
Discursive Framings of Human Rights

Negotiating agency and victimhood

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The problem of empathy

Reading the Wilkomirski Affair in the light of the history of literature

Ingvild Hagen Kjørholt

The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes. The great power of books is the capacity to take you out of yourself and to put you somewhere else.

Barack Obama

After the Holocaust, reading has to be changed.

Robert Eaglestone¹

There seems to be a common belief today, among book circle readers, scholars, and presidents alike, that human rights and literature are interrelated phenomena. From different points of view, based on more or less qualified analyses and assumptions, it is widely held that the two areas are based on two mutual cornerstones: the individual experiential human being, and the psychological capacity of empathy – of being able to imagine how it is to be another (cf. Goldberg and Moore; Hunt; Keen; Nussbaum). Just think about classic modern novels, such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which foreground the personal experiences and feelings of 'inferior' characters, such as the female servant or the Negro slave, or any Amnesty International campaign that criticizes human rights abuses globally by telling the stories of individuals – of the 600 days of imprisonment of an Egyptian photojournalist, or of the death sentence of the Sudanese woman whose crime was to marry a Christian.² The novels, as well as the campaigns, invite their readers to emotionally engage with the personal stories that are being told, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, to 'recognize the other

as a center of experience' (*Political Emotions* 146). Despite the different political, legal, and cultural institutions, discourses, and agencies that structure and validate them, novels and a universalist ethics of human rights thus welcome a similar reaction from its receivers – an empathic response.

Contemporary Western societies display a cultural absorption in the personal story. The aim of this article is to critically examine a part of its genealogy. From the point of view of literary history, I will discuss a particular way of reading such stories, or, more specifically, a certain type of reader – what I call 'the empathic reader'. My point of departure is that the empathic reader, a product of the eighteenth century's rise of the novel, and a still dominant mode of perceiving fiction, has become a fundamental subject position in the modern discourse on human rights. The key questions of this analysis are: Who is the empathic reader? How does this figure incarnate the interconnection of the history of literature and the history of human rights? And, what happens to the empathic reader when confronted with the genre of Holocaust testimony? The discussion will start from a specific case, the so-called 'Wilkomirski Affair', which, I argue, emphasizes the shortcomings of the empathic reader, and thus reveals a need, as Holocaust scholar Robert Eaglestone has put it, to change the way we read (136).

The Wilkomirski Affair

In 1995, Jüdischer Verlag, a division of the large German publishing house Suhrkamp, published *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1947*, written by a hitherto anonymous Swiss musician named Benjamin Wilkomirski, and characterized as a memoir or, more specifically, a Holocaust memoir.³ It is the horrifying narrative of an orphaned Jewish boy who – before he was adopted by Swiss foster parents in 1945 – spent his early childhood alone, in Eastern European orphanages, on the run, and in the Nazi death camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz Birkenau. The memoir was shortly after translated into nine languages, including the English *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1996), and it soon became a media event. Both in Europe and the US, the book was hailed as a masterpiece, not only by prominent Holocaust scholars such as Daniel Goldhagen and James Young, and survivors such as Elie Wiesel, but also by literary critics. *Bruchstücke* was called a new Holocaust classic, and received several prestigious awards, including the American National Jewish Book Award for autobiography and memoirs, the Jewish Quarterly prize for non-fiction in the UK, and the Prix Mémoire de la Shoah in France. Wilkomirski was compared to authors and Holocaust victims such as Anne Frank, Primo Levi,

1 Barack Obama cited in Pavlovich and Krankhe 1; Eaglestone 136.

2 Cf. Amnesty International's official website, www.amnesty.org/en/ (retrieved 7 April 2015).

3 The following outline of the reception history is based on Maechler's writing.

and Paul Celan. In 1997, the author's wartime biography was the subject of two TV documentaries, Esther van Messel's *Fremd Geboren*, and Eric Bergkraut's *Das gute Leben ist nur eine Falle*. The Fortunoff Video Archive (Yale) and other Holocaust testimony collections interviewed Wilkomirski, and he was also invited to TV shows and memorial ceremonies as a witness and expert on child survivors. Thus, from being an unknown, silenced victim of his traumatic past, he became an important public agent: the mouthpiece for a group of victims that had long been neglected, but had only recently begun to make itself heard in the public sphere – child survivors of the Nazi genocide, or what has been called 'the 1.5 generation' of Holocaust survivors (Suleiman).

