

Narrative Tensions: The Archive and the Eyewitness

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I rebel . . . against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way.

Améry xi

If you could lick my heart, it would poison you.

Yitzhak Zuckerman, *Shoah*, 196

How do eyewitness narratives affect the understanding of archival records — and vice versa?

Although archives often contain, among other things, eyewitness narratives, there is a basic tension between these two modes of recording that which has occurred. Archival material bears the imprint of the bureaucratic, of that which has been institutionally preserved. It gives us traces of the dead, evidence of the past that has been recorded but not (yet) brought into the public space of the published book, of the library or museum; it exists as a mnemonic device, as what awaits the coming of the researcher to be brought back to life. The eyewitness narrative, on the other hand, is always intensely personal, even if also collective. It insists on the importance of individual experience against the crushingly impersonal forces of history; it demands that we hear the story and the voice of the victim (against the hand of the bureaucrat); it presents us with the power of living memory, and of truth that will not be forgotten; it moves from the living to the dead, from the surviving eyewitness, who still performs the speech act “I witness,” to what is absent and can no longer be seen or heard.

The eyewitness narrative and the archive present us with fundamentally different forms of memory. The archive is a repository, a place of storage. It contains droplets of time — observations, registrations, notations, pieces of data that can reawaken a memory. The contents quietly await a return of a user or later researcher who can make use of this information. Yet the archive is also a lure: it promises contact with “original documents” and with what has been touched by the agents of history

— what was registered and recorded at the time, prior to the vicissitudes and reworking of memory. The archive is an in-between space: between the living and the dead, the personal and the impersonal, the public and the private, the fragment and the whole.

The eyewitness narrative, conversely, *demands* our time. It insists that *we* remember, and no longer be allowed to forget, what has been lived through and suffered by others. The eyewitness seeks to implant and imprint a living voice: a voice that registers the trauma of what should not have happened, and therefore must not be forgotten. Eyewitness testimony contains an imperative — you too must know, must remember, must bear the marks of the past — even as it states the impossibility of ever truly grasping the violations that the witness has undergone.

The contrast between these opposing, if intertwined, modes of memory and representation itself has a long history. Jacques Derrida, in his early essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” turns to Plato’s *Phaedrus* to stage and deconstruct the opposition between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*, between “living, knowing memory” and “re-memoration, recollection” (1981: 91), between living truth and “the active reanimation of knowledge” (108) on the one hand and the mnemonic device and the archive on the other. Plato juxtaposes two modes of memory — “what is truly written in the soul” (84) against what “is external and depends on signs that belong to others” (79), and Derrida asserts that what Socrates fears, the introduction of “forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn [writing]” (84), has of course always already taken place:

The space of writing, space *as* writing, is opened up in the violent movement of this surrogation, in the difference between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*. The outside is already *within* the work of memory. The evil slips in within the relation of memory to itself, in the general organization of the mnemonic activity. . . . Memory is thus contaminated by its first substitute: *hypomnēsis*. (109)

Derrida insists that we rigorously question and re-value the denigration of what has traditionally been regarded as the secondary, exterior, supplemental form of memory: “monuments (*hypomnēmata*), inventories, archives, citations, copies, accounts, tales, lists, notes, duplicates, chronicles, genealogies, references” (107).¹ He does not want to do away with

¹ In *Archive Fever* Derrida gives a different list of the hypomnesic: “of that which can never be reduced to *mnēmē* and *anamnēsis*, that is, the archive, consignment, the documentary or monumental apparatus as *hypomnēma*, mnemotechnical supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum” (1996: 11).

the opposition between these forms of memory — in *Archive Fever* he states (ironically?): “Let us never forget this Greek distinction between *mnēmē* or *anamnēsis* on the one hand, and *hypomnēma* on the other. The archive is hypomnesic” (1996: 11; emphasis added). But the rhetorical force of his writing is to give value to that which has previously been marginalized.²

