



## An Archaeology of Witness: Testifying, Attending, Reading, and Writing

**Cheryl Chaffin**

Cabrillo College, California (USA)

chchaffi@cabrillo.edu

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3299-1506>

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### ABSTRACT

Primo Levi's experience in *If This Is a Man* included the change of his body through adversity while he remembered and recorded the names and stories of those he encountered on his downward journey into Auschwitz. In post-war decades he witnessed his life and mind in context of the camps and in his place of the middle to late Italian and global twentieth century. This article, turning to phenomenological and Buddhist thought, explores how readers may develop a practice of witness in reading traumatic literature. In the work of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty witness as perception and attention is inherent to the body through observation and participation expressed in the senses and the rational and intuitive intelligences. Buddhism focuses on shared human suffering and addresses how we respond to each other's pain. Finally, writers of traumatic literature and their readers are inextricably and ethically linked in the process of witness.

**KEYWORDS:** witness, literature, Primo Levi, phenomenology, Buddhism

## Arqueología del testimonio: atender, leer y escribir

### RESUMEN

La experiencia de Primo Levi en *If this is a Man* ponía en relieve el cambio que sufría su cuerpo por culpa de la adversidad al mismo tiempo que recordaba y registraba los nombres e historias de todos aquellos que conoció en su terrible camino hacia Auschwitz. Durante varias décadas de posguerra dio testimonio de su propia vida y de su mente en el contexto de los campamentos y de los lugares en lo que estuvo desde mediados hasta finales del siglo XX en Italia y alrededor del mundo. En este artículo, volviendo al pensamiento fenomenológico y budista, se explora cómo los lectores pueden ser testigos de la literatura traumática. En la obra del fenomenólogo Maurice Merleau-Ponty éste da testimonio como forma de percepción y atención, convirtiéndose en algo intrínseco al cuerpo por medio de la observación y la participación expresadas a través de los sentidos y en las inteligencias racionales e intuitivas. El budismo se centra en el sufrimiento humano compartido y aborda la forma en la que respondemos al dolor ajeno. Por último, los escritores de la literatura traumática y sus lectores están éticamente vinculados al proceso de dar testimonio.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** testimonio, literatura, Primo Levi, fenomenología, budismo

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A practice of *being in witness* through writing and through reading has always been urgent and perhaps there is an even more pressing urgency for this type of living in our contemporary world of digital mediation and isolation. Jamil Zaki, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory, in *The War for Kindness* writes “the modern world has made kindness harder.” More people live in cities than ever before and, “we see more people than ever before, but know fewer of them.”<sup>1</sup> Interactions with unknown others are increasingly virtual. Online interactions make it easy to espouse political and social views that are then liked and encouraged by others, all behind a screen of anonymity, a space apart. Empathy, he argues, is a skill we can build and we do so in relationship with self and with others. Empathy, I also suggest, is one facet of a space of witness if we consider witness as a relationship with self, others, and the world. Reading, as Zaki sees it, constitutes an “untethering,” leaving your world for the context of another’s.<sup>2</sup> A reader witnesses a writer’s traumatic story. Readers then participate in history by their responses to that story in their engagement with literature. Here I focus less on witness as located in a person and more on witnessing as an action, a practice, of reading, yes, but more so of living. Witness(ing) in this conceptualization is then a practice both active and passive. It is active when readers are conscious that they perform an act of witness as they read and, later, discuss a book. Readers are enabled to allow the practice of witnessing to affect their approach to life and their responses to others.<sup>3</sup> Witnessing is passive in that it is always present in the reader; it neither appears nor disappears at random; rather, it is consistently present and available when readers develop the practice of *being in witness*—a state of being that resides within and that a reader is conscious of cultivating (witness becomes a practice, a habit, or, even, an ability that is nourished with attention). In reference to witness (as a concept, an act, and a practice), I employ various verb forms to suggest that witness does not start and stop when readers engage literature that details traumatic situations. These verb forms are: infinitive—to witness; indicative present—witness; and, present participle—witnessing. Through my exploration, I argue that *witness is phenomenological*, a practice of being in the body and recognizing that faculties of perception and mind are *in training* to offer presence to others as they relate their experiences, in this case through the

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<sup>1</sup>Zaki, *The War for Kindness*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Here I intend *others* as both the writer, for whom readers perform the act of witnessing, and other human beings, both within and outside our sphere of experience and with whom we have human life in common.

transmission of written story. Of course, the practice of witness, which is intersubjective, may also find application in formal oral telling, in informal conversation, in listening, and in simply being attentively present to other human beings.