However, Wilkomirski's success turned out to be fleeting. In autumn 1998, the journalist Daniel Ganzfried published several articles in *Die Weltwoche*, a conservative Swiss newspaper, which suggested that Wilkomirski had invented his biography. The author was neither a Jew nor a concentration camp victim, Ganzfried claimed, and his real name was not Benjamin Wilkomirski, but Bruno Dösseker. According to Ganzfried, Bruno had not been born into a Jewish family in Riga, but in Biel, Switzerland, in 1941 as the illegitimate son of a Swiss woman named Yvonne Grosjean. Bruno had spent his first years in a Swiss children's home before Mr and Mrs Dösseker adopted him in 1945. As the only child in the family, he grew up in their home in Zürich. Ganzfried, who built his claim on several historical records, suggested that a pathological identification had led the adult adoptee to rewrite his own miserable autobiography by appropriating the ultimate twentieth-century victim identity – the child Holocaust survivor. Ganzfried's delicate revelation was soon picked up by the media, worldwide. In particular, two essays, from the summer of 1999, presented the peculiar history to the Anglo-American audience: Philip Gourevitch's 'The Memory Thief' (*The New Yorker*) and Elena Lappin's 'The Man with Two Heads' (*Granta*). Although Wilkomirski himself kept on insisting that he had told the true story of his life, huge media institutions such as *60 Minutes* and the BBC called *Fragments* a fraud, and the author an identity thief. The revelation of the scandal turned the tide, and the public condemnation of writing fiction masked as testimony proved merciless. The book was withdrawn from the market, and both the author and his defenders soon disappeared from public view.

In 1999, Stührkamp hired the Swiss historian Stefan Maechler to investigate Wilkomirski's identity. After thorough archive studies and interviews, Maechler concluded that the man who called himself Benjamin Wilkomirski was born Bruno Grosjean, and that there existed neither historical documents, credible witness reports, nor DNA analyses to support the autobiographical claims. The official report from Maechler's inquires, *Der Fall Wilkomirski* (2000, *The Wilkomirski Affair*), presents the author's own story, the documentation of his real historical identity, and a thorough outline of *Bruchstücke's* publication and reception (Maechler). *Bruchstücke* and its peculiar reception have since been referred to as the 'Wilkomirski Affair', and Wilkomirski's memoir has only been reprinted

as an appendix to Maechler's report. Consequently, today, it is practically impossible to read the memoir without the associated contextual information.⁴

The history of *Bruchstücke's* reception reveals that two contradictory ways of reading were activated in the wake of the publication of Wilkomirski's memoir. Empathic readers that read *Fragments* as a Holocaust testimony representing the experiences, feelings, and memories of an innocent child victim dominated the first phase of the reception. The memoir, a first-person narrative representing the fragmented childhood memories of the narrator, touched the public, whose compassionate response motivated political action that led to increased attention to child Holocaust survivors. Thus, the readers became important agents in the affair – they made the book an object of political attention. An essential presupposition for readers' empathy – their vivid imagination of how the poor orphan had suffered both during and after the war – and their subsequent engagement, was a belief in the author's identity. Furthermore, they relied on the autobiographical contract, which guarantees that the author and the narrator are one and the same (cf. Lejeune), and on the historical truth value of the narrative.

When, suddenly, all three conditions (author identity, autobiographical contract, historical truth claim) were questioned, the reader's intuitive recognition of Wilkomirski's story of pain as true and authentic was replaced by a suspicious and critical reader response. The suspicious reader refused to accept the narrator's representation of the little boy as a victim in need of care, and ignored the pain the narrative communicates. Rather, the second phase of the reception was preoccupied with readers' questioning the author's authority, or lack of such, and his right to speak as a Holocaust victim.

