tragen, und je merkwuerdiger und verstoerender dieser heimliche Kern ist, desto groessere Chancen hat eine Geschichte, dass sie uns nicht loslaesst und uns statt dessen immer wieder beschaefigt und beunruhigt (2).

Brussig decides to approach this “unasgesprochene Essenz” of his stories in *Wie es leuchtet* from numerous stylistic and even extra-generic angles. As he states, he has high hopes that his approach will add a mysterious quality to his work, which will then ideally captivate and fascinate his readers. Captivated and fascinated readers would ideally become passionate about and compassionate with the challenges of the culture from which Brussig is witnessing.

There are several ways in which Brussig’s prose assumes non-prosaic characteristics, even characteristics belonging to art forms other than literature: via his vignettes, his writing approximates photography. It is quick, it flashes; it introduces one environment, sets up one mood, and quickly moves on. There is so much happening, so much to record, that there is no time to linger. The speed and method of recording has to approximate the speed of life if it is going to be relevant:

Es brach eine Zeit an, in der tatsaechlich vieles anders wurde, weil viele etwas machten, das sie bis dahin nicht gemacht hatten. Eine Mutter schreibt an den Innenminister. Eine Schriftstellerin tritt aus der Partei aus. Ein Direktor laesst sich scheiden. Ein immer folgsammer Sportstaar gibt andere Interviews. Ein Professor macht Yoga. Eine Tieraerztin wird Vegetarierin.

Ein Journalistikstudent bestellt die Zeitung ab. Ein Hausmeister hoert auf zu rauchen. Eine Klavierlehrerin besucht einen Selbstverteidigungskurs. Eine Maseuse faehrt mit Rollschuhen durch die Stadt. Alle machten etwas, das schon lange faellig war. Das Netz aus alten Gewohnheiten und Abhaengigkeiten, aus Untaetigkeit, Gleichgueltigkeit und Ohnmacht war loechrig. Bald wuerde es ganz reissen (58-59).

The above description provides a slide-show of images of 1989 in word form. Via these images, it records not only the actors and their actions; the speed, the enumeration, and the sense of urgency create a mosaic amidst overwhelming change. This mosaic alludes to new freedoms, new avenues of self-realization, new hopes, as well as new fears. This short passage is an accurate illustration of the goals and mood of *Wie es leuchtet* as a whole.⁷⁶

A strong sense of sampling from the visual world is present throughout Brussig's novel also due to its title. The title, *Wie es leuchtet* (awkwardly translatable into *How It Is Shining*) relies on the strong visual motif of light. The way in which light is used highlights the impermanence, unpredictability, and uniqueness of the events Brussig describes. The shining is more a flickering and flashing, symbolic of one improbable, precious moment in history. As Lena muses, when speaking with her "big brother,"

‘Weisst du noch, was ich vor einem Jahr gesagt habe? – Dass so ein Leben – mein Leben zum Beispiel – auch voellig anders gelaufen sein koennte...Das Flirren und Flimmern der Zufaele regiert...Aber wenn man etwas nimmt, das an vielen Stellen flimmert und flackert, und man schaut sich *das Ganze* an, dass sieht man, wie es leuchtet, verstehst du?...Und das Leben – ich finde, es leuchtet manchmal. Wenn die Zufaele nur wenig flimmern und flackern,

⁷⁶ Other important extra-generic aspects of Brussig's novel include: songs (both their composing and performing, especially by Lena), poetry (der unrasierte Dichter), business speeches (Werner Schneidel), political speeches, and journalistic reports (Leo Lattke). These extra-generic aspects are significant details that serve the larger purpose of the plot. In fact, frequently, as is the case with Lattke's report on Sabine Buse, they overtake the plot of the novel entirely. Brussig gives Lattke's report 12 pages of space, complete with a different font and formatting. None of these sources are excerpted. They are all quoted in their entirety.

dann kommt nichts zustande. Aber im letzten Jahr, da ist so vieles passiert. Natuerlich nicht nur mir, sondern auch vielen andern. Und da denke ich, das leuchtet. Das leuchtet so hell, dass man es noch lange sehen wird' (600).

Lena describes the changes of 1989/90 in a seemingly contradictory fashion: she is describing a “flickering and flashing,” normally transitory visual events, which ultimately add up to a much more permanent, momentous event, a shining, or as she specifies, the shining of life itself. As she suggests via the visual references to light, the whole can only be productively approximated if the disparate parts are observed attentively and ultimately combined via a kind of birds-eye perspective of a given situation. It is the accidents, as Lena puts it (“Zufaelle”) which put together the life she sees. Certainly, it is not hard to discern the parallel between the seemingly small and unimportant “snapshots” that Brussig presents to his reader throughout the novel and the “Flirren und Flimmern” which so fascinates Lena. Similarly, the whole (shining, life) which is the sum of all the flashes can be a parallel to the wholeness of *Wie es leuchtet* as such⁷⁷. After all, these philosophizing thoughts are presented by Lena only seven pages from the end of the novel, as she manages to see her life and the events she is experiencing from somewhat of a distance.

Matthias Matussek brings up another important effect that Brussig’s book, and especially his motif of light brought about in 2004:

Kann sich denn, im gegenwaerigen Jammertal, keiner mehr an das Leuchten erinnern? Es war ueberall, in den Augen, im Spruehregen, in den Umarmungen, in den Peitschenlampen an der Mauer, vor genau 15 Jahren. Es war da, als Kraene, die Mauerteile anhaben im Scheinwerferlicht und Kraehenschwaerme durch den Winterhimmel stoben. In Berlin kam die Geschichte an ihr Ende, sagte man. Es war wie eine Sternschnuppe, die vorbeigezischt ist. Jahrzehntelang war der Mauerfall unvorstellbare Zukunft.

⁷⁷ Even this wholeness, however, is incomplete, since the sum of all the flickers and flashes still does not include those moments and events left in (literal or figurative) darkness.

Und jetzt ist er laengst nachtschwarze Vergangenheit. Irgendwo dazwischen ist es verglueht, dieses Leuchten; dabei ist alles, was wir heute sind, in jenen Monaten geboren worden (192).

While Brussig might spend most of his time in *Wie es leuchtet* complicating and explaining the multitude of events of the *Wende*, he also takes time to remind the disenchanted reader of 2004 of the momentous nature of the event that s/he witnessed in 1989. Brussig intentionally dwells on the fact that in addition to history in the making, there was also an undeniable beauty in the moment of the revolution, in the cheers, chants, smiles, and togetherness of crowds. This enormous, life-changing, positive energy is what Brussig ultimately sees as the light, the light that he wants to shine throughout his novel. Matussek gives Brussig credit for this.

Brussig's critics certainly pick up on the extrageneric / multigeneric nature of *Wie es leuchtet*. Regardless of their opinions about Brussig's work, reviewers across the board notice Brussig's non-traditional techniques. Sandra Pfister for instance argues that with *Wie es leuchtet* Brussig accomplished what Guenther Grass could not with *Ein weites Feld*, namely to produce an accessible, relevant and entertaining *Wenderoman*. She calls Brussig's book a "vielseitiges Tableau der Zeit," and continues:

Die Begeisterung des Wendejahres laesst sich heute nur noch in emblematischen Bruchstuecken wachrufen: Wir sind das Volk. Und weil die Erinnerung so truegerisch ist, und der Stoff so fluechtig, deshalb will Thomas Brussig die Wendezeit 1989/90 festhalten in einem Erinnerungsbuch, einer Art Kaleidoskop von Episoden und Bildern... wo Remarque blanken Realismus wollte, neigen Brussigs Gestalten zur Karikatur – in satten Farben gemalt. Das Buch ist alles in einem: Reportage, Schwank, Krimi, und Gleichnis. Brussig gibt dem Leser ein Fotoalbum in die Hand, voller Schnappschuesse, und auf diesen Bildern tauchen 20 Menschen auf (www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/politischeliteratur/320032) 11/8/2004

Just to name a few others, Frauke Klinge, another literary critic and historian qualifies Brussig's work as "die Wende als literarisches Puzzle" (www.titel-magazin.de/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=2972) 11/1/2004. Kristina Mardt Zinke introduces yet another genre for comparison, when she calls *Wie es leuchtet* Brussig's "Wende-Walzer" (http://www.buecher.de/shop/Ungarn/Wie-es-leuchtet/Brussig-Thomas/products_products/detail/prod_id/12776831/) 10/23/2004.

As I argued at the outset of this chapter, it is precisely the task of witnessing, especially of witnessing at the end of the 20th century amidst the challenges of an already frantic, abrasive world that makes realism as a style insufficient. This style, as I defined it earlier, is even less fitting when the events to be depicted contain a trauma to which the author has somewhat of a personal connection. This is why the works of Maslowska and Brussig (as well as Richter, as I have demonstrated in my second chapter) draw heavily on the postmodern techniques of pastiche/sampling. It is this heavy reliance on pastiche which creates a centrifugal force pulling these works away from the clear cut definition of a realist novel (or, in Richter's case, a realist poem). Based on appearances, these works are novels, but based on stylistic choices such as pastiche, linguistic experimentation with rhyming/rap, the choice of including non-fiction genres as well as characters, the interjections of visual aids, Maslowska's and Brussig's works become, as the critics above called them, waltzes, photographs, puzzles, jokes, parables, reports, caricatures, tableaus. *A piece of removed witnessing, regardless of the genre in which it is presented, is thus always also eluding that genre; it is more than that genre. In addition to the remainder in*

*content, which is amply documented in testimonial literature (Felman, LaCapra, Agamben, Blanchot), there is always also a remainder in/of genre in removed witnessing.*⁷⁸

One of the last points I would like to discuss in relation to Brussig's style in *Wie es leuchtet* is his intended interlocutor, or imagined reader. This is an essential topic to consider in literature of witness, because the author's imagining of her/his reader and her/ his attitude towards the reader says a lot about what kind of testimonial work the author deems is necessary in her/his given society. Authors of literature of witness often discern blocked or nonexistent channels of communication between particular parts of one society such as members of different classes, generations or professions. Alternatively, these authors, especially if well traveled (or at least aware of the world at large), have their ear to the ground as to the blocked channels of communication due to a lack of information or interest on an international basis. In this case, they become mouthpieces for any given culture (or more specifically any given event, issue, etc. within that culture), transmit and often also translate these events/issues to the world at large, or to another specific culture. It is in this way then that the intended audience of an author of testimonial literature tells us so much: it gives us a hint as to what is amiss or ignored in a given setting, who

⁷⁸ It is of course also true that there are innumerable works which employ the postmodern techniques of pastiche heavily and which experiment with the genre in which they are written/produced, that have nothing at all to do with witnessing. I argue that most works of witness elude clear generic guidelines to one degree or another. However, not all works which elude their generic guidelines are also works of witness.

should know about this, and ideally also what might be done to start changing the status quo.