Language is not requisite to witnessing. Silence is a form of witness, which for all intents and purposes *is* presence, the attention of the whole being to what and who presents itself. Such attention requires discipline achieved through thinking, contemplating, reflecting, and not needing anything but being present to (something; someone) without the filter of the self and its desires and motivations. This is a lifetime practice. *Practice* in relation to witness signals incompleteness or partiality. Humans, if they so choose, are always engaged in witness as a teaching, a learning that is without end, and they can become more adept at it over time. The nature of human experience is such that new experiences continue to arise, so in that arising humans continue to learn and to practice in body and mind (phenomenologically, then) what they have learned.

For these reasons, for the very warp and weft of practice itself, I've turned to phenomenology in a brief encyclopedic analysis of witness (to witness, witnessing) in order to explore it as occurring always in the (a) body (a singular body but that body is also in relation to another who tells the story of his body's experience). In Primo Levi's case, he experienced the camps as an assault on body and mind, as a physical experience as well as a psychological, spiritual, and philosophical one. His awareness of witness arose as he revised the first edition of his book *If This Is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*) for a second publication run with Einaudi in 1957 and 1958. In a chapter written expressly for the second edition, "Initiation," Levi names witness as a survivor's act in which he is engaged both within the camp and in the moment of writing, "even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization."<sup>4</sup> Robert Gordon refers to the multiple forms and genres in which Primo Levi wrote—trial depositions and statements, reports, speeches, newspaper columns, poems, anthologies, translations, science-fiction and fantasy, novels and stories about work, resistance, and science—and writes that in Levi's hands testimony "is best thought of as malleable and fluid in form, and as one all the more profoundly engaged with truths historical, moral and imaginative."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man* in *The Complete Works*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, *Auschwitz Testimonies*, 4.

In the spirit of this malleability, I want to read Levi's work, focusing on *If This Is a Man*, with attention to Buddhist teachings in which the notion of witness—as an observer to and an observation of experience without reaction—is integral to a reading of trauma and the reflection of the author, as in Levi's case, upon the meaning of that trauma. The Buddhist teachings referenced here address the practice of being with, being present to, habits of contemplation, compassion, and, when extended to literature, a considered and thoughtful response to a writer's narrative and his address to readers.

Such "witness teachings"—found within both western and eastern philosophical writings—may help to awaken reader response to trauma narrative and analysis. I focus here on Primo Levi's work as offered in his autobiographical account of Auschwitz because I have taught his first book *If This Is a Man* for fifteen years in my college critical thinking courses. There are myriad literary accounts of trauma, written of the Shoah, yes, but also of multiple kinds of political, social, historical, and personal trauma. Literature, in large part, is a repository of trauma—regardless of its genre, geography, or time period. Levi had his own unique experience of the camps during the Second World War and, like any writer, he wrote directly from that experience and the memories it left. Over his lifetime, he coupled his literary production with historical research on the war and Auschwitz. He never stopped learning and he knew that his writing of the camps offered one man's experience of traumatic truth. In fact, he began the first chapter of his final book *The Drowned and the Saved* (*I sommersi e i salvati*, 1987) acknowledging memory's limitations, "Human memory is a wonderful but fallible instrument."<sup>6</sup> As a reader, writer, professor of literature, and a human being in relation with others, I have absorbed the witness teachings explored here. They manifest in how I interact with students, how I research and write academic articles, how I raise a child, among other things. I hope that this essay will illuminate ways of thinking about reading, responding to, and holding traumatic stories—acts of witness—so that we are moved and changed and, further, that our living reflects those changes.

## 2. TAKING UP WITH PRIMO LEVI

Over nearly two decades of teaching and writing on Primo Levi's first-person experience as a Holocaust survivor and the primary narrative that evolved of that experience, *If This Is a Man*, have brought this reader-writer to reflect on the complexity of being witness to one's own experience, which for Levi in that first book included the change and adaptation of his compromised body through violent adversity while he also remembered and recorded the

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<sup>6</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* in *The Complete Works*, 2420.