The Wilkomirski Affair is frequently mentioned in Holocaust studies and memory studies as an example of the paradigmatic shift from history to memory, and to a representational mode that seems to pervade Western public discourse: the individualization and privatization of historical events. Advocates of this trend argue that the personal story, the testimony, and an empathic (or emotional) approach to history is a prerequisite to understanding what it meant to be a victim of the Nazi genocide in Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, Holocaust scholar Allison Landsberg has argued for what she calls 'a radical politics of empathy' – a concept of knowledge that embraces the experiential and emotional processes involved in engaging with history (Landsberg). Historian Dominick LaCapra, who has discussed the need for affectivity in historical writing and understanding of atrocities, asks for an

4 As this article's topic is the reception of the Wilkomirski Affair, a thorough analysis of *Bruchstücke* as an autonomous work is beyond its scope. Nevertheless, it is worth remarking that the text's rhetorical devices establish a certain implied reader position, and thus that the reader response is conditioned by the text itself. For a thorough analysis of the rhetoric of *Bruchstücke*, see Pennington.

'empathic unsettlement' – a responsiveness to the traumatic experiences of others, without appropriating their identity (41). Others have critically questioned the idea that historical truth should be represented from the point of view of individual experience, and in an interpersonal relationship between victim and recipient. They see the trend as a device to decontextualize historical events. As Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder have claimed: 'The enthusiastic reception of Wilkomirski's book is proof that the Holocaust has become completely decontextualized and turned into a personal trauma with which everyone can identify' (151).⁵ Several critics have noted that Bruno Dösseker/Binjamin Wilkomirski himself embodies the ultimate affective response to the Holocaust, as he identifies with its victims, and feels their pain to such a degree that he appropriates their identity. Whether the author himself may be considered some kind of an empathic reader will not be further discussed.⁶ In the following pages, I will rather focus on the historical readers' leading part in the Wilkomirski Affair.

The empathic reader

In Maechler's discussion of whether Wilkomirski actually believed in his own memoir, or rather cynically and deliberately invented a false autobiography, he concludes that:

There is every indication that Wilkomirski found his own narrative true and authentic because it unleashed such stunned silence, such waves of sympathy. Perhaps he did not believe his story, but he did believe his own telling of it. Anything that had such an effect on listeners must be true. The glow in their eyes lent him a living, coherent identity – that of the greatest of all victims – and gave his story overwhelming authenticity. Without an audience, there would be no Wilkomirski. (273)

Maechler pinpoints what I suggest is of basic importance when it comes to the discussion of *Bruchstücke's* veracity and generic status. Namely, that its truth value is not primarily produced in the narrative. It neither depends exclusively on the autobiographical contract nor on the author's authority, but is principally

5 Another well-known example that illustrates this trend is the Holocaust Museum in Washington, where, at the entrance, visitors are given the identity of an original camp victim (his or her photograph, prisoner number, and biography), and invited to experience the genocide through his or her eyes.

6 It is also worth distinguishing his response from an empathic response. Empathy requires the recognition of the alterity of the other. By appropriating the Holocaust victim identity, Wilkomirski instead becomes the other.

an effect of the public response. The readers' empathy, and the actions that stemmed from imagining the pain of the lonely child, determined the text's production of truth. From such a point of view, the empathic reader is the main agent of the Wilkomirski Affair.

What is an empathic reader? In order to identify the figure, it seems necessary to begin with a definition of empathy. The term 'empathy' is complex, and applies to various phenomena. The English psychologist Edward Titchener first coined the English term in 1909 as a translation of the German *Einfühlung*, literally 'feeling into': 'imaginatively projecting oneself into another's situation' (in Batson 6). In its origins in the English language, empathy belonged to the register of aesthetics, referring to the process by which a writer or a painter imagines what it would be like to be either some specific person or a particular inanimate object. Today, empathy is considered to be the human capacity that 'depends on a biologically based ability to understand the subjectivity of other people and to be able to imagine that their inner experiences are like one's own' (Hunt 39). To empathize with another person is to feel what we believe are his or her emotions (cf. Keen 5). It is a 'virtual experience' (LaCapra 47); it is about being able to feel a stranger's situation.