Brussig does not waste much time in letting his readers know one of the goals of his writing. When introducing Waldemar Bude, who as I mentioned earlier is a struggling writer as well as Brussig's alter-ego within the world of the novel, Brussig makes it clear that the disconnect between the readers and the writers in post-1989 society in Germany is one of major problems plaguing his society:

Jahrelang hatte er mit der Hoffnung gelesen, in diesen Buechern etwas zu finden, was seine Lage erhellen koennte – nichts. Waldemar interessierte sich fuer das, was in diesem Land passierte, und dass er aufhoerte, sich fuer die Literatur dieses Landes zu interessieren, wuerde er den Schriftstellern nie verzeihen. Dann fing er selbst an zu schreiben. Es war ein Akt der Notwehr. Den wenn *die* nicht die richtigen Buecher schreiben, dann muss er es selber tun (42-43).

In analyzing the problem, i.e. that the readers in Germany of Bude's present moment need something quite different from what the writers of the time are offering, Brussig points out a similar problem to the one Richter noticed around the same time in Slovakia. In both cases, most writers in these countries concentrated on themes which were commercially successful; they were always looking for themes from the west. Analyzing the current socio-historical moment of their respective countries was considered not only unprofitable but also uncool. (Richter offered a scathing critique of the hypocrisy of such writers in his poem "Ballad About the Genius of Slovak Poets" which I analyze in my second chapter). In the case of Eastern Germany, this kind of cultural "copycatting" was probably even easier and more seductive, since East Germany as the only country from among the former Eastern Block countries, shared its language and some of its culture with a western, adjacent country.

Embedded in this critique is also a call to action, which is another typical move on the part of an author of testimonial literature. Brussig suggests here that critique is not enough; it has to be followed up with action.

Waldemar Bude is ultimately very lucky when he, much to his surprise, finds a publisher who is interested in his novel, and willing to publish it. Bude is originally from Poland, which turns out to work in his favor:

‘Sie koennen ja auch Polnisch,’ sagte der Verlagsdirektor. ‘Eigentlich koennen sie gar nichts,’ sagte die Lektorin. Will sie mich beleidigen? dachte Waldemar, versuchte aber, endlich das Wesen der Diskussion zu fassen zu kriegen... Sie sind sprachlich unbehaust. Sie sind von zwei Seiten unfertig, aber *wie* Sie daneben hauen – das ist schoener, als wenn Sie treffen wuerden. Wir werden uns bald in einer Gesellschaft muehen, die nicht die unsere ist...’
‘Und deshalb koennte ihr Buch auf eine ganz subtile, scheinbar unerklaerliche, raetslehafte Art einen Nerv treffen... Weil wir aber bald die Marktwirtschaft bekommen und – entschuldigen Sie die fuerchterliche Formulierung – weil sich *alles rechnen muss*, suchen wir nach Buechern, die einen Nerv treffen koennen’ (434).

This is the only publisher Bude can find who is interested in and sees the need for explaining the present historical moment. He understands that explanations and reflections have to happen for the benefit of both East German and West German citizens; he sees that they are both struggling with understanding the events surrounding them, albeit in different ways. The publisher also sees that Bude, due to his Polish origins, is more in-between different worlds than even the average East German citizen, and thus sees a potential in this hightened transitory identity. He sees this identity paralleling the transitory nature of Germans, and unlike others, he sees this striking of a nerve also having a potential for profit. Via the publisher’s words, Brussig acknowledges that while the requirements of profit might be an ugly truth,

these requirements are not necessarily mutually exclusive with supporting literature which is reflective and relevant to any given historical moment.

Brussig's challenge with the Eastern European reader might be to evoke the need to act, to have the reader heed a call to witness, to phrase this need/call as a moral responsibility of anyone stemming from that part of the world. After all, this is what Bude, one of Brussig's most sympathetic characters in *Wie es leuchtet* does. Brussig's challenge with the Western European and American reader is even tougher. Brussig is certainly intending to reach the western reader, especially the West German and American reader. As I mentioned earlier, it is via his humor that Brussig intends to make his often times intense and fragmented prose accessible. Yet, he knows he needs to do more, especially when it comes to his American readers. This challenge becomes clear when he makes the Leo Lattke character travel to the USA to sell one of his Wende-stories to the *New Yorker* magazine. To his great surprise, Lattke gets refused.

Lattke's trip and submission initiate a series of reflections on what the American audience wants, what is accessible to them, what they care about. The Senior Editor at the *New Yorker* suggests to Lattke that the ideal piece is "Etwas das politisch ist, ohne Politik zu sein" (574). (This notion of daring to make literature political dovetails very well with Brussig's goals as a writer. This became even clearer when in 2005, only a year after having published *Wie es leuchtet*, Brussig joined a group founded by Guenther Grass called "Gruppe 05" or "Luebeck 05." This group's primary goal according to Grass was precisely to become involved in politics). Lattke continues to learn about the readers he is hoping to reach:

Auf der Uni hatte [die Chefredakteurin] einen Professor Kausch, der ihr den Unterschied zwischen Trivialliteratur und grosser Literatur deutlich gemacht habe: Ein Paar, das auf einem Bahnhof steht und schmerzvoll Abschied nimmt, weil sie sich wohl niemals wiedersehen, ist fast immer ein Fall fuer die Trivialliteratur. Wenn jedoch der Abschied im Maerz 1918 stattfindet und er als Soldat an die Front muss, dann hat die Szene die Chance, enem grossen Roman zu entstammen (574-575).

Lattke seems to learn that the kind of literature an American audience would be interested in has to have political relevance. Based on this information, Lattke is very hopeful, since he sees his literature as the best combination of the personal and the political. He rewrites his submissions with an American reader in mind, leaving out what he calls the “deutsch-deutschen Interna” (574). In the end, however, while the editor calls his submissions “very interesting...marvelous and amazing, great...wonderful” (576), she also suggests that she can not print these stories because they did not happen to an American. After this, Lattke becomes disenchanted and morose as he realizes that he is at a complete loss in figuring out how to reach the American audience, how to make them care about a topic that is absolutely relevant even though it may not have happened to them.

In his musings, Lattke eventually gives up his idealized goal to speak to everyone in America. Based on his limited experience, he concludes that when it comes to American readers there are really two main groups: those who are intellectuals and thus do not develop nationalist ideas, and those who overdevelop their patriotism, and thus become unreachable to anyone who does not share their views or interests: “Amerikaner sind ja keine schlechte Menschen, dass gewiss nicht. Nur wenn sie sich patriotisch versammeln, werden sie laecherlich bis unausstehlich” (542). Lattke finds that the American audience tends to like stories which are easily

wrapped up. Due to this, the events of 1989 are viewed as a positive accomplishment, but not much more. The idea that not everything was explained and resolved in or soon after 1989 is uncomfortable. Ironically, Lattke realizes that the reasons why his pieces were rejected in Germany were the same ones that made him miss his opportunity in the USA: no one wanted to hear about a revolution that had its' darker sides, its' incompletes and painful results.

One of Brussig's ultimate goals is precisely to be read in America. The western readership may not have been ready for the dystopias connected to the utopia caused by the revolutions of 1989/90, but what Brussig's character Lattke could not accomplish then, Brussig is more hopeful in achieving with a few years' distance. This distance is essential, since it allows for reflection and evaluation which was not possible amidst the turmoil of the events of 1989/90. Brussig's books circling around the topic of the *Wende*, *Helden wie wir* written in 1995, *Am kuerzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* written in 1999, and ultimately *Wie es leuchtet* in 2004, are proof of his repeated attempts. He also has, to a large degree, caught the attention of western audiences throughout Europe, especially once he wrote the screenplay for Leander Haussman's film *Sonnenalle* (1999). Reaching the American reader is certainly in Brussig's mind both the last frontier and the new frontier. For one, Lattke's trip to the US is the last part of *Wie es leuchtet*. Also, Brussig has been working hard on getting his works translated into English, with his first success, *Heroes Like Us* having appeared in 1997.

At least according to one surprising and generous review, that of Matthias Matussek, Brussig is successful in his goals: "So viele haben sich an der deutschen

Revolution abgearbeitet und sind daran gescheitert...Thomas Brussig, 38, gelingt der Zauber. Er beherrscht das Komische und Sentimentale und Grotteske gleichzeitig und hat vor grossen Stoffen keine Angst" (192). This evaluation certainly reflects the success Brussig can claim in the unified Germany and in Europe at large. The question that remains and will probably remain unanswered at least until all his major works have been translated into English is whether Brussig's literary and rhetorical techniques are the kind that can appeal to, touch, or inspire the non-academic American reader.

Ultimately, both Maslowska and Brussig heed Brussig's definition of an author, as I quoted it in my epigraph to this chapter. To paraphrase, a true writer is not necessarily someone who can write well. That is not enough. Even though this goal might sound naïve, this does not bother Brussig: a real writer is someone who intends his works to change a status quo, resolve a problem, open up lines of communication, change the world. And, since these goals are quite similar to those of a removed witness, one could argue that – at least according to Brussig's definition – any true author is also a witness.

Chapter Four:

The Hazards of Witnessing: Christa Wolf

The Bermuda triangle of politics, philosophy, and literature is rich in casualties and poor in rewards.

~Andreas Huyssen

Schreiben bedeutet fuer [Christa Wolf] die Intensivierung von Leben, Denken, und Handeln. Ihre Schreibarbeit ist von Anfang an darauf aus, den einzelnen Menschen zu staerken und zugleich eine Gemeinschaft zum Wachsen zu bringen, deren Gesetze Anteilnahme, Selbstachtung, Vertrauen und Freundlichkeit sind.