names and stories of others whom he met on a journey downward, as he described his plummet into Auschwitz. Over several post-war decades Levi witnessed his life and mind in relationship to Auschwitz and his place in the middle and later half of an Italian and an increasingly global twentieth century. Levi achieved a growing understanding of witness in his role as a survivor, in his work as a writer testifying to the lives of others who had experienced war and internment with him, as well as in observation of chemical phenomena in various laboratory environments through university education and his profession as a chemist. This writer watches, observes, notes, analyzes, compares, commits details to memory, and, eventually, puts life on the page through the interpretative voice and sensibility which the act and practice of witness supports. Domenico Scarpa in “Il terzo incomodo: un invito a frequentare Primo Levi” (“The Third Wheel: An Invitation to Take Up with Primo Levi”) describes Levi’s dual role: the victim who suffers the event that is Auschwitz with the fullness of his own person and that of the witness who with a superhuman effort of physical, moral, and cognitive survival succeeds in retaining an outward gaze, objective and scientific with respect to the event in which he finds himself implicated.<sup>7</sup> The third role of the witness that Levi performs, Scarpa argues, is in relationship to his readers whom he demands participate in his story and ask themselves what they would have done in the same circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Primo Levi wanted us, his readers, to read his work with an attitude of ongoing curiosity and inquiry. He informs us in an essay entitled “The Path of a Jewish Writer” (1984), that his first “is not a book purely of testimony.” He attests to intertwined themes: an effort to understand how the events could have happened, a scientific study of human behavior (his and others) under extreme circumstances, the painful and daily comparison with life as a free person, the appearances of literary reminiscences from Dante’s *Inferno*, which, he notes, were sometimes intentional, other times unconscious and spontaneous, and his evocation of the Bible.<sup>9</sup> His writing, as both artifact and living document in readers’ hands, remains outside the boundaries of time. Levi’s work, that started with the arrest, deportation, and detention of the author and includes the details of eleven months in the Lager of Auschwitz, represents an autobiographical history of the mind, body, intelligence, and personal experience that follows a period of dictatorship, political turmoil, war, and subsequent civil peace. The body of his work as a whole represents the composition of a

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<sup>7</sup> Scarpa, “Il terzo incomodo,” 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 21. Translation mine.

<sup>9</sup> Levi, “The Path of a Jewish Writer,” in *The Complete Works*, 2644.

singular life and at the same time a life shared with the other. However, Levi wrote in his “Premise” to *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays* that he was an ordinary person except for the war and the internment at Auschwitz; his was a quotidian life—of work, laboratory, and family, in his birth city, Turin, where he lived until his death. “I’m a normal man with a good memory who fell into a maelstrom and got out of it more by luck than by virtue, and who from that time on has preserved a certain curiosity about maelstroms large and small, metaphorical and actual.”<sup>10</sup>

To read Levi’s work, written from 1946 to 1987, is to read his life in narrative form. As a receiving reader, one notes that his life was not ordinary, especially accounting for his birth two years before Benito Mussolini came to power and his young life under institutionalized fascism. The Racial Decree of 1938 imposed restrictions on Jewish employment, businesses, property, schooling, works of art and literature, publishing, sports, and music. Further, in the post-war period he was a survivor of genocide. With or without the writing, he was not a “normal” person in any sense of the word, given the maelstrom he experienced and from which he returned and the maelstroms that continued to compel him in his thinking and writing for the remainder of his life. He was instead a person with a life formed completely by the history of Europe and of the European Jews of the twentieth century.

### 3. READING AS WITNESS

Witness is an acquired relationship with the world. It is both an intellectual and emotional act. Eastern and Western philosophies suggest that it can be cultivated as a *practice* of attention that includes seeing and listening as well as contemplating and responding. The first-person witness has often experienced traumatic events (cumulative events of physical and emotional violence) and, consequently, has been permanently changed by these experiences. The change undergone by one who has witnessed may be, given one’s skills and resources, the impetus to a life-long practice of artistic and intellectual expression. In Levi’s case, such an expressive response evolved in literary writing, as well as journalistic and commemorative writing. Witness importantly occurs in the process of reading as well as writing. Such engaged reading may germinate in turn a sustained writing practice and production over a reader’s lifetime that becomes a response to reading-witness.

The lexical notion of witness exists within a framework of juridical and religious law. The word testimony came into use in the fifteenth century as proof or demonstration of some fact, evidence, or piece of evidence, and in legal testimony as a sworn statement by a witness.

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<sup>10</sup> Levi, *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays*, 4.

In Latin, *testimonium* connotes evidence, proof, or attestation. In early Christianity, the word witness was developed from a Greek or pre-Greek word, *martyr*, and came to signify a person who bears testimony to faith and would willingly suffer death rather than renounce their religious faith. The apostle Peter declared in the tenth chapter of Acts that those disciples who ate and drank with Christ were chosen to be witnesses, commanded to preach, testify, and bear witness in converting others to the gospel.<sup>11</sup> Thus, early Christians testified to their faith and worked to bring “the good news” to others.