Although the empathic reader is involved in what narratologists call 'character identification' (i.e. readers identifying with the characters in a narrative), empathy is not about feeling pity for the other. Thus, it is an emotional response similar to, but differentiated from, sympathy. As Allison Landsberg has explained: 'While sympathy [...] relies upon an essentialism of identification, empathy recognizes the alterity of identification. Empathy, then, is about the lack of identity between subjects, about negotiating distance' (82). Whereas the empathic reader imagines him or herself to be the other, to experience the world from the other's viewpoint, the sympathetic reader imagines how he or she would feel in the other's situation. Thus, the latter transposes his or her identity onto others. The sympathetic reader and the empathic reader both take part in a process of affective engagement, but nevertheless there is a considerable distinction between the two ways of approaching another person's experience.

Empathy is a widely discussed phenomenon within diverse academic disciplines, from Holocaust studies via the expanding field of affect studies, to neurosciences. It is also of particular interest within literary history. During the eighteenth century, the phenomenon of empathy, or human sensibility in general, constituted an important point of intersection between literature and political history – an intersection in which historians and literary scholars have, in recent years, begun to show interest (cf. among others Anderson; Eagleton; Hunt; Maslan). Despite the different perspectives scholars have revealed, they seem to share the basic idea that human sensibility, both as an important literary subject and as a capacity that developed from reading fiction, became a political matter when a new subject of rights, the man-citizen, became the basis of the emerging political European constitutions (e.g. *La Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*), and of the American Constitution.

The new subject of rights, the modern European citizen or the human rights subject, implies a breakdown of the traditional distinction between private and public identities. The new public or political identity was founded in humanity. From that point on, an important citizen virtue found its model in affective bonds between brothers or spouses. Whereas man as a natural or biological creature, defined by his physical sensibilities and vulnerability, traditionally had his place in the private sphere, such qualities were now imagined as belonging to man's political identity. Fellow citizens should act towards one another as affectionate brothers (cf. Maslan 80). Consequently, in the emerging modern society, both private and public life should be anchored in the human being's natural and universal affects.

In her clever thematic analyses of canonical literary works, such as Corneille's *Horace* (1640) or Montesquieu's *Les Lettres Persanes* (1721), literary historian Susan Maslan convincingly reveals how, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French fiction, the fusion of man and citizen, humanity and citizenship, takes place at the level of the story, or plot. This man-citizen is a being of emotions; a man who is able to shed tears when confronted with the suffering of a stranger.⁷ Maslan suggests that literary representations such as these preceded the founding of modern politics and modern human rights.

Instead of focusing on literary plots, as Maslan does, historian Lynn Hunt, in her influential *The Invention of Human Rights* (2007), approaches the intersection of literary and political history as a question of reading. She argues that, above all, it was the structure of the early modern novel that taught men and women the capacity to empathize with strangers, a required capacity for being able to approach a random fellow citizen as one's brother:

Novels like [Rousseau's] *Julie* drew their readers into identifying with ordinary characters, who were by definition unknown to the reader personally. Readers empathized with the characters, especially the heroine or the hero, *thanks to the workings of the narrative form itself*. [. . .] novels taught their readers nothing less than a new psychology and in the process laid the foundations for a new social and political order.

(38–39, my emphasis)

A crucial point in Hunt's argument is that it was the literary *form* of the novel that invited its readers to be empathic. In particular, she claims that the epistolary novel enabled such an approach.

The epistolary novel, a genre that foregrounds the interior thoughts and feelings of its characters, has a narrative order (letters sent between different

7 An example is to be found in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), when the protagonist meets a mutilated Negro slave in the Dutch colony of Suriname, and bursts into tears when the latter tells him the story of his life of slavery. For an analysis of the episode, see Kjørholt.

senders and recipients) that makes the reader aware of a number of different subjective viewpoints simultaneously. Instead of predicting 'truth' as unified and stable, the epistolary novel – through its very form – visualizes truth as subjective, and depends on the individual's specific circumstances and viewpoints. The epistolary novel reader engages emotionally in the fictional characters' lives, and he or she learns that each character experiences the world in his or her own way. In the emerging early modern democracies, this capacity of seeing the world through others' eyes became an important citizen virtue for socializing with fellow citizens.⁸ In other words, in order to fulfil his citizen duties, the individual was supposed to apply a particular way of reading fiction. From Hunt's point of view, eighteenth-century novels indirectly, by providing a certain model of, and conditions for, reading, paved the way for a modern idea of sensibility – and empathy, in particular – as an important citizen quality.