~Sonja Hilzinger

What Remains describe[s] a circle: the ending invariably feeds back into the beginning, because her resolutions of profound human dilemma are brought about by the very act of writing. This circular narrative structure is but one of many validations of Wolf's powerful dictum: 'Books are deeds.'

~Margit Resch

In Christa Wolf's GDR, there was no sense of community without an involvement in literature, and there was no serving this community via Wolf's craft, literature, without also getting involved in politics. Central to this constellation is the very concept of witnessing as Wolf used it. Throughout her work, perhaps also in concordance with her socialist ideals, Wolf rarely hails individualism. The individual is important in as much as s/he is the building block on the way to her/his community. In relation to this, Wolf uses witnessing as a community building exercise, a service to the community. Socially conscious and politically involved literature for Wolf is like a nation's conscience. This kind of literature is the public consciousness of an organism which is always changing, and always in need of many workings out and workings through of the problems and traumas at hand. In her book entitled *Christa Wolf*, Sonja Hilzinger expresses Wolf's insistence on the importance of a public working out of issues, when she states, "Wenn eine Gesellschaft ausgrenzt, was ihr

Angst macht, dann kann es die Aufgabe der Einzelnen sein, sich der eigenen Aengste, des eigenen Verdraengen zu stellen und mit der grossen Veraenderung bei sich zu beginnen" (124). The above is a description of the function of an individual vis-à-vis society, as well as an illustration of the fact that to Wolf, witnessing begins at home and is first done to and for one's home turf.

Christa Wolf's novella *Was bleibt* can be given the widest consideration only if the text proper is given sufficient attention. It is important to note that during the crisis of intellectuals that ensued both after the publishing of Wolf's novella, as well as after the revealing of Wolf's Stasi file, Wolf's most vicious critics rarely gave *Was bleibt* any serious close reading. The text was ignored, dismissed as not literature, as merely a sappy confessional with which the author sought to clear her conscience after the change of regimes. I include one representative position here, that of Katja Lange-Mueller, a GDR writer roughly a generation younger than Wolf. Unlike Wolf, Lange-Mueller did decide to leave the GDR and publish in West Germany, arguing that her works were only publishable in the west. In an interview with Robert von Hallberg in his book *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State*, she is asked whether she had read *Was bleibt*. She responds,

Yes. It...is...naïve, in spite of everything, it's still terribly naïve. I'm sorry. I also don't understand how anyone could go on living in such circumstances for so long, how anyone could have written all those books and then write one like that. It's like a relapse into some early stage of consciousness (241).

Despite Lange-Mueller's claim here that she read Wolf's novella, it is quite clear that she certainly did not do a close-reading of it. The interviewer even tries to complicate Lange-Mueller's stance by suggesting that "In *Was bleibt* Wolf writes, on the first

page, about a new language. I think that what she intended by that is a clean language, uncontaminated by ideology” (238). It is evident that someone concerned with finding the best way of expressing herself, someone searching for a new language can not be operating in “some early stage of consciousness.”

I argue that via *Was bleibt* Christa Wolf gave her readers perhaps the most poignant, most thoughtful (if conflicted) voice in the revolutionary year 1989. Via its intense self-examination and introspection, the main character’s voice managed to be an “everywoman” while also being “nowoman.” On the one hand, the main character’s life and in some ways even her very being is extremely limited by the incessant presence of her Stasi observers. Her routine life ceases to be because she has to alter it significantly due to the observation. On the other hand, via her keen awareness of this observation and her reactions to this observation, the main character does a profound turn inward, and via this turn manages to speak to and speak with a large variety of her compatriots who found themselves in a similar situation at any time during the length of the GDR. Thus, the paradox of *Was bleibt* which most of Wolf’s detractors willingly ignored was that while the main character may have dealt with a loss of voice and a loss of freedom, the speaking out about these losses gave Wolf’s readers a voice, an *immediate* post-November-1989 opportunity to start working through their respective, long-repressed losses of freedom.

Very early on, the narrator of *Was bleibt* stresses the importance of finding a voice, a voice that is functional and appropriate for the expression of her feelings:

Unsere Empfindungen...sind kompliziert. Und die richtigen Woerter hatte ich immer noch nicht, immer noch waren es Woerter aus dem aeuseren Kreis, sie trafen zu aber sie trafen nicht, sie griffen Tatsachen auf, um das Tatsaechliche

zu vertuschen, so unbekuemmert wuerde ich nicht mehr lange drauflos reden koennen (17).

The narrator speaks here of words from an “outer circle.” These words are unsatisfactory. The following questions arise: What are the words from the *inner* circle? What are these words supposed to accomplish? According to the above passage, these new words need to first be able to express feelings. Second, they need to rid themselves of the requirement to express facts, replacing it with a requirement to represent truth, the real, the actual (das Tatsaechliche). I read this passage as Wolf’s striving at a new language which is not necessarily obsessed with the factual. This is also a language which will easily connect with the reader/listener on an emotional basis. As the narrator suggests here, speaking the truth does not necessarily have to mean having all the facts, or having perfect factual support. Thus, based on my earlier discussions of witnessing, this search for words from the inner circle sounds quite like the search for the proper language of witness.

As I have discussed in my previous chapters, witnessing, whether removed or not, ideally has an ambition to spread further than one’s nation. Wolf’s writing about her socio-historical moment always starts at home, but always also includes a vector to move out. As is the case with most GDR writing, the move westward is directed first to West Germany and then to the rest of the world. Among other aspects, it is this debt and responsibility towards her community that defines Wolf’s work as a work of witness. Thus, while in the following quote from his book *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* W. James Booth might be defining witnessing in general, this definition fits also Wolf’s approach to her writing very

well:

[The] obligation [to bear witness] in certain respects is closely kindred to justice...and might be described as a kind of indebtedness: what is owed within the context of an enduring community, an obligation incumbent on us as persons sharing a life-in-common. To neglect the memory of the community, not to preserve and transmit it, in short, not to bear witness to it, would be to damage the group's identity and violate a norm of reciprocity and co-responsibility: the debt, or quasi-contract, entailed by a life-in-common across time between the present in whose hands these memories (partially) rest and the absent past (xii).

The above description of witnessing as a doing justice to memory is particularly relevant when discussing Christa Wolf's work *Was bleibt*. First, while *Was bleibt* may have been characterized as an autobiographical piece, Wolf certainly saw herself as doing justice to the memory of a whole community in narrating the events of her day in the 1970s while she was observed by the Stasi. It was less important to Wolf that the injustice she describes in her novella happened to her; it was more important to Wolf to put this silenced and observed voice out in the open because she knew that a large number of her compatriots would be able to relate to her experience. It is in this way that Wolf saw both the writing and the eventual publishing of *Was bleibt* as being faithful to the memory of her community, as it was in the 1970s.

Second, since as Booth suggests, time never expires on the need to do justice (the past always requiring the present to speak for it), the accusations leveled at Wolf regarding her 10-year delay in publishing *Was bleibt* does not signify any kind of cowardice on Wolf's part. As Annette Firsching rightly suggests in her work

Kontinuität und Wandel im Werk von Christa Wolf,

Einen text wie *Was bleibt* zum Zeitpunkt des Entstehens zu veröffentlichen – und dies waere nur im Westen moeglich gewesen – haette die Ausbuergerung bedeutet. Durch die Observation hatte man der Autorin die 'Instrumente'

gezeigt. Die Wirkung war tief. Mitten in der Zeit der Diskussionen um die Wiedervereinigung griff Wolf dann auf den frueher entstandenen Text zurueck und ueberarbeitete ihn fuer die Veroeffentlichung. Sie nahm damit in Angriff, was sie in ihrem politischen Aufruf eingefordert hatte: die Aufarbeitung des stalinistischen Erbes, das sich in einem Ueberwachungsstaat maifestiert hatte (259).

As Firsching suggests, Wolf was so committed to her community and her nation that she did not leave even when she was blacklisted as an author. Without speculating too much, the publishing of the rough draft of *Was bleibt* in 1979 would have been a considerable risk which Wolf was not willing to take *not* because she was cowardly and afraid of persecution. She already was being persecuted by her own party who saw her as too free-spirited and reform-minded. Rather, Wolf believed that if she was forced into exile, she would necessarily fall out of touch with daily life in the GDR, and she would not have been able to affect her community nearly as much as wanted.

I. General Constellation

Since the GDR, much like the other countries of the Eastern Block, lacked a free press, it was up to the intellectuals to publish novels, plays, and poetry as the new repositories of enthusiasm, or locations of a freer public debate. As the revolutionary years 1968 and especially 1989 approached, the same sources became voices of dissent, the new sources of otherwise uncomfortable information. An unexpected sense of urgency and social relevance was found in the realm of literature. As von Hallberg puts it, “The GDR rested not on wealth, force, or accident, but on a bedrock of ideology...the GDR needed always to legitimate itself through the word, which is one reason writers counted for so much” (7).

The creation and consumption of texts that gave back the reader (and the writer) a sense of agency and freedom, was welcomed and celebrated at the time. As von Hallberg reports, however, with the creation of the politically involved literary text, strong criticism of such a text arose simultaneously. He labels this “hazards of engagement” (11) and evokes a differentiation between transcendental and instrumental intellectuals. The argument siding with the instrumental intellectual is similar to Edward Said’s argument in *The World, The Text, The Critic*, asserting (about the postcolonial intellectual in his case) that “culture serves authority, and ultimately the national State...because it is affirmative, positive, and persuasive” (Said, 171). This statement, with no trouble, is applicable to the intellectual in communism. On the other side of this dispute is an argument that has been torturing the GDR/former GDR intellectuals up until today, namely the accusation of outdatedness, or irrelevance.⁷⁹

Certainly, the label “GDR intellectual” does not sell in the West, where the issues raised by such intellectuals are considered stale, or already resolved. The “memory of [and the requirement for] transcendental intellectuals,” as von Hallberg puts it, “survives among the public at large” (17), which is to the detriment of the East German literary intellectuals. West Germany did reluctantly agree to re-unite, but rather than a merging or a melting, Western Germany swallowed its Eastern other whole, and has been troubled with indigestion ever since. Some of the ways the west has been making the east pay for this is by staging the reunification entirely on the

⁷⁹ The frequency of this accusation throughout Eastern Europe is illustrated by the fact that both Thomas Brussig (via his character Fritz Bode), as well as Milan Richter (in his sarcastic critiques of his poet colleagues) spend quite some time critiquing the sad irrelevance of their writing.

west's terms, *and* by imposing its standards for literary criticism on East German intellectuals, such as Christa Wolf. As von Hallberg states,

Less than a month before the conversion of the currency, West German critics launched a severe attack on the literary and political authority of the former GDR's most renowned writer, Christa Wolf. This was widely understood as a campaign by the West German literary establishment against East German writers generally. The west was making it clear that East German writers would have a much harder time in the book trade after reunification. East German authors would not be allowed to speak for the national culture of reunified Germany; Christa Wolf and the critical writers like her could not be the conscience of the new nation (20).