Structurally similar is the often invoked opposition between memory and history. In *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi writes:

Memory and modern historiography stand, by their very nature, in radically different relations to the past. The latter represents, not an attempt at a restoration of memory, but a truly new kind of recollection. . . . The historian does not simply come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact. . . . No subject is potentially unworthy of his interest, no document, no artifact, beneath his attention. . . . The point is that all these features cut against the grain of collective memory which, as we have remarked, is drastically selective. (94)

Yerushalmi is arguing that the historian cannot be the “restorer of Jewish memory,” cannot “replace an eroded group memory,” or counteract the “decline of Jewish collective memory in modern times,” because the historian is operating in a different sphere and attempting “a truly new kind of recollection.”

Pierre Nora, in his essay “Between Memory and History,” plays upon and transforms these oppositions while still drawing on the force of these terms:

What we call memory today is not memory but already history. . . . Modern memory is, above all, archival. . . . The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs — hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age. . . . Memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin. (13)³

²The Derridean aftermath has produced a widespread suspicion of such terms and adjectives as presence, immediacy, lived experience, organic, and original, and led to a privileging instead of absence, artificial, mechanical, prosthetic, secondary, reproduced, and simulated. Postmodernism has been largely the aesthetic and intellectual legitimation of this reversal.

³Both Yerushalmi and Nora are in part responding to Maurice Halbwachs’s notion of “collective memory.”

The contrast here between remembering and recording, between what is “experienced from the inside” and “only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs,” is very close to Derrida’s claim that the “outside” begins “at the point where the *mnēmē*, instead of being present to itself as a movement of truth, is supplanted by the archive, evicted by a sign of remembrance or of com-memoration” (1981: 109). Yet whereas Derrida, with his typical deconstructive logic, concludes that “The outside is already *within* the work of memory. . . . Memory always therefore already needs signs in order to recall the non-present, with which it is necessarily in relation. . . . Memory is thus contaminated by its first substitute: *hypomnēsis*” (109), the historians define modernity as a temporal movement from *mnēmē* to *hypomnēsis*, from living memory to the archival.

Memorials and sites of commemoration necessarily raise questions about heterogeneous forms of memory. They seek to inform and to transform the person who comes to see them, and this person is always a latecomer, someone who was not present at an earlier moment to witness and be marked by what took place there. The violence or threat that these sites sometimes recall is itself often portrayed as the irruption of inhuman and non-human qualities within the realm of the human: the mechanical, inorganic, and death-driven taking the place of a living presence. Giorgio Agamben, writing at the opening of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin in 2005, again distinguishes between two types of memory in attempting to describe both the experience of walking through the field of large, concrete stelae and the relation of this above-ground monument to the underground Information Center beneath it. Agamben writes that, as one walks between the stelae,

one leaves behind one, step by step, the recollection that can be recorded and archived, in order to enter the unforgettable. Unforgettable and recollectable [or “memorable”; *Erinnerbares*] are not the same. One of the main services that Eisenman’s memorial performs is to remind us that the truly unforgettable cannot be consigned to any archive. (Agamben 2005)⁴

Here, the “unforgettable” is generated by moving into a non-representational field, an uneven grid of dark, blank stelae. Yet Agamben continues,

⁴The translation is mine from a German translation of Agamben’s text. I have translated *Erinnerung* as “recollection” and “remembrance,” although it could also be translated as “memory,” in order to differentiate it from *Gedächtnis*, which I have translated as “memory.” For a discussion of the distinction between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis* (in Hegel), see Paul de Man’s “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” and also Derrida’s discussion of this essay in “The Art of *Mémoires*.”