In contemporary discourse, the empathic reader is still an ideal of novel reading. The reading method has also been transferred to other media; in particular, the commercial, narrative film relies heavily on emotionally engaged spectators. And today, the idea that 'novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world' has become a 'contemporary truism' (Keen xv), a view politicians often express with wonderful pathos, and which, in the academic world, is perhaps most famously advocated by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum has argued that literature (and art in general) helps to cultivate what she calls 'narrative imagination' – the capacity to see the world through another person's eyes. In her view, literature is a tool for developing emotions such as empathy, which is a fundamental citizen quality, and necessary in building and sustaining democratic societies (cf., for instance, *Political Emotions; Not for Profit; Poetic Justice*).

Holocaust testimony

The Wilkomirski Affair illustrates that the empathic reader is still vital, and no longer reserved for the domain of fiction, but also makes him or herself felt in the reception of documentary Holocaust representations, in particular testimony. The testimony was originally a judicial genre. Its writers assumed the role of an eyewitness to a criminal event. Whereas the novel is regarded an invention of early modern Europe, Holocaust testimony has been seen as the archetypical genre of late modernity.⁹ In broad terms, Holocaust testimony is a narrative

8 Benedict Anderson makes a similar argument in *Imagined Communities*: the nation state emerges because its citizens are able to imagine a community of fellow citizens with whom they never meet physically. Anderson claims that newspapers and novels serve as models for this way of imagining, as literary technologies that manage to represent simultaneity and plurality.

9 Cf. Elie Wiesel's well-known dictum: 'if the Greeks invented the tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony' (9).

genre constituted by a certain approach to a certain subject – personal experiences of the historical event known as the Holocaust. It includes various subgenres, such as diaries, memoirs, interviews, and notebooks. In addition to its many subgenres, the location of the writer, the date of writing, and the authority of the writer may vary radically. Some testimonies were written down during or immediately after the Second World War, whereas others were written decades later. There exists a certain transnational canon of Holocaust testimony, which includes writers such as Anne Frank, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Jorge Semprun, to mention but the best-known, together with a massive corpus of texts and statements authored by less-known witness-authors.

A characteristic feature of Holocaust testimony is that it complicates the border between fiction and historiography. It has been defined as ‘a “factually insistent” narrative’ (Young 404) and ‘a subject’s recall of facts from the past’ (Vice, ‘Questions’ 47). An important cause of this intermediate genre status is the concept of ‘trauma’. Holocaust testimonies are narratives of trauma, and the genre has been extensively discussed within academic fields such as trauma studies and memory studies.¹⁰ Following Freud, trauma has been defined as the experience of a repressed or forgotten memory. Thus, an experience of trauma is always belated with respect to the event that originally caused it, and the faculty of imagination is necessarily involved in the psychological reconstruction and literary representation of the original experience that precedes a testimonial text. Although Holocaust testimony is authorized by the writer’s relationship to the historical event that is described, the Nazi genocide in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, it is also a narrative of a personal trauma. Consequently, the truth on which Holocaust testimony depends is not only historical truth, but also a kind of psychological truth that is to be found in the unconscious (cf. Caruth; Felman).

Fiction is a precarious concept when it comes to Holocaust representations, as Sue Vice clearly reveals in her *Holocaust Fiction*, where she analyses several well-known literary representations of the Holocaust, such as the novels *Schindler’s Ark* (1982, the basis of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, of 1993) and *Time’s Arrow* (1991). Vice concludes, with particular reference to the Wilkomirski Affair, that receptions of Holocaust literature reveal that the relationship between author and narrator, and knowledge of the author’s biography, are significant, in terms of reader response (*Holocaust Fiction* 163). This does not mean that we do not read novels about the Holocaust, but rather that knowledge of the narrative’s relation to historical and biographical truth is of great importance. But *Bruchstücke* illustrates that the dividing line between fiction and history in Holocaust literature