In *The Guardians of Memory* Valentina Pisanty, Professor of Semiotics at the University of Bergamo, defines witness testimony as an original perceptual act (a witness sees an event, or is informed about it by someone who was present) and a subsequent communicative act (the witness recounts what he or she has seen or heard), where the later holds only by virtue of the former.<sup>12</sup> In a court of law, she notes, the definition of witness narrows to one who has seen directly and first-hand, and, as such, is called to speak of that witness experience, which may become evidence in a trial. Annette Wieviorka in *The Era of the Witness* (2006) [*L'ère du témoin*] writing with a historian's view of witness argues that the advent of public testimony of large traumatic events began with the Eichmann Trial in 1961. She asserts, “Testimony appeals to the heart and not to the mind. It elicits compassion, pity, indignation, even rebellion. The one who testifies signs a ‘compassionate pact’ with the one who receives the testimony, just as someone who writes an autobiography signs what Phillipe Lejeune calls an ‘autobiographical pact’ with the reader.”<sup>13</sup> Individual psychological subjectivities then risk translation into political categories. Wieviorka argues that individual stories of traumatic events atomize larger historical events, that stories in their subjectivity may erode the history as a researched, more objective telling of events. Yet, I argue, testimony strongly appeals to the reader-listener's intellect, particularly when reading comprises a space of reflection that permits ethical consideration of a story and its facts (facts oftentimes, as with literature of the Shoah and other narrative accounts of extreme violence, have been newly established in the text itself). Wieviorka notes a shift in the evolution of testimony. As events are told they move from private to public, becoming part of a collective and political realm; they are transformed into stories and critical arguments in the process. History is not exclusively representational—a recounting of events and facts and their

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 10:40-43. The Greek form of apostles, “Apostolos” (Ἀπόστολος), signifies a messenger, an envoy, a person sent forth. The apostles carried Jesus's teachings into the world as an act of witness.

<sup>12</sup> Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory*, 269.

<sup>13</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 143.



connections; history is also a telling of human experience from an autobiographical and, thus, an intimate viewpoint.<sup>14</sup>

From the personal nature of literature, more specifically from writing and subsequent witnessing, Wieviorka's concerns arise. She details that in the immediate post-war years personal, individual memories, confined within close, family-like groups, had been generated from the moment the events took place. But these memories, which held the possibility of becoming narratives, were not part of the cultural mainstream and had thus little political meaning. To acquire political weight events must enter into public discourse and memory. Before the memory of the *Hurbn* [destruction] could penetrate the public sphere, the political climate would have to change. Testimony would have to become relevant beyond its personal [private] meanings. Its importance would have to be recognized by society. This would take place with the Eichmann trial, but the price would be alterations in the content and meaning of this memory.<sup>15</sup> Shared memory becomes something other than private memory; it is transformed in the sharing exchange. An implied concern is that truth-value is lost; the closeness to facts becomes diluted through narrative retelling and the repeated conjuring of memory in efforts to share with others, who very may well become readers.

The term *poetry of witness*, introduced by poet and human rights activist Carolyn Forché in "Reading the Living Archives," descended from literature of the Shoah and suggests that such poetry has been complicated by philosophical, religious, linguistic, and psychoanalytic understandings of "witness." Forché posits witness as a mode of reading rather than writing, of readerly encounter with literature of that-which-happened. In ethical reading the reader engages narrative as evidence in which "language is a life-form....This evidence continues to mark human consciousness." In the aftermath of this evidence, we read "the mark or trace of extremity."<sup>16</sup> The reader is marked by the encounter with the evidentiary text, which is the experience and its aftermath rather than a representation of it. Forché's sense of witness, grounded in Emmanuel Levinas's ontological argument for infinite responsibility to the other as reflective of self, is experiential in its crossing from writer to reader. It stresses relationship and ethicality in reading through responsibility and attention to the other's experience, to the living material of language and the energy of story that stays

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<sup>14</sup> This transition of the historical into narrative form is not unproblematic for Wieviorka, as a portion of her argument in *The Era of Witness* concerns the personalization of history or the narrativizing tendency of historical presentation.

<sup>15</sup> Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Forché, "Reading the Living Archives," 167.



inside and changes the reader. This conceptualization of witness eliminates representation as a screen or barrier between the writer and the reader and makes the text the direct experience of trauma. Trauma is then read in its fragmented language; yet, that fragmentation must still be signed and signaled, in punctuation, diction, and tone.