In the meantime, retaining the function of the "conscience of the new nation," is exactly the goal Christa Wolf was still pursuing. Even Lange-Mueller concedes this point (237). This is precisely why Wolf decided to edit and publish *Was bleibt* during those turbulent times. *Was bleibt* is nothing if not a clear voice of a conscience speaking to a nation.

To Wolf, the essential function of literature as a public forum for the discussion of cultural, historical, and political topics, for the airing out and working out of controversies did not become obsolete with the revolution of 1989 or the reunification of Germany. On the contrary: in Wolf's mind, this function of literature became even more important during and after these events. According to Annette Firshing again,

Christa Wolf geriet nicht zuletzt deshalb zwischen die Fronten, weil sie an der Utopie auch dann noch festhielt, als die Mehrzahl der EinwohnerInnen der DDR sich schon fuer die Wiedervereinigung entschieden hatte...Sie ueberleg[te] weiter, welche Aufgabe die Literatur im wiedervereinten Deutschland obliegen koennte, nachdem die Literatur die Arbeit der Presse nun an diese zurueckgegeben hat. Wie bei Christa Wolf nicht anders zu erwarten, [sah] sie die Aufgabe der Literatur weiterhin darin, Sand im Getriebe zu sein, solange die Verbesserung der Lebensbedingungen allein im Materiellen gesehen wird (262-263).

As Firshing states here, one of the reasons Wolf was attacked was because she was

unwilling to give up on the utopian idea of a Germany (whether a reformed GDR or otherwise) where thought, introspection, reflection, and the everyday confrontation with complex even contradictory ideas was possible. This insistence was inaccurately immediately equated with a yearning for the old GDR. As a result, Wolf was branded as backward, a communist (thus an anti-democrat), someone whose time was simply over.

Christa Wolf's work *Was bleibt* and the proliferation of debates around it is a perfect illustration of the post 1989 clenched, cathected position of Germany; between the need for both: joyful reunification and maintaining of specific GDR/FRG identities, between lauding the intellectuals and blaming them, between the strong need to be finally carelessly joyful about the future, and the need to forever hide the uncomfortable parts of the past. The few (and notably *too few*) years that Germans had between the revolution and reunification did not allow for a much needed working through⁸⁰ all the issues mentioned above. Rather, both Germanies were stifled with urgent requirements for quick decisions.

During this very time, Wolf was witness to the various conflicts the citizens of the former GDR were facing. Whether it was in her public speeches on squares, in the media, in the reactions to her detractors or in her literature, she was pointing out

⁸⁰Working through here as elsewhere in my dissertation is meant in a Freudian sense, with the implication of pathology if this stage is passed over. What is desperately needed is a *working through* that will require time and reflection the immediate skip towards the capitalist system has no room for. As Freud states in his essay "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through," "One must allow the patient time to become more conversant with his resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to work through it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it..." (155). Time, again, is the key factor. The patient, the Eastern European (in this case German) subject, has to explore her/his resistances (for example the reasons why s/he seeks the past so longingly, or on the other hand, why s/he seeks to plunge into the teleological pursuit of a capitalistic and capitalizing future so aggressively).

the fact that history was moving too fast. Wolf was desperately calling for reflection, for a reduction of the speed with which the public was “running” towards the west (for instance in “Sprache der Wende” or in “Nachtrag zu einem Herbst”). Wolf, as the best kind of witness (whether removed or not) was expressing the fact that the citizens of the former GDR could not from one day to the next learn how to freely express their opinions, how to vocalize what they needed and what they did not want. Something they were forbidden from doing for over 40 years (i.e. free speech, any independent ideas about their preferred future, agency) could not be learned or gained in only a few years. I would like to include one representative instance of Wolf’s witnessing here. In her essay entitled “We Don’t Know How” from the collection *The Author’s Dimension*, Wolf gives an account of a reading in a small town in former East Germany, where the discussion about literature quickly turned to a discussion on politics:

A physician called on everyone to say what he or she thought openly and clearly, not letting themselves be intimidated, and to do nothing that violated their conscience. In the stillness which followed his words, one woman said in a low, sad voice: “We don’t know how.” Encouraged to go on, she talked about the political and moral development of her generation in this country: of the people who today have just turned forty. She told how as a child she was obliged to conform, not to go her own way but, especially in school, to be careful to express the opinions that were expected of her, so as to guarantee herself the problem-free career which her parents felt was so important. A permanent schizophrenia had made her empty as a person, she said; so now she could not suddenly begin to “speak openly” or “say what she really thought.” She did not even know herself exactly what she thought (299).

These calls for a slowing down and reflection while absolutely necessary and accurate were not the popular opinion, and Wolf’s witnessing was faced with a large wave of resistance. Ultimately, the revelation of her file as a supposed Stasi collaborator

(which was never conclusively proven, and Wolf never confirmed this) served as a very welcome justification for her immediate, un-reflected dismissal and condemnation.

While making quick decisions, it is obviously very easy to also pass quick judgments, create quick labels that are easily put “ad acta.” Is/was Wolf prolific or deceptive? Is her novella proof of resistance or collaboration? Is it possible and condonable to outwardly go along with the system while inwardly resisting it? Is it fair to require a literary work, a work of witness to be politically accurate? None of these questions have an easy answer, and perhaps the most important task at hand is to keep it that way: to avoid easy answers at any cost.

Wolf’s *Was Bleibt* is a paradigmatic study of the GDR, the events of 1989 and the events following it. It reveals the stigma of deferred action⁸¹, and plays with the inner/outer dichotomy in a new way: the inner realm of a person/author/intellectual is not (only) safe anymore and the outer realm does not (only) represent a threat anymore. The adjectives are switched and the dividing line between them is blurred. Strangely, life ends up imitating art when the questioning of the intellectual’s inner life and integrity in the main character of *Was Bleibt* can be seen as a pre-figuration of the questioning of the integrity of Wolf the author.

II. A Close Reading

Julia Hell’s argument that a traumatic past can often only be dealt with via a

⁸¹This is deferred action on multiple levels: first, the main character defers letting her voice be heard until the end of the novella during the public meeting at the Klub der Volkssolidarität. Second, the very years at the end of the piece (1979/1989) are witnesses to the deferred action (publication, letting the inner dynamic be seen publicly) of the author.

recreation, and that this is the reason for the newly discovered nostalgia towards the “good old, safe world” of communism, is an appealing one. As she states in her article “History as Trauma, or, Turning to the Past Once Again: Germany 1949/1989,”

History as trauma means that those who have lived through momentous changes ‘carry an impossible history within them,’ a history which they cannot assimilate. It is as if an unassimilable historical moment, in this case the recent past of the GDR’s dissolution, is now approached from the vantage point of the not-so-recent past because that past, although it too has lost its contours, is still more familiar than the present (912).

The question that remains, however, is whether what is seen here is a true “dealing” with the past, or precisely the opposite, a frozen refusal to do so. Referencing Freud again, the latter seems more probable. This idea is also easily supported by the discussion in my third chapter of – as I suggest there – negative *Ostalgie*, an *Ostalgie* which cathects onto the past without any intention of working on it rethinking it.

Later on in her article, Hell makes much of the fact that in *Was bleibt*, Wolf’s main character spends most of the time in the novel without her body, in her head in the company of her thoughts. This observation is further transformed into a more general statement that “totalitarianism is misleading if we use it in the sense of an externally imposed system of thought beneath which we find an untouched identity ready to emerge as soon as the system collapses” (939). There is a slight contradiction within the above two statements. First, Hell implies that by getting rid of her body, the main character of *Was bleibt* can become more free, can escape her Stasi followers. Then, in the quote, Hell talks about the impossibility of an “untouched identity.” This, one can only assume corresponds with the inner life, i.e. thoughts of a person.

The fact of the matter is that Wolf’s character, while very involved in thoughts, does keep mindful of her body, specifically by doing repetitive everyday

chores, such as making her bed or washing dishes. Using her body in a repetitive manner becomes a part of or an extension of thinking, continuously reconstituting her in the physical world just as she starts drifting away from it. There is no such thing as an “untouched identity” in Wolf. The corrupted self is as much a threat as the corrupted other(s). This is also illustrated by my earlier discussion of the narrators’ search for new words, or a new language (17). Lange-Mueller’s assertion that the language Wolf searches for is supposed to be somehow pure and free of ideology is inaccurate. The language Wolf is seeking aims to repair and renew what is already there. It is not starting from scratch.

In this same vein, Wolf’s novella *Was bleibt*, shows that the good old world is/was not safe at all. In fact, throughout most of the piece, Wolf’s main character performs what could be called live autopsy on herself: ironically, she is more vigilant in observing and analyzing herself, her actions, her thought processes than the Stasi watching her. There is a surgical precision to the log she keeps, as she observes the Stasi observing her. Wolf also deals with the constantly present trauma of being followed around in a different manner: she seems to lose herself in ordinary activities, but most importantly in the text, in language. In a curious way, she deals with her trauma by seeking out a collectivity, by connecting to those who (but only on the surface) are the source of her trauma. The functions of the follower and the followed are precisely the structures created by the system that need to be short-circuited, and, in being friendly with her stalkers and attempting to find out tid-bits of information about them, the speaker entertains herself, remains sane, and most importantly, can feel that she is doing something to subvert the system.

The narrator resists the totalitarian society by showing that you *can* break down the master’s house with the master’s tools. She transforms herself from being the one under close surveillance into the one who is *doing* the close surveillance.