10 Psychoanalytical concepts such as ‘trauma’, ‘deep memory’, or ‘transference’ are associated with these fields’ treatments of the genre, and a thorough presentation of Holocaust testimony would require a discussion of these and other key psychoanalytical terms. Owing to the limits of this article, I give only a brief presentation of the concept of trauma, and do not thoroughly discuss this approach to testimony.

is blurred, and difficult to trace on an immanent level of the text. One aspect that makes it difficult to tell the one from the other is that both fictional and autobiographical testimonies apply the same narrative devices and metaphors. Another reason is that the historical truth of the political event (the Nazi genocide) is supplemented by a notion of psychological truth that accompanies individual traumatic experience, which are often the core of the story. We may also add that, owing to its extensive use of literary devices, Holocaust testimony hinges on the concept of universal truth, to which works of fiction, according to Aristotle, refer. Hence, the testimony makes three different and contradictory truth claims – it depends on historical, psychological, and fictional truth. Its complex ontological and epistemological status makes it perhaps even more important to establish the contract between writer, reader, and subject matter when reading Holocaust literature than when reading in general.¹¹ Even though such a contract is always at work in the reception of literature, it may be understood as a defining, generic feature of Holocaust representations. Consequently, the contribution of the reader is crucial in the transmission of Holocaust testimony.

Being a narrative of a trauma, Holocaust testimony often presupposes a certain reader response that is historically linked to fiction – an emotional response. In *Holocaust and the American Life* (1999), historian Peter Novick claims that ‘we actually read Holocaust testimonies not for their historical insight, but for their emotive power’ (in Gross and Hoffmann 33). Similarly, Robert Eaglestone emphasizes that ‘one of the most important characteristics of the genre of testimony stems from the reader’s experience of identification’ (117). Both scholars question emotional identification as an adequate reader response to Holocaust testimonies. Eaglestone is one of the few who has discussed the genre of testimony in light of the history of literature. According to him, Holocaust testimony, owing to its intermediate position between the traditional nineteenth-century novel and historiography, consists of ‘a paradoxical “doubleness”’: its form leads the reader to identification, as it applies the traditional narrative scheme of the nineteenth-century novel, while its content and context lead away from it (119). He argues that Holocaust testimony ought to be considered on its own terms, and provides a taxonomy of general traits and concrete examples, in order to reveal its generic qualities.¹² Eaglestone insists that although Holocaust testimony asks for the reader’s identification, the invitation results in what we might call a ‘receptional fallacy’: Holocaust testimony per se precludes identification, in the sense that a personal experience of the Holocaust is an extreme viewpoint nearly impossible to imagine, it is inaccessible to most. That is why, he concludes, ‘[a]fter the Holocaust, reading has to be changed’ (136).

11 Inga Clendinnen also emphasizes the importance of the reading contract when it comes to literature about the Holocaust; a work of history establishes a different contract between author and reader, and author and subject, than fiction does (170).

12 These traits are: overidentification, epiphany, interruption, the way of using narrative frames, and the ways of using history (Eaglestone).

Empathy put to the test: from early modern novels to Holocaust testimony

If experiences of the Holocaust are impossible to imagine for someone who was not there, as Eaglestone claims, the empathic approach is theoretically not an available reading point of departure when it comes to Holocaust testimonies. Still, the ideal of the empathic reader is powerful, and persistently called upon in the public discourse of Holocaust memory. The empathic reader at work in the Wilkomirski Affair has a similar way of reading Holocaust testimony as an eighteenth-century citizen, a human rights subject to be, reads novels: his or her chief concern is to emotionally engage in the personal story that is being told – to imagine the world from another centre of experience. But what happens to the empathic reader, understood as a historical product of the early modern novel, when confronted with the genre of Holocaust testimony? What are its effects and functions when it is deployed in a historical context completely different from the context in which this figure emerged?