Pisanty in *The Guardians of Memory* offers a check on witness as an experience of the sacred or divine that is then transferred to the reader or listener through the linguistic act. She argues for the scientific method when considering the validity of witness narratives. She might disagree with Forché and Levinas' approach to narrative as primarily presence or actuality over representation in language, and she expresses her concerns with an almost biblical mimicry, "the word is the thing, as if it drew directly on the substrate of events it speaks of...without fractures or intermediate elaboration: a natural sign, a revelation, an intuition that goes beyond logical-discursive thinking." The danger is that "through the witness's physical presence, those who were not there can annul the distance between past and present and are thrown, teleported so to speak, into the heart of the event."<sup>17</sup> Reverence for a writer's story and words, its infallible and all-encompassing memory, risks a non-critical space where the reader jettisons interpretative rationality and skepticism for the writer's witness as absolute and full truth, as if the reader were "teleported...into the heart of the event." Let's hold Pisanty's concern for the quasi-sacred nature of testimony with Forché's supposition that fractures—and fragments, questions, aphorisms—appear in lines across the page and within the words that compose those lines. The interior state of fragmentation that arises in and through traumatic occurrences resides in the language, meditated by body, which encompasses mind, that has suffered. Not as sacred or divine but as reflected in the physical manifestation of an art form, in this case, prose and print. Such elevation of testimony may lead a reader into false reality, the sense of a preferential meta-channel that through contact with testimony gives access to moments of ascetic ecstasy or profound insight, as Pisanty contends.<sup>18</sup> Yet, and still, language in its representation carries the affective residues and ethical compromises of traumatic experience.

Within the context of reading and teaching Levi's work, as well as other works of traumatic recounting, I take Pisanty's concerns seriously. Crucial to creating dialogue with and among students is space to process, discuss, and share narratives of trauma, allowing varied critical and emotional responses. Some students have their own trauma that arises in reading traumatic histories and contemporary events. It is incumbent on teachers to surface and

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<sup>17</sup> Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

discuss this complex range of response that includes, sometimes all at once, repulsion, fear, empathy, anger, sadness, critical curiosity, and respect. These spaces permit students to enter thoughtfully and with courage into their writing in response to a traumatic text. Readers are in critical relationship with a text and its story over an extended period of time. Reading, and writing in response, is a [radical] reflective exercise, that develops with practice and time.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND INTERSUBJECTIVE

Human beings translate meaning, in part, through the body. In the mid-twentieth century Maurice Merleau-Ponty, influenced by the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, furthered his thinking on a phenomenology of perception, focused on the body as a locus of knowledge. Knowing from a phenomenological view is located in the body through sensory engagement—sight, hearing, smell, touch, exposure to the elements and in the natural world, through physical proximity and distance, and emotional responses to the environment. Witnessing moves through periods of time and space in acts of reading and writing. Humans live in a world of created, living, dying, regenerating, and transmogrifying things. Partly, we inherit that world in reading. We receive historical accounts of human activity and thought across culture, through historical time, and over borders drawn through the dividing work of conquering nations and through territorial wars and disputes—often cultural, religious, and economic in nature. Writing is a response to witness. We write because we are witness to personal experience, to the experiential spaces of fellow beings and we share and relate stories with others. The work of writing traumatic experience and the engagement of reading such experience then converge symbiotically in the practice of witness as relational and co-extensive.

For Merleau-Ponty the human relationship with history is a dynamic inquiry into the present rather than an attempt to solve contemporary problems. He writes in “The Crisis of Understanding,” “Perhaps history will eliminate, together with false solutions to the human problem, certain valid acquisitions as well. It does not locate its errors precisely in a total system. It does not accumulate truths; it works on a question that is confusedly posed and is not sheltered from regressions and setbacks.”<sup>20</sup> He continues that in each distinct time period humans encounter their problems unique to that time and its conditions. History then is not an answer, a lesson, a resolution, or a solution. “Historical epochs become

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<sup>19</sup> See below for Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the term *radical reflection*.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, 340.

ordered around a questioning of human possibility, of which each has its formula.”<sup>21</sup> In reading literature of trauma, we are reading the failures of humans to maintain collaborative social spaces and witnessing the progression of violence into daily human life, to the point that meaningful life and all that supports it has been destroyed. This knowledge has to necessarily inform any exploration of possibilities. Violence annihilates the first person and it reduces collective life. The writer-witness reconstitutes a participatory self in writing. Speaking and writing from this destruction the writer creates a collaborative pact with their readers; thus, the writer regains self and relations with a wider community and public.

Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* focuses on subject position and agency of the “inner witness,” a concept introduced by Dori Laub, researcher of trauma psychosis and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine.<sup>22</sup> Violence intends to destroy the experience of an expressively unique self.<sup>23</sup> “Oppression and domination succeed by undermining, damaging, or annihilating. . . the inner witness necessary for the process of witnessing to support itself. . . Dialogue with others makes dialogue with oneself possible. In order to think, talk, and act as an agent, the inner witness must be in place.”<sup>24</sup> The self in this formation *is* the inner witness, the one who sees, notes, absorbs, processes, reflects, and through writing, in this case, shares with others. The inner witness is relational with self and then in dialogical relation with others through the act of writing. As the structure of witnessing is dialogic, the self must be constituted in address to and response from others. Witness creates a conversation with the inner observer in remembering and reconstituting self. It is then essentially relational, and compositional when it occurs in written language. Because it is relational and compositional it is ethical in its request for response, and in its desire to return to shared human life.

Forché conceives that “the poem’s witness is not a recounting, is not mimetic narrative, it is not political confessionality and it is not simply an act of memory.”<sup>25</sup> The poem then bears witness as a political and ethical act. The poem stands in for experience, not simply representing but constituting it in the act and form of witness. Language carries trauma,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 341.

<sup>22</sup> See *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Routledge, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved (in The Complete Works)* of “useless violence,” “an end in itself, designed solely to create pain; sometimes for a purpose but always redundant and always disproportionate to that purpose,” 2486.

<sup>24</sup> Oliver, *Witnessing*, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Forché, “Reading the Living Archives,” 162.

delivers the energy of witness and its residues. Writing is not simply representation but reality. The self that has been violated constitutes itself again in language. In seeking out another, the writer finds the reader who helps make experience real, who makes experience exist again relationally. Language *is* the wound. The language may be fragmented and varying, pocked with “questions, aphorisms, broken passages of lyric prose or poetry, quotations, dialogue, brief and lucid passages that may or may not resemble what previously had been written.”<sup>26</sup> Language as the material container through which the wound is felt, experienced, and expressed becomes, through the writer, the reader’s wound. The reader assumes in reading the transference of this wound. The wound infiltrates thought and informs actions. A writer and their readers live the knowledge of this wound and allow themselves to be moved and changed by its existence. The wound need not be appropriated as the reader’s very own suffering, but carried or held in such a way that the reader recognizes suffering as a human condition that requests response. Language and conversation are spaces of the self’s formation and its knowing. After grave trauma, the self gradually reenters the world, creating a life in and through ethical relationships with others. Levi’s title *If This Is a Man* is an unfinished and, hence, dependent conditional clause that awaits its independent partner to become complete. The fragmentation of the title leaves the readers with a possible question and a possible statement. The reader dwells in the midst of an incomplete and anticipatory fragment awaiting some possibility, some whole, and some type of completion. The content of the text is determined partly by the author’s desire to detail in narrative intersubjective relations with those he encountered during the deportation process and once at the camp, as well as the writer’s need from and mandate to his readers. The relationships that Levi recounts are themselves unfinished, truncated in their midst by disappearances and murder, by acts of genocide. At certain moments, there is deep regret for not knowing something at the time in relation to the future that would come. The deprivation of the prisoner’s life is implied as Levi remembers a moment of food among friends. “I see the spaghetti which we had just cooked. Vanda, Luciana, Franco and I, at the sorting-camp when we suddenly heard that news that we would leave for here the following day; and we were eating it (it was so good, yellow, filling), and we stopped, fools, stupid as were were—if we had only known! And if it happened again...Absurd. If there is one thing sure in this world it is certainly this: that it will not happen to us a second time.”<sup>27</sup> This is the space of death, of zero reoccurrences. There is regret in a momentary glance

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>27</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man* in *The Complete Works*, 70.

backwards and the absurdity of hope and a future. The work of ethical reading lies ahead for readers at the outset of Levi's narrative account, which, to echo Forché's understanding of a poetry of witness, saturates the reader in broken connections, fragmentations, regrets, questions, and "lucid passages that may or may not resemble what previously had been written."<sup>28</sup>

The reader's engagement with and response to history in narrative form is a practice of ongoing, lived witness taken into body and mind, seeded with an exploration of curiosity, contemplation, and desire for what is possible in our relations with each other and the world in which we live. The human quality of narrative becomes integral to our knowledge, to who we are and how we live and conduct ourselves in the world. This thought is expressed in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception (PP)* as well, where intersubjectivity becomes a space of simultaneous individual and general experience of being human. "My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual and absolutely general. Our being in the world is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity. Provided that this is so, there can be situations, a sense of history, and a historical truth."<sup>29</sup> Sense [*sens*] also constitutes a wakefulness that elicits response in each reader.