Ultimately, this allows her to predict when she can fit in those activities during which she does not want to be observed. This gives her a renewed sense of agency. The narrator does not only observe, she internalizes and familiarizes the Stasi agents to the point where, in her head, she can rid them of the strict characterizations given to them by the prevalent ideology, and can actually relate to them on a free, human, even humorous level. The fiction of interpersonal kindred which she creates allows to defuse her hopeless situation, and prevents her from being consumed by hatred:

Zum Beispiel bedauerte ich es immer noch, dass ich nicht gleich damals, als [die Ueberwachung] anfing, in den ersten kalten Novembernaechten, meinem Impuls gefolgt war und ihnen heissen Tee hinuntergebracht hatte. Daraus haette sich eine Gewohnheit entwickeln koennen, persoendlich hatten wir doch nichts gegeneinander, jeder von uns tat, was er tun musste, man haette ins Gespraech kommen koennen - nicht ueber Dienstliches, Gott bewahre!-, aber ueber das Wetter, ueber Krankheiten, Familiaeres (19-20).

In concentrating on that which one has in common as opposed to that which divides subjects, the narrator manages to rescue the everyday, the ordinary. The narrator fights for her inner freedom by injecting everyday tasks with life, thought, reflection. They are transformed from potentially suppressing mechanical action (one is reminded of Benjamin's "wasting away of experience" as one of the signs of disappearing subjectivity in modernity) to a space of resistance.

Wolf's narrator internalizes precisely what could not be externalized until 1989 without endangering one's life. This is also why the dates at the end of Wolf's novella mean more than just the years 1979/1989. Wolf's critics attacked her stating that she was a coward for not publishing a novella so highly critical of the totalitarian communist system while the system was still in place, arguing that she was putting her personal well-being ahead of the good that an earlier publication could have achieved. The true reasons behind this late publication, however, could be seen elsewhere. Quite possibly, Wolf, while being ready herself, might not have seen her

audience as being ready for a critique of this caliber. As Gail Finney states in her book *Christa Wolf*, at the time of the novella's publication, many of Wolf's defenders were rightly arguing that "*Was bleibt* [was] not too late but rather [arrived] at precisely the time when East Germans [had to] concern themselves with their postwar history in order to learn from it with their newfound confidence" (113).

Wolf's main character is a "self made woman" if there ever was one. The character starts out as a depressed, frightened, fading woman who is barely ever able to leave her apartment.⁸² Gradually, however, she manages to solidify her ideas and take advantage of the fact that ideas are established as power. Listening and writing turn out to be auto-therapeutic in the same way that Wolf hopes listening and reading will turn out to be therapeutic for her readers. For the times of silence and oppression, she creates several other personalities within herself who provide opportunities for dialogue. (Curiously enough, Wolf the author did this herself on several occasions, the most prominent being the "Interview with Myself" published in her collection of essays entitled *The Author's Dimension*). The following passage from *Was bleibt* reveals a great deal about the narrator's inner dynamics and turmoils. It gives a hint of some of the conflicts that had to be negotiated in order for any solid ideas (and new, passionate ideology) to come to fruition. It is a key passage because in it, Wolf literally traces out the progression towards finding her new voice. She outlines both the voices that trouble her as well as those that liberate her:

Ich selbst. Ueber die zwei Worte kam ich lange nicht hinweg. Ich selbst. Wer war das. Welches der multiplen Wesen, aus denen "ich selbst" mich zusammensetzte. Das, das sich kennen wollte? Das, das sich schonen wollte? Oder jenes dritte, das immer noch versucht war, nach derselben Pfeife zu tanzen wie die jungen Herren da draussen vor meiner Tuer? He, Freundchen:

⁸²It would not be unusual at all (in fact it would be the norm) if a character with such predicaments would lose her mind, or end up disappearing as, say the nameless main character in Ingeborg Bachman's *Malina*, or the nameless main character in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" did.

Mit welchen von den dreien haelst du es? Da schwieg mein Begleiter, verstimmt, aber hilfreich. Das wars, was ich brauchte: glauben zu koennen, dass ich jenen Dritten eines nahen Tages ganz und gar von mir abgeloeest und aus mir hinausgestossen haben wurde; dass ich das wirklich wollte; und dass ich, auf Dauer gesehen, eher diese jungen Herren da draussen aushalten wuerde als den Dritten in mir (57).

It is obvious from the above just how crowded the narrator's inner self is. Wolf describes a trinity of selves, each having a different priority. The most interesting self is the third one, the one that was created when the totalitarian ideology surrounding the narrator became so strong that it started seeping into her inner core. (This third one could, however also be seen *not* as an imposition from the outside world, but as an intrinsic part of the self, which is even more scary as the narrator mentions above). More than anything, the narrator is concerned with self purification, with ridding herself of anything that might inhibit a creation of new, more productive and independent ideas. Getting rid of her constantly present inner censor would be just one of such steps: "Fast nichts konnte ich mehr denken oder sagen, ohne meinen Zensor gegen mich aufzubringen" (65).

Only after a kind of cleansing of the self is accomplished (i.e. only after the narrator finds a voice she is happy with) does the narrator allow for any intersubjective contacts. The main character does not impose isolation on herself with any masochistic pleasure. It is apparent from the self-interrogation above that the narrator is eager to find a way to lead a redemptive life via a breaking free from the prison she created for herself *inside* herself. There is, from the very beginning, a strong need to commune with other people. At a certain moment of disillusionment with society the narrator realizes that the strongest tie she has in common with other fellow subjects is precisely this isolation: "Die Fremdheit die mich von der Menge trennte, glaubte ich, trennte die Menge auch von sich selbst" (72). While claustrophobic, this realization is a good starting point. The communing via isolation

is not the end state of things; it is a state to be overcome. Ultimately, it is overcome by Wolf's witnessing, whether it is the narrator's ability to interact and debate with others towards the end of *Was bleibt*, or Wolf's ability to engage in a public debate after having published her novella.

Wolf's use of "die Menge," while seemingly just a part of the setting, is also very important. The word "masses" was instrumentalized to such a great extent during the last decades of the communist regime, that it was impossible to mention it without evoking sincere disgust in most subjects. (Indeed the word "masses" was impossible to be thought outside of the phrase "revolutionary masses.") Wolf does not give in to the - all too easy - impulse to vilify the masses. As a matter of fact, the first significant episode of communing with a "Maedchen" occurs when this girl (almost miraculously) emerges from the mass of people the narrator is observing: "Ein Maedchen wie tausende, nicht gross, wieder duenn noch dick, mit sehr kurz geschnittenen braunen Haar...Man musste nur einen einzelnen ins Auge fassen, schon war man seine Angst los" (73). The above description stresses the fact that this girl was nothing unusual, a part of the mass that did not stand out in any way. This fact is important, because it suggests that there is a potential for the narrator to connect to "thousands" of others just like she does to this girl. She stands out for the narrator, as it is only via an inter-personal connection with another single human being that she can get rid of her fears. And, only by getting outside herself and connecting to one other person can the narrator prepare herself to eventually connect with many. Thus, after this initial "click," the girl understandably becomes the narrator's mentee, protégé, hope:

In Zeiten wie diesen, ging es mir fluechtig durch den Kopf, werden alle unsere schwaechen wach, oder unsere Staerken werden zu Schwaechen...Ich sagte, was sie da geschrieben habe, sei gut. Es stimme. Jeder Satz sei wahr. Sie sollte es niemandem zeigen. Diese paar Seiten konnten sie wieder ins

Gefaengnis bringen. Das Maedchen wurde vor Freude weich, es loeste sich, begann zu reden. Ich dachte: Es ist soweit. Die Jungen schreiben es auf. Das Maedchen erzaelhte von seinem harten Leben, jetzt wollte es sein innerstes Wesen hervorkehren...Ich musste jetzt, falls es moeglich war, diesem Maedchen Angst einjagen. Musste ihm sagen, die grossten Talente seien in deutschen Gefaengnissen vermordert, dutzendweis, und es sei nicht wahr, dass ein Talent der Kaelte und der Demuetigung und der Zermuerbung besser wiederstehe als ein Nichttalent...Und dass sie, bitte, nicht in jedes offene Messer laufen solle...Das Maedchen hatte ein Einsehen. Sie wolle sich doch nicht ins Verderben stuerzen. Nur habe sie es eben gern, etwas aufzuschreiben, was einfach wahr sei. Und dies dann mit anderen zu bereden. Jetzt. Hier...Wir koennen sie nicht retten, nicht verderben (76-78).

The greatest challenge for the narrator/author in the above passage is to keep the delicate balance between being greatly excited (as well as nurturing this excitement for self-expression, for “truth telling”) and greatly terrified (for the girl, and via the girl, for herself as well as for all whom the narrator calls “die Jungen”). Wolf is speaking through the narrator here in describing the hopeless situation for intellectuals in communist Eastern Germany. (Judging from Wolf’s relation to the system she lived in, hopelessness would have developed specifically in the 1970s, with her final termination of any cooperation with the Stasi and her subsequent observation by the same). The resulting impression from the above passage is twofold: sincerity and resistance are “rewarded” with persecution, but even then, the new realization that “Die Jungen schreiben es auf” is teeming with hope.

Via the connection to the young “Maedchen,” Wolf’s narrator is opening up, outlining the treacherous and complex terrain that witnessing can be. And, it is obvious that the narrator is housing contradictory sentiments: at times, she wants to warn this girl, to scare her off and send her away before she is punished for her ambition to speak out. At other times, the narrator finds hope in the fact that the girl

and the young people have ambitions to realize their freedom of expression via writing. The promising yet torturous contradiction of the narrator's sentiments is expressed in the last sentence of the above quote: "Wir koennen sie nicht retten, nicht verderben" (78). This girl is someone who stands in for a large group of people in whom Wolf puts her hopes. And while this girl (and the group she represents) can not be rescued and protected the way Wolf would like, she should also not be spoiled. An ambition to speak out here is an ambition to witness to the challenges of the time, and perhaps instilling fear in a potential witness would be equal to silencing them, which to Wolf would then be equal to actually spoiling them.