Eaglestone emphasizes that 'reading testimony is not like reading a novel' (135), and therefore questions the functionality of the empathic reader when confronted with the testimonial genre. However, he does not offer an alternative way of reading Holocaust testimonies. Furthermore, I do not agree with his claim that it is the narrative form of the testimony, and not its subject and surroundings, that lead the reader to identify with the narrator. In light of the Wilkomirski Affair, I suggest the opposite: that the reader's empathic response to Holocaust testimony is a matter of the genre's defining subject – personal experience of the Nazi genocide – and the status of this specific trauma in the context of our contemporary Western culture.

The eighteenth-century reader's empathy was trained by the novel form's ability to represent several subjectivities simultaneously. The ethical response was triggered by certain aesthetics of representation. Thus, we may suggest that the novel's aesthetics taught its readers to empathize. In the case of Holocaust testimony in general, or of Wilkomirski's so-called memoir *Bruchstücke* in particular, I suggest that the reader empathizes with the narrator, not mainly because of the way he represents his traumas, but because of the specific trauma he represents. Thus, I claim that, contrary to Eaglestone's view, the empathic readers of Holocaust testimony instead respond to the narrative's content and historical context.¹³ In other words, the cause of the victim's suffering demands

13 On this point, I also disagree with Sally Miller's psychoanalytic analysis of the Wilkomirski Affair. She argues that it is not the content of *Fragments* that engages the reader, but its narrative form, and, more specifically, the implied reader constructed in the narrative: 'I propose that it is not the details of Dössekker's imagined experience of the Holocaust that resonated so strongly with readers but its positioning of the reader as a witness. [...] we can see that the narrative of *Fragments* is concerned with staging a very particular encounter between the testimonial speaker and the secondary witness' (51).

the reader's emotional response; it makes him or her capable of feeling the emotions of the traumatized child in Wilkomirski's narrative.

When reading Holocaust testimony, and not (an early modern) novel, not only the cause of the empathic response, but also its effects, differ radically. Even though literature was an important subject of discussion in the eighteenth century's emerging public domain, the typical novel reader was a woman, confined to the private sphere where she read to herself in silence. Her capacity to experience the world through novel characters did not lead to immediate public and political actions. Thus, the effect of the empathic reading became a public matter only indirectly, by providing a model of social bonding that gradually became an ideal in the modern discourse on human rights, as Lynn Hunt has argued. In the Wilkomirski Affair, however, the readers' concrete reactions to the little orphan Benjamin's wartime experiences instantaneously became a public matter. The readers (in the broad sense of the term) were, as I have argued, the main agents of the media event that followed the publication of *Bruchstücke*, and their judgements determined the book's public significance. As Maechler pointed out, the empathic response of *Bruchstücke*'s readers worldwide contributed to its status as an authentic and authorized testimony of the Nazi genocide, and to increase the public attention paid to child victims.¹⁴

A third difference between the early modern novel readers and the readers of Holocaust testimonies is the object of their empathy. In the first case, the empathy is directed at the novel's fictional characters; in the latter, the author-narrator is the object of empathy. Although empathy with fictional characters is unrestrained, in contrast, empathy with the author of a testimony relies on a certain precondition – the belief that the represented experiences have actually happened. The Wilkomirski Affair reveals the breakdown of the empathic reader when this precondition is falsified. The initial, intuitive, empathic response to *Bruchstücke* as a Holocaust memoir ceased when it turned out that the story was the product of the author's imagination. Quite paradoxically, then, its reception history shows that the reader position that was originally inherent to the fictional novel genre fit Holocaust testimony, but was invalidated as soon as it turned out to be mere fiction.

Although critics have claimed that Wilkomirski's book has novelistic qualities, and, after the revelations of the author's identity, could still be regarded as a valuable work of fiction about the Holocaust, in my view it is impossible to read *Bruchstücke* as a novel. Not only because it was published as a memoir, but also because its reception history has now become inseparable from the work.

14 Marouf Hasian has also discussed how the readers participated in the rhetorical process we know as the Wilkomirski Affair, and he emphasizes the productive 'roles that audiences and critics play in the co-creation of any "authentic" Holocaust witness' (235).