Michael Berman in "Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna: Enlightenment, Ethics, and Politics" writes that both for second century Indian Buddhist monk Nagarjuna and for Maurice Merleau-Ponty freedom is "the total emersion into the existence of the lived body within the context of its essential or originary sociality. It is the recognition and acceptance of the fundamental interconnectedness of oneself with not only the world environment, but also the people who coinhabit it. Our existence is ethical at an originary level."<sup>30</sup> *Emersion* connotes a movement outward; we merge toward others, taking part in the world through our lived body and our lived experience. Human life recognizes itself in relational connections; it goes toward understanding among selves, and the ethics that arise from it are rooted in lived life. An energy of infusion characterizes the knowledge of individual consciousness paired with a "general" or shared experience of being human, similar to ideas of interdependence and mutual co-existence explored in Buddhist philosophy. Such an infusion acknowledges both the individual distinctness and collective nature of each human

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<sup>28</sup> Forché, 167.

<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 474.

<sup>30</sup> Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, 220.

life. Pathologist Neil Theise argues in *Notes on Complexity* that on cellular and molecular levels humans are not separate but rather a holarchy or conglomeration of energetic forms that overlap, intersect, and respond, or fail to respond, to one another. “Thus, the world is made of potentials, of possibles akin to Kauffman’s adjacent possible. Then our minds consider the world, and as we choose the moment to gaze and the perspective from which to gaze, the world takes form.”<sup>31</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh conveys “mind” in Buddhism as a space of physical, emotional, and intellectual processing and activity.<sup>32</sup> “Every object of the mind is itself mind.” The objects of mind are dharmas, often grouped into five categories or the five aggregates,

1. bodily and physical forms;
2. feelings;
3. perceptions;
4. mental functionings; and,
5. consciousness

Consciousness in this framework contains all other categories and forms the basis of their existence. We meditate upon these five aggregates to perceive the interdependence of all things. A table is not simply a table but contains traces of forest, sky, iron in the nails, the carpenter, his ancestors, sun and rain. We understand that we are not separate from one another and from things, and that the seeming “object” of knowledge is also the “subject” of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> In this formation, action is a form of witness. To be steeped in witness as an approach to living is to move with compassion, the recognition of impermanence and the fleeting and rare nature of our existence on the earth. History then is not a thing to be studied at every moment or even a memory or a story. It is a space of existing with beings through time. The only way this kind of existing could happen is through compassion, both in the midst of knowledge and unknowledge, which if we are not respectful could be a kind of ignorance. Such knowledge releases us from obscuration of mind and from suffering that comes of a sense of isolation.

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<sup>31</sup> Theise, *Notes on Complexity*, 86. [Stuart Kaufmann is a polymathic physician and theoretical biologist who has explored the biological implications of complexity. He defines the adjacent possible as radical emergence. The biosphere is creating its own future possibilities of becoming that emerge evolutionary niche areas as species occur. A single species will give rise to the evolution of other new species.]

<sup>32</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, writer, scholar, activist, and teacher nominated by Martin Luther King for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. For more about his life and work see <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/biography>.

<sup>33</sup> Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, 46.

Merleau-Ponty posits that to engage an activity is to recover it from the up until now un-engaged. It is to bring from the experienced and the imagined the newness of somethingness. It is to make something—however abstract—exist in the world to self and for others. Yet, the unreflected is not the non-reflected. “To reflect is to recover the unreflected.” The “un” awaits its actualization. Radical reflection is reflection that attempts to understand itself.<sup>34</sup> It asks: “What do I know?” rather than stating that it knows nothing.<sup>35</sup> This approach to knowledge provides a productive space of writing, energized by curiosity and wonder. To begin with *what I know* is more powerfully enabling to expression than feeling *I know nothing*. Yet, the witness submerges herself in humility. She writes from a place of uncertainty. She starts with the world of perception, which includes feelings, which includes thoughts, which involves, of course, experiences filtered in and through the body. Places in space are not objective positions in relation to the objective position of the body; they inscribe around us the variable reach of our intentions and our gestures.<sup>36</sup> In fact, as scientists such as Neil Theise suggest, we *are* place. We are already inscribed at a cellular and symbiotic level with that which we observe. Observation is a mode of participation. The body is in relation to space, adjusting itself to it and being shaped by spaces and our desires and needs within spaces.