The young witness is a precious parcel to Wolf. S/he needs to be protected for the future, hopefully a future in which having a resistant ideology would not be deemed dangerous. Finally, the narrator's meticulous work and the great risk she took with allowing another person "in," paid off: while still filled with warnings and disclaimers, there is now hope, a hope that a core courage will remain intact and will be passed on via speaking out, witnessing, until such time when the conditions for its success will be more likely. Margit Resch expresses this idea similarly when she argues in her book *Christa Wolf: Returning Home to a Foreign Land*:

The...important influences on the narrator's catharsis are two anonymous young women [one of whom is the "Maedchen" I discuss above], whom Wolf portrays as the actual heroes of *What Remains*: they represent incarnations of the title's meaning. The personal courage of the two women is ultimately what remains, because they embody the qualities that conquer oppression. Both women remain anonymous. They represent all the East Germans who dared voice their dissidence and question their future under the GDR regime. Thus, Wolf invests the particular individual, not the general will of the masses, with the power to initiate change (167).

What remains for Wolf then is the word, a word that has to be supported and

furthered by the courage of the individual in order to become testimony. It is the courage of the individual that is the building block for a new society with more agency, a society that Wolf hopes will be quite different from the “revolutionary masses” I discussed earlier in this chapter.

How this new, ideal, self aware, free, curious, outspoken society is built and where its’ seeds lie is demonstrated towards the end of the novella. The narrator is holding a public reading and discussion, and she is initially anxious that the crowd will not be open to what she has to say: “Wie sich in den ueber hundert verschiedenen Koepfen die Welt spiegeln mochte – ich wollte fuer diese eine Stunde meine Welt in ihre Koepfe pflanzen” (93). She is hoping, as she states, that her listeners will forget their prejudices.

The heart-wrenching sincerity of the actual piece of literature, the moral dilemmas the character has to face, the small but significant steps the main character manages to take to resist the parts of the system she disagrees with, are all ignored by Wolf’s critics. One of the most amazing moments in which the main character of *Was Bleibt* overcomes her fears, externalizes her inner thoughts thus risking being condemned publicly, is at the above mentioned meeting at the Kulturhaus. During this meeting, which starts ordinarily enough with standard phrases, prefabricated speeches and a fearful, dumbfounded mass, a member of the mass, a woman whom the main character immediately acknowledges as an *individual*, dares to speak out. (She is the other of the “two anonymous young women” whom Resch mentions). The energy this person has to ask the painful questions gives the main character a sense of responsibility to answer them, thus showing the infinite distance the character has

managed to “travel” from the early passages of the novella.

Die junge Frau...haette sich nie das Herz gefasst, oeffentlich zu sprechen, wenn sie nicht extra gekommen waere, um die fuer sie unaufschiebbare Frage zu stellen: auf welche Weise aus dieser Gegenwart fuer uns und unsere Kinder eine lebbare Zukunft herauswachsen solle. Sie sprach ohne Betonung, sie warf sich nicht auf, klagte nicht an, liess nichts durchblicken. Sie wollte nur wissen...nun standen die wirklichen Fragen im Raum, die, von denen wir leben und durch deren Entzug wir sterben koennen. Ich sagte etwas in dieser Art und gab mir Muehe, wie ich es mir angewoehnt hatte, die junge Lehrerin, die vielleicht arglos unter Argen sass, nach Kraeften zu decken und den Anlass fuer ihre Frage auf mich zu nehmen...an mehreren Stellen im Saal gingen die Haende hoch, erhoben sich Stimmen, die die Frage der jungen Frau nicht nur als ihre eigene wiederholten, sondern sie erweiterten und sich in unbekuemmerter und ruecksichtsloser Manier auf sie einliessen. Was taten diese Leute. Sie brachten sich in Gefahr...Jemand sagte leise “Bruederlichkeit.” (94-96).

The narrator feels a responsibility to make sure the questions are answered, takes up the implicit danger to seem to be the one who raised them. She is still very protective both of the teacher and the crowd, just as she was with the “Maedchen.” However, she is also deeply moved by the incredible courage of the crowd. This is a new kind of courage just sprouting up in the moment, a courage to demand a better future, a courage to redefine the mass of followers into a new grouping, a brotherhood. While Wolf feels imprisoned and threatened by the party and the particular structured situation, she *also still* feels that a presumably hollowed out word such as “brotherhood” can have a potential as an answer to the question about a future. An active re-injection of meaning into an estranged word via the utmost respect and concern for the individual is seen here. This can easily be taken as an illustration of Christa Wolf’s relationship to the system she lived in: she was continuously reminded of how flawed it was while also continuously seeing the unfulfilled potential it harbored.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that what Wolf describes here is one of the ways in which a seed of a revolution is planted. Wolf returns to one of her recurring motifs throughout *Was bleibt*: often, it is only one voice, one deed, one individual who can make a difference, who can change the course of the development of a whole society. The movement of the many begins with the courage of the one.

Wolf's novella ends the way it began. The narrator's day also ends the way it began, as she observes every small detail of the "zwei junge Herren" who are watching her. The big difference however is that, having found her voice and thus her agency, the observation no longer bothers the narrator: "Stuenden sie wieder vorm Haus? – Sie stuenden. – Stoere es mich noch. – Nein. Es stoere mich nicht mehr" (106). The narrator's language still is not perfect; it still has to be worked on. Finding one's voice is not a one-time event, but a long process which has to be practiced often in order to be achieved. And so, at the very end of the day, the narrator sits down at her desk and starts honing her voice:

Eines Tages, dachte ich, werde ich sprechen koennen, ganz leicht und frei. Es ist noch zu frueh, aber ist es nicht immer zu frueh. Sollte ich mich nicht einfach hinsetzen an diesen Tisch, unter diese Lampe, das Papier zurechtruecken, den Stift nehmen und anfangen. Was bleibt. Was meiner Stadt zugrunde liegt und woran sie zugrunde geht. Dass es kein Unglueck gibt ausser dem, nicht zu leben. Und am Ende keine Verzweiflung ausser der, nicht gelebt zu haben (107-108)

As the narrator realizes here, even the largest change starts with the simplest, smallest step. In this case, this step is sitting down behind a desk and beginning the process of writing, giving the silenced a voice. What remains at the end, in addition to the newly found voice and the individuals who now have a new kind of agency, are all those things that are still waiting for a voice to speak on their behalf. The narrator's

city needs to be given a voice; this is her larger community. In the end speaking out and writing become so essential to the narrator that not following this call becomes equal to not living.

Was bleibt describes one author's journey towards witnessing. It is about finding the proper language, courage and parameters to witness. At the same time, it acknowledges the author's shortcomings and limitations as a witness. Some critics argue that this complexity and conflicts within the author are reflected in her style. As Gail Finney puts it, "The story's language is poetic, compassionate, and occasionally beautiful, but also vague, euphemistic, stylized, lacking in rigor, and sometimes colorless – a duality [reflective of] ...the conflict between Wolf's belief in the power of communism and her awareness of its inadequacies" (112). But, as both Finney and Margit Resch point out, the fact that the author may have been conflicted when writing her work does not reduce the incredible impact it had on its readers, the GDR society, and the world at large. As Resch puts it,

The realization that in the eyes of the public [Wolf] actually serves as an agent of change, and therefore has responsibility to her readers, unlocks her paralysis... *What remains* records experiences that, although shared by millions of East Germans, were unknown to most people in the West. Neither their collective impact on individual lives and social conduct nor their pervasive evil can be adequately gleaned from the surviving Stasi files. But in this cautionary tale the intimidating and paralyzing effect of surveillance resonates vividly and unforgettably. To dismiss the story as an act of posturing and solicitation of sympathy is a misreading of Wolf's intentions and overlooks its significant contribution to mutual understanding and social reconciliation between East and West Germans (168).

Resch argues for the importance of *Was bleibt* and by extension, the essential nature of the literature of witness: a passionate, politically involved literature with the goal of spreading specific knowledge. This kind of literature plays a function that can not

be replaced by journalism or, as Resch says, by the examination of the Stasi files. Much like *Was bleibt*, all of the pieces of (removed) witnessing that I analyze in this dissertation have the ambition to spread hitherto unavailable knowledge westward. In conjunction with this knowledge, all of these works set spreading a passion and involvement about this knowledge as their goal. These goals are the very definition of a piece of witness.

III. The “Debate”

When looking at a strong message of both disillusionment and hope like *Was bleibt* (which contains Christa Wolf’s personal voice and hopes since it is characterized as an autobiography), it is shocking that in the debate ensuing after the publication she was accused of being cowardly, of only being interested in her own well being. According to Werner Mittenzwei, however, the personal attack on Wolf’s integrity was only a cover-up for a larger issue at stake, namely the question who exactly would be allowed to be a “speaker,” a witness and a conscience for the nation after the reunification. The entire debate was not about the past or the controversial way it was dealt with. Rather, it was about a power issue that was very much in the present. I am including a longer quote by Mittenzwei here, since it is an essential passage:

[Christa Wolf], die Vertrauensperson der ostdeutschen Leser, wollte man treffen. Ihre Autoritaet sollte ausgeloescht und ihre Stimme zum Verstummen gebracht werden. Deshalb der vereinte Angriff der beiden grossen Zeitungen, so dass der publizist Thomas Anz von der ‘grossen Koalition’ schrieb, die der Feuilletonchef der Zeit und der Leiter des Literaturteils der FAZ eingegangen waren. Sie erreichten ihr Ziel. Christa Wolf verstummte fur laengere Zeit, andere fuehlten sich gewarnt. Doch die Feuilleton-Attacke zielte weiter. Sie

wollte Richtpunkte setzen, nicht nur fuer die Literatur, sondern fuer die allgemeine Diskussion. Wie Christa Wolf in ihrer Erzaehlung nach der eigenen Sprache fuer die erlebten Vorfaelle suchte, so lag dem Feuilleton daran, dafuer eine Sprache vorzugeben. Es sollte nichtmehr vorkommen dass die Ost-Intellektuellen den Versuch machten, die Verhaeltnisse im demokratischen Westen gleichsam als die andere DDR als die Unfreiheit mit anderen Mitteln erscheinen zu lassen...was von Autoren wie Christa Wolf und Stefan Heym verlangt werden muesse, naemlich das ausdrueckliche Bekenntnis, dass die DDR im Vergleich zur BRD nicht der 'bessere' sondern der 'schlechtere Staat' gewesen sei (478-9).