The reception has altered the contract between writer, reader, and subject matter. Today, one reads the Wilkomirski Affair, rather than *Bruchstücke*. Knowledge of the author's falsified biography, and the production context in general, information that now accompanies the narrative as paratexts that the reader need to think of, forces the reader to consider several aspects that fall outside an empathic approach. Thus, the empathic approach, which for most readers is still the most intuitive when reading the story of a traumatized, child victim, is, so to speak, de-automatized, when reading the Wilkomirski Affair.

Empathy – a problem of excess?

'Personal stories are the contemporary currency of human rights projects', states Joseph R. Slaughter (in Goldberg and Moore xiii). Personal stories, narratives of eyewitnesses, help us realize how history and politics concern individual human beings, and condition our experience of the world, and vice versa – the personal story may also have tremendous political impact, to the extent that it changes the world. For instance, the slave narrative, a subgenre of the novel that gained popularity in the nineteenth century, contributed to giving the so-called Negro slaves – who colonial law had reduced to commercial objects – a subjectivity: proper names, identities, and biographies. Thus, the personal story qua slave narrative contributed to humanizing a dehumanized population, and its reader – the empathic reader – was important in developing the modern discourse on human rights. The personal story is also the core of memory culture today, and several scholars agree that it owes its almost hegemonic place to the 'Holocaust discourse'. Similar to the slave narrative, the personal story qua Holocaust testimony is a device of resistance, insofar as it re-establishes names, experiences, and biographies of the Nazi victims. It has clearly helped to change the world, as the public recognition of the Holocaust victims' stories of suffering led to the institution of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

The personal story – whether represented in museums, Amnesty International campaigns, novels, testimonies, or Hollywood blockbusters – remains a powerful aesthetic strategy for narrating human rights, and the idea that reading it fosters empathy and educates future world citizens is widespread. But perhaps the Wilkomirski Affair reveals a dead end to such individualization, and the empathy vogue that follows in its wake. For the eighteenth-century novel reader, novelistic representations of individual suffering were a new phenomenon. In our contemporary world society, such representations are omnipresent. In the wake of the Holocaust, individual suffering and empathically relating to the pain of others have nearly become a cultural cliché (cf. Sontag). Is 'the biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now . . . an empathy deficit', as US President Barack Obama has claimed? Or is the problem perhaps the opposite – too much empathy? Is the empathic reader – who once provided

a model of citizen virtue – today at risk of becoming an instrument for obscuring a critical understanding of historical and cultural artefacts?¹⁵

The Wilkomirski Affair offers an important lesson in revealing the power, as well as the shortcomings, of the empathic reader. It shows us what happens if we automatically read personal stories the way we (used to) read novels – we recognize the other (i.e. the narrator of or the character in a story) as a centre of experience, as Nussbaum puts it, without regard for the story's genre, the concepts of truth to which it refers, or its production context. I hope this analysis has revealed that the contemporary invitation to an empathic reader response runs the danger of foregrounding the receiver's emotions and feelings. Knowledge of the person whose story is being told, as well as of the narrative's contextual circumstances, risks being left in the shadows. In and after Holocaust testimony, the dynamics that interconnect literature, politics, and human rights are of a different character than they were in the early modern era. The question that should be addressed today is not that of the kinds of feelings a personal story such as Wilkomirski's evokes, but rather what body of knowledge it represents. To conclude, I suggest that what our society and the world today suffer from is not an empathy deficit, but rather an excess of empathy. The empathic response falls short of recognizing the complexity of the historical and political conditions that cause personal trauma. The Wilkomirski Affair, from its position between fiction and autobiography, and with its different concepts of truth, reveals the possible impact of literature, and the need to understand the dynamics between text and context. Empathy may block our access to contextual – historical, cultural, political – conditions, and consequently we are in need of readers that are able to recognize reading contracts in which paratexts, such as those that surround the reception of Wilkomirski's memoir, are taken into consideration.

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15 The argument is in line with Gross and Hoffmann's, which claims that: 'This approach [i.e. to empathize with the victims] preserves the sanctity of individual memory, but at the expense of converting the Holocaust into the sublime, something that can be felt but not understood. [. . .] the result is not history or knowledge but a common – and transcendent – identification with the victims' (40).

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