Reflection creates a relationship with the past that reverberates in the present moment. Thus, in reflection that past, even *a* past, materializes. It may also be that a past exists but we do not yet have any particular relationship to it. Relationship happens not only in physical or mental visitation but in thought, image, memory, sensation, and feeling. The movement towards the “un-reflected fund,” a fund available or prohibited us on the basis of conditions, desire, and action, is a creative space. Creation is our relationship with this fund as it emerges into and gets processed in our consciousness. This is a space where narrative assumes form and alights. Every perceptual act appears as taken from an overall adhesion to the world. The manifold is not yet disassociated; the perceptual act is totally absorbed, not separate from, the world and our interaction in and with it. Perception is an action; it is also material on which we reflect and to which we respond, what Merleau-Ponty considers *radical reflection* in that it attempts to understand itself.<sup>37</sup> Perception is always in relationship to the world; as such, the body and consciousness of the human being is inseparable from this world. A Buddhist teacher and thinker might frame Merleau-Ponty’s

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<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 251.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 421.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 251.



notion of *adhesion* as co-dependent arising.<sup>38</sup> Entwining his philosophical inquiries with those of René Descartes, he reminds us that the early philosopher did not claim “I think, therefore I am separate and distinct,” rather he stated, “I think, therefore I am.”<sup>39</sup> A phenomenological formation could be: I think, therefore I adhere. In finding my (a) self in adhesion with the world, I think and realize my relations within the world. It is in reflection that we draw on the un-reflected fund available to realize self and our individual life in this shared world, in being in and drawing from, in mutual adhesion, and the availability of knowing that comes through being—in a body that is in the world and interacts with the world and that becomes a primary mode of knowing.

## 5. WRITING AND RECEPTIVITY

Writing is a space of receptivity that reader-writers cultivate as a practice. Practice becomes participation so that as a reader-witness each of us carries this interdependence into our writing. Creation then is a contemplative process. Lydia Davis writes of the materials of writing as co-extensive with the body. “The journal or writer’s notebook: a partial, externalized form of his or her mind. Just as, if we take notes on our reading, either in or out of our notebook, so that we don’t forget what we have read, then these notes become an externalized form of our memory.”<sup>40</sup> The most immediate, perhaps metacognitive, practice of witness is found in watching the body-self in a task while in simultaneity focusing on the task at hand. Watching becomes knowledge of the coupling of feeling, or sensation, and physical movement through space-time. At this subtle level observation *is* thinking. Observation is a form of meditation. Writing engages itself in relationship with the physical world. Davis admonishes that readers “Keep in touch with the physical world. There is a lot of emphasis on sex and violence—two forms of physicality—in our culture. That is partly the result of lazy, unimaginative writing...But maybe it is also a crude substitute for the physicality that has in general been lost from our daily life. Imagine how physical life used to be.”<sup>41</sup> We are in our bodies while engaging physical movement. Witnessing, we notice how we move from task to task. Writing comes from the body, from this sensate place. We recognize the world’s realness as we describe our physical, mental, intellectual, historical, political, and social spaces and times.

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<sup>38</sup> *Pratītyasamutpāda* states that all things (dharmas or phenomena) arise in dependence upon, or in relations with, other things.

<sup>39</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 421.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Essays One*, 216.

<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 253.

Phenomenology postulates the possibility of others, in part, through their culture productions. What is created of a first person, individual “I” perspective becomes a work that speaks to the “we,” the collective and cultural life of a society or societies. The part participates in the whole. “Others can be evident because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body along behind itself.”<sup>42</sup> We do not think of our perspectival views as independent of each other, as grounded and affirmed in an individual self. They slip into each other and are gathered together in the thing.<sup>43</sup> One perspective slides into another; perspectives are thus clustered in a single world in which all participate as anonymous subjects of perception. The perceptual occurs for Merleau-Ponty within a context of freedom; however, we recognize perception is not free when it is curtailed and quarantined by absolute power structures. In terms of traumatic literature, perspectives become possible in their conjuring, their shared presences, the need to speak a story and to make others witnesses so that you are un-alone and then together. The writer needs his readers who are, for him, his co-witnesses: “The dependent and indeclinable subject.”<sup>44</sup> Witness is an action, as well as a fact, a listening, a willingness and willfulness, an intention to see and hear, to think and meditate. Witness encourages interdependence between writer and reader and among readers. We become each other’s indeclinable, unavoidable and certain, subjects. “Evidentness, like perception, is a fact.”<sup>45</sup> Levi in *If This Is a Man* gives his readers facts; he makes fact evident; he imparts them as evidence in narrative form. Facts take on a life of their own; rather than fragments of information they bloom as dark, hopeful, despairing narratives connected by names and events and feelings, descriptions, perceptions, physical spaces, and memories that arose of the camp’s created environment and its extreme conditions. These stories manifest energetically in a world of compromised humanness, historical and contemporary humanness; these imparted facts reach into the present, connecting writer and reader through time and space, and asserting themselves into our dangerously close future.

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<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 368.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 369.

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