The above sounds unmistakably like a witch hunt. In other words, it reflects what happens to the witness when her/his witnessing is done in a manner which does not please large sections of her/his home turf. As Mittenzwei argues above, the fact that *Was bleibt* was a search for one's own language upset those critics who did not think such a search was necessary or useful. If this search for an independent voice dissenting from the reflection-free euphoria about the regime change and especially the reunification had been successful, the fear was that, while gaining momentum, it could perhaps influence public opinion enough to also influence the future of Germany. Thus, as Mittenzwei demonstrates above, the search for a voice also signified a search for power, and it is this potential power that upset so many critics and caused one of modern-day's most pronounced public, political, intellectual and cultural crises. Ultimately, Wolf's choice ended up being that between using the language (and thus ideology) approved by the mainstream critics or silence.

The threat to the dominant ideology that Wolf might pose became more tangible when Wolf as well as several other famous East German personalities expressed their doubts about the utopian expectations that were injected into the reunification. Had Wolf been enthusiastic about 1989 and the reunification, it is quite possible that the delayed publication of *Was bleibt*, if even noticed, would not have raised any eyebrows. Another method that the powers that be used (according to Mittenzwei) to silence East German intellectuals was an appeal to the purity of art

(l'art pour l'art). This way, again, these voices did not have to identify what was bothersome, but could claim to be returning the art of literature into the original state, the way it was *supposed* to be: "Eine aufgeklärte Gesellschaft brauche keine 'Priester-Schriftsteller' mehr" (Mittenzwei, 481).

The debate, which became labeled as "The Crisis of Intellectuals" in retrospect, started with several harsh attacks on Wolf in the German magazine *Die Zeit*. It is impossible to ignore the irony with which the alternate name ("The Debate") was faced: rather than any sort of dialogue, a hurt silence, a vacuum, an absence was outlined, staked out around intellectuals (Heiner Mueller, Christa Wolf, etc.). The speaking on the other hand, was mostly done by sensation-seeking attackers. This sort of speaking (initiated in the article by Fritz Raddatz in *Die Zeit*) did not encourage a response. Rather, the article entitled "Von der Beschädigung der Literatur durch ihre Urheber" *precluded* reactions, thriving by bullying Mueller and Wolf. Among other things, Raddatz calls Mueller's and Wolf's statements "Schwatzen" and "Papperlapapp" (qtd. in Vinke, 169). Raddatz took the position of a deeply hurt, deceived, and venomous connoisseur of great literature who was taking the ones who dared to taint it to justice. He accused Wolf of having betrayed all her previous work because *Was bleibt* was supposedly an untrue representation of her actual life. ("Mir scheint, beide haben nicht nur ihrer Biographie geschadet; Sie haben ihr Werk beschädigt. Sie haben uns verraten" [qtd. in Vinke, 168]). Here, again, is that highly flawed requirement for authenticity, for the representation of "wie es wirklich gewesen ist." Does Wolf's claim that *Was bleibt* is partly autobiographical justify looking at all her other work and expecting it to be an exact match to her life? If that was a requirement for all "true" and "great" literature, none might exist. In fact, this is yet another instance in which the concept of removed witnessing is useful. If Wolf's witnessing was defined as such from the start, it would not have been open

to a lot of the attacks against her.

As I have mentioned before, it is quite interesting that while this entire attack is done as the author claims in the name of literature, there is no close reading of the actual novella in the lengthy article. Raddatz accuses Wolf of immorality, cheating, insincerity, secrecy: “Wenn aber Thomas Manns Satz gilt ‘Schreiben, das heisst sein Herz waschen,’ dann kann man mit dem Herzkrebs der Unaufrichtigkeit nicht schreiben. Mogeln darf man im Abituraufsatz, nicht in der Literatur” (qtd. in Vinke, 168). It is precisely the lack of any kind of close reading that allows for the kinds of accusations and infantilizing attitude vis-à-vis Wolf that Raddatz adopts here. On the other end of the spectrum is the literary scholar Andreas Huyssen, who does perform a politically charged examination of Wolf’s novella, but does this always having the original text in mind. In his article “After the Wall: The Failure of German Intellectuals,” he lists some criticisms of Wolf. However, due to his close reading, he can not list these without also contextualizing and thus complicating them:

The fact that [the critique of GDR utopian socialism in *Was bleibt*] is articulated from an ever more imploding and vanishing space inside is precisely what makes it a pertinent expression of a certain GDR sensibility...the always careful and hesitating style of her critique which some see as hedging, others see as going to the root. One may very well wonder why Wolf did not leave the GDR at that time. But her staying should then not be read as unqualified support for the SED regime. Processes of dissidence and identification under communism are too complex to be reduced to the stay-or-leave model. That model, however, is the basis for many of the criticisms of Wolf in the summer of 1990 (124).

Moving from the narrator’s confrontation with the political system to Wolf’s critique of it (as some would say “in real life”), an interesting letter exchange between Guenter Grass and Christa Wolf comes to mind as a good parallel. This exchange happened as a part of the debate in early 1993, and ironically if studied closely enough, has potential to be greatly satisfying to Raddatz and others demanding a perfect unity between “life and work.” In a letter to Wolf, Grass generally takes her

side, but also asks some of the more difficult questions, the central one being about the alleged lack of her public critique of the socialist system even while it was still in power.⁸³ To this, Wolf writes a reply quoting herself from a letter she wrote in 1979 (It should be noted that this is the very same year she wrote *Was bleibt*), listing a series of criticisms that she had tried to get published repeatedly:

Ich habe [die Kritik] sehr deutlich ausgesprochen, Guenter, und nach 1976 erklart, dass ich ausgeschlossen werden will und zu keiner Parteiveranstaltung mehr gehen wuerde – was ich auch nicht tat, und ich habe von Honecker abwaerts jeglichem Funktionaer auf jeglicher Ebene gesagt, warum...eine gute Bekannte [hat] mir die Kopie eines Briefes geschickt, den ich ihr im Juni 1979 geschrieben habe; ich zitiere Dir einen Abschnitt daraus: “Wo die Zukunft ist? Das kann man nicht wissen, und es ist wahr, die alten Muster – Tod, Wahnsinn, Selbstmord – sind in diesen 170 Jahren verbraucht worden. Also muessen wir leben nach einem unsicheren inneren Kompass und ohne passende Moral, nur duerfen wir uns nicht laenger selbst betruengen ueber unsere Lage als Intellektuelle, duerfen uns nicht vormachen, wir wuerden fuer andere arbeiten, fuer ‘das Volk,’ die Arbeiterklasse: die liest uns nicht, das hat Gruende. Trotzdem bezahlt sie uns, letzten Endes, damit wir uns unsere inneren (und aeusseren) Konflikte leisten koennen, die sie gar nichts angehen.” Das schickte ich dann per Post von einer observierten in eine andere observierte Wohnung, zum Totlachen...Es war unser Konzept, nicht in jedes Messer zu rennen, und zu versuchen, meine Texte auch in der DDR gedrueckt zu kriegen...Ich habe dieses Land geliebt. Dass es am Ende war, wusste ich, weil es die bessten Leute nicht mehr integrieren konnte, weil es Menschenopfer forderte (qtd. in Vinke, 306-8).

The above passage speaks of the future, of a responsibility towards it. And it is proof that in the same year when Wolf was finalizing the narrative of *Was bleibt*, she was also formulating the reasons she was getting disenchanted with the communist party. She spoke out on the need of intellectuals’ contributions to think through the status quo, as well as their failures to do so. Notably, she included herself in this group. This kind of open criticism of communist writers and communist society in general

⁸³Grass states, “Nach meiner Einschaeztung haetttest Du die Kritik an jener Partei, in der Du Mitglied warst, deutlicher und fordernder aussprechen muessen, auch ohne Angst vor dem oft beschworenen Beifall der falschen Seite.” He also makes sure to stress that “Diese Meinungsverschiedenheiten haben uns nicht gehindert, weiter im Gespraech zu bleiben...” (qtd. in Vinke, 302).

was unthinkable in the 1970s. This was a decade of increased oppression by the communist party, to a large degree due to the events of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. Wolf's critical statements are independently corroborated by actual Stasi observation files. For instance, already on December 21st, 1965 (thus more than a decade before she wrote *Was bleibt* in 1979), a Stasi file named "Auskunftsbericht," in a subsection entitled "Einschaetzung der Genossin Wolf," states:

Infolge ihrer leichten Beeinflussbarkeit traten...bei der Genossin Wolf bei ernstern politisch-ideologischen Auseinandersetzungen zeitweise politische Schwankungen auf, in dem sie Zweifel an der Richtigkeit der Kulturpolitik der Partei, insbesondere an den Methoden ihrer Realisierung, ausserte. 1963 vertrat sie zum Beispiel die Meinung, dass sie das Schreiben werde, was und wie die es fuer richtig haelt (qtd. in Vinke, 22-23).

Based on the above, Wolf was being considered rebellious and unreliable by the Stasi as soon as 1963, and her "informelle Mitarbeiterin" files sound more like the Stasi was monitoring her rather than using her to monitor others.

Wolf's criticism of literary intellectuals' failure to be active witnesses to relevant events is another important critique and concern that all the writers I discuss in my dissertation have in common. To a literary witness such as Richter, Maslowska, Brussig, or Wolf, there is no worse crime against witnessing than a lack of caring about one's present socio-historical situation, one's home environment. These failures are inextricably connected with a loss of relevance and lack of connection with one's readers. While the ideal literary witness might be removed in many senses of that word, s/he should never be removed from her/his reader.

A lot of the criticism of Wolf is based on the premise that she was intentionally ignoring the system's mistakes, or was naive at best. In the same vein, the controversy around the Stasi files and the debate ensuing it is portrayed as a sort

of “rude awakening” for Wolf, one that she did not handle well. It is clear from the letter she attempted to publish that this is not the case. With this, she manages to return the charge of selective vision/criticism into the opposing court. The fact that Wolf allegedly did not draw conclusions from nor acted according to her critiques is the second misinformation she sets straight in the above passages. While with hindsight, writing and publishing *within* the system after realizing its serious problems might not seem radical enough, she argues (sarcastically) that it is definitely a more productive/proactive deed than the insanity and suicide intellectuals regressed to during the totalitarian regime. She uses the strong figure of “running into an open knife” and the futility of that act both in her novella as well as the letter above.

Returning to Raddatz’s critique then, the situation in which the work was published (the deferred decade) is allowed to erase the accomplishments of the contents. The reader gets a good picture of just how vicious the attack is when the author manages to put the following two sentences in the same column: “Es geht um das tiefste Wesen von Literatur...Auch die fickende Nonne kann ein grosses Gedicht schreiben” (qtd. in Vinke, 168). Raddatz ends the article with the following appeal: “Keine Mogelpackungen und Placebos mehr. Halten Sie der Wuerde Ihres Werkes die Treue. Erklaeren Sie. Nehmen Sie mir und Ihren Lesern die Traurigkeit” (qtd. in Vinke, 171). These appeals make it obvious that Raddatz is yearning to make Wolf responsible for a lot more than she actually could influence. Now, her challenge is supposed to be to cure a generally disillusioned audience of its sadness. Wolf, again, is put in an impossible position: to be responsible for the “correct” political action/initiative, to entertain with a “pure” work of art, *and* to be her nation’s

psychotherapist, all the while being asked merely rhetorical questions to which Raddatz and others like him have already given answers.

Wolf ends up giving the only possible response to such an article: none. She does not remain entirely quiet though, only marginally so. Only five days after the publication of the article at hand, Hans-Juergen Fishbeck writes an open letter to Raddatz, in which he defends Wolf, and calls the attack “violent.”⁸⁴ This finally gives Wolf an opportunity to speak out with a letter to Fishbeck (notably *not* to Raddatz) from her current location in Santa Monica. Here, she writes:

Ich werde nicht mehr ‘oeffentlich’ sein koennen, aber ich glaube die Deutschen kommen da ganz gut ohne mich aus. Statt dessen denke ich intensiv ueber meine Vergangenheit nach und will versuchen, naeher an die Zeit heranzukommen, aus der diese Akte stammt. Ja, Sie haben recht, ich bin bereit, darueber mit Menschen zu reden, die auch bereit sind, sich darauf einzulassen, ohne sich zum Tribunal aufzuspielen – dann verkriecht sich naemlich die Wahrheit (qtd. in Vinke, 175).

It becomes obvious from this passage that again, the greatest lack that needs to be alleviated is a space for thought, reflection, working through. (On a personal side-note, it was quite tempting and seemed quite easy to condemn Wolf for being sympathetic with a system for which I personally, having grown up during it, have no sympathy. The more materials I read, however, the more dimensions the issues took on, and the tougher it was to flat out dismiss or accuse Wolf). This side note then becomes proof that the more “working through” one does, the more time one spends

⁸⁴The following is an important passage in defense of Wolf:

Viele Menschen der ehemaligen DDR wuerden zu gelegentlichen Gespraechen von den Herren der Staatsmacht besucht. Man konnte sich verweigern...Aber warum sollte eigentlich ein (damals noch) ueberzeugtes Mitglied dieser Partei und ein (damals noch) loyaler Buerger dieses Staates von vornerein Nein sagen? Es steht Ihnen nicht zu, an dieser Stelle die Linie zwischen Gut und Boese zu ziehen. Wer gibt Ihnen das Recht, mit dem Wissen von heute und verzerrten Massstaben, die einer Lebenswirklichkeit, die Sie nicht kennen, nicht gerecht werden, ueber ein Verhalten, das 30 Jahre zurueckliegt, mit westdeutscher Medienmacht zu Gericht zu sitzen? (qtd. in Vinke, 173).

with an issue, the blurrier the line between “good” and “bad,” “black” or “white” becomes. One becomes more compassionate, connected with the issue at hand.

It is quite impossible to draw up a conclusion to a series of topics so branched out, space-wise, source-wise, even time-wise. Some intellectuals (such as some of the Prenzlauer Berg authors) believe that the debate has been over a long time ago and that the intellectual has no room in today’s society. Others, such as Grass, continue to publish and argue their persuasions despite the fact that some of their ambitions (for instance resisting the reunification) might have failed. As for Wolf, possibly the greatest challenge for her has remained finding her voice again, injecting some of the same (pre- “debate”) activist enthusiasm into her more recent works.

In a response to a letter by Efim Etkind published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 3.2. 1993, she refers to a passage in *Was bleibt* dealing with multiple “Ich-s,” which I discussed in this chapter. There only seemingly is no difference between the multiple personality “disorder” Wolf uses in *Was bleibt* and the one she uses in this article. In the former, this trope allows the narrator to be more vocal, allowing her to make choices, while in the article at hand, the same situation makes the narrator/Wolf doubt herself; it pushes her to chose silence. As she states in her response now cited from *Parting from Phantoms: Selected Writings 1990-1994* entitled “The Multiple Being Inside Us,” “Ein Teil meiner ‘multiplen Person’ empfindet diesen ganzen Schwachsinn naehmlich auch als eigene Schande, wengleich er gegen mich gerichtet ist und ich mich schon sehr lange nicht mehr mit den Uhrhebern identifiziere” (161). The above statement illustrates the fact that a simple belief in self is not enough after the kind of traumatic attack and silencing that Wolf has experienced. Interestingly enough, a sort of silencing and self doubt can also be seen in the former East German intellectuals in general. Since the reunification, only a handful still maintains that there is such a thing as a specific East

German kind of literature or culture. The ratio of West German versus former East German publishing is alarmingly unequal, with especially the younger generation not wanting to be identified as stemming from Eastern Germany. Wolf sums up the above mentioned article by pointing out what it is that she seeks to retain as well as forget. The problem she will continue facing, however, is the conflict between an attempt to forget just enough to not remain traumatized, while remembering enough to be able to fulfill her ultimate goal of relevant writing, and thus witnessing.

Conclusion

I have started off my dissertation with an epigraph by W. James Booth, from his important contribution in the field of testimony, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice*. In it, he outlines the function of the witness not only as a kind of human archive and a proponent of the truth, but also as an educator, concerned with the future as much as s/he is with the past. The archival function according to Booth is actually not quite accurate, because the witness' task is less an accumulation and preservation of facts about the past, and more a constant breathing of life into the past, a keeping of a whole community accountable and involved.

This description is also a good place to respond to those inquiries which suggest that the role of the witness is much too similar to the role of the historian.

This is not the case. As Booth puts it,

[History] is (or seeks to be) detached, critical, and in principle universal rather than being bound up with attachment to the narrative of one community... Historiography aspires to move alongside the event, outside and parallel to it. It is linear, chronological, and oriented toward the explanation of change. Memory, by contrast, seeks a fusion with the past, seeks to make the past present as its own, as part of an identity, of the persistence of the same... The history of historians, which is (aspiring to be) distanced, objective, critical, and causal/chronological, is thus often scarcely recognizable to the witnesses, to the bearers of... memory (93).

As Booth accurately suggests here, the historian's task and the witness' task only overlap to a small degree, even though they might both be interested in guarding the past. While the historian deals with/in facts, the witness deals with/in memories.

None of the authors whom I analyze in my dissertation, in fact not even any of their characters could be called historians in the strict definition of that function, while all of the authors and a lot of their characters could be called witnesses. The historian is

only concerned with the present in so far as s/he wants the past to be recounted correctly in the present. The present only becomes interesting to the historian when it is no longer the present, when it can be analyzed from a detached, birds-eye point of view. Detachment here is an asset, an aspect of scientific objectivity.

For the witness, detachment is a handicap. And, while at first glance it might sound counterintuitive, for the removed witness (as have I defined her/him), detachment is especially unacceptable. As Booth describes it, one of the most important aspects of bearing witness is “the embeddedness...in the relations of a community’s life-in-common, and not just as a background condition of having a past-in common but rather as part of an ethics of responsibility within the framework of a community across time” (100). The witness, as I have analyzed her/him throughout my dissertation, thrives on and needs her/his community, just as much as her/his community needs her/him. This relationship is a symbiotic one. In my third and fourth chapters, I have also shown the crises that can occur when a society fails to support its witness, while in several instances throughout my dissertation (Richter, Brussig), I have shown what happens when a witness fails her/his calling and ceases to be relevant/helpful. In both cases, a crisis occurs, a crisis that often takes a lot of work and a long period of time to get over. This crisis needs genuine witnesses, such as Richter and Brussig to point out the failure of witnessing, to point out the needs of the society at any given time, and to lead both by critique and example.

The one point at which Booth’s discussions on witnessing and my concept of the removed witness part ways is when Booth addresses the negative aspects of witnessing, and describes certain circumstances in which the witness becomes

embittered, a “gravedigger of the present.” “Bearing witness to the past, refusing the cup of forgetting, making oneself the instrument of the iron compulsion to justice and vengeance: all this seems too much, too destructive of present and future, the locales of hope, of the possible, and of human action” (147). Throughout my dissertation, I evoke Freud’s concept of “working through” precisely to fend off the unproductive, embittered witness, who may be doing some witnessing, but who is doing so as a repetition compulsion, due to resentment, feeling of injustice, and/or trauma. These feelings are of course necessary and acceptable, but only as an initial starting point that always needs to be worked through. As I have mentioned, my removed witness is never a juror, s/he never condemns. Booth also suggests that sometimes witnessing works against a good forgetting (147-150). My removed witness does not deny the power of forgetting; however, again, a productive forgetting can only happen *after* a remembering and a working through have happened. Forgetting without working through is precisely what psychoanalytic thinking would label as repression.

In addition to expanding and reworking the definition of witnessing, my dissertation had an analysis of witnessing in/through literature as its main goal. While the proliferation of both theory about witnessing and testimonial art works has been great throughout the 20th century and especially during/after the Holocaust, in my preliminary research for this dissertation I found a lack of theory of witness which would be able to address, help formulate, group, and understand the proliferation of Eastern European literature of witness around the years 1968 and 1989. As a matter of focusing my project, I chose the latter year. However, as I found throughout my analyses, the year 1968 had to be addressed to some degree when discussing 1989,

since in many ways 1989 was just a stronger echo of 1968. While there may have been sufficient material around to theorize pieces of visual witnessing (whether films, sculpture, or otherwise), or even epistolary and autobiographical pieces of witnessing, the theory so necessary for the analysis of fictional literary pieces of witnessing about the events in Eastern Europe around 1989 and after was all but nonexistent. This was an important inspiration for my dissertation, and it is this lack that my dissertation is hopefully alleviating.

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