“In the memorial these two heterogeneous dimensions of remembrance are topographically differentiated . . . The immaterial threshold, that separates these two forms of memory, is the true place of the memorial.”⁵ The chasm between different tasks of memory and memorialization — such as between bringing the vanished details of past lives into our consciousness and grasping the irreversibility of loss, absence, and death; between revivifying the immediacy of an individual’s experience and portraying the collective, impersonal, and anti-human eradicatory violence of the State — cannot be bridged through the power and insistence of the “unforgettable” or by the full details and history of the recollectable.⁶

In designating the “immaterial threshold” as the true place of the memorial, Agamben moves away from what seems to be his privileging of the “unforgettable” over and against what can be “consciously called to mind” and archived.⁷ A memorial cannot fully synthesize “these heterogeneous dimensions of remembrance,” and designing a memorial, a museum, a historic marker, or an artwork always involves making choices about how to bring these competing modes of memory into play. The eyewitness narrative and the archive do not line up neatly with the oppositions of *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis* or of memory and history or of the unforgettable and the recollectable (and none of these oppositions are at all neat or simple). My aim with this brief overview has been not to establish a theoretical model but rather to begin to draw out these complicated dynamics of memory, and also to re-frame them, through examining the tension between the eyewitness narrative and the archive.

Simone de Beauvoir remarks, in her “Preface” to the transcript of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, “After the war we read masses of ac-

⁵ This brings to mind Derrida in “Plato’s Pharmacy”: “between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*, between memory and its supplement, the line is more than subtle; it is hardly perceptible” (1981: 111).

⁶ In his earlier book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben also speaks of the “unforgettable”: “On the one hand, what happened in the camps appears to the survivors as the only true thing and, as such, absolutely unforgettable; on the other hand, this truth is to the same degree unimaginable, that is, irreducible to the real elements that constitute it. . . . such is the aporia of Auschwitz” (12). In another passage that calls for further analysis he adds: “Testimony thus guarantees not the factual truth of the statement safeguarded in the archive, but rather its unarchivability, its exteriority with respect to the archive — that is, the necessity by which, as the existence of language, it escapes both memory and forgetting” (158).

⁷ In Eisenman’s original plans, there was to be no “Information Center” of any sort, but the German government, over his objections, demanded its inclusion. Eisenman has now come to embrace it, and also to embrace Agamben’s reading of the relation between what is above and below ground.

counts of the ghettos and the extermination camps. . . . In spite of everything we knew, the ghastly experience remained remote from us. Now, for the first time, we live it in our minds, hearts and flesh. It becomes our experience" (vii). In framing my paper as an interrogation of the eyewitness narrative and the archive, it is precisely against this goal of having the sufferings of others truly "become our experience" that I wish to argue. De Beauvoir longs for the work that can perform a (counter-)movement from *hypomnēsis* to *mnēmē*, from what has been passively registered to what is actively experienced and remembered. Her few words invoke multiple forms of overcoming the distance and boundaries that separate us from the horrific experiences of the Shoah (experiences which have too often been categorized as "inexpressible" and "incomprehensible," that is, in some sense infinitely distant): what previously had "remained remote" is no longer separated from us by an interval of space or time; what was external becomes internal; what had belonged only to others is now ours; what we had only read about we now live; and what we had known through repetition and reproduction ("masses of accounts") we now experience originally, "for the first time" (this movement from knowledge to experience is further emphasized by the progression minds — hearts — flesh). The ultimate form of this desire is brought to the surface by Art Spiegelman in *Maus II*: "I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!" (16).⁸

There are many grounds on which to question the hope that eyewitness testimony, or a work of art,⁹ can achieve this goal of collapsing distance and otherness. But an artwork that would successfully achieve such a task would also overcome and thus betray the extreme failures of understanding, intersubjectivity, sympathy, and enlargement of mind that

⁸One can find many examples and versions of this desire. Analyzing Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between "literal and exemplary memory," Carolyn Dean writes that Todorov explores "our desire, not to be victims in the present, but to *have been* victimized in the past" (62). Dominick LaCapra speculates that "Lanzmann's own desire to identify with the victim is based on an encrypted or hidden wound caused by the fact that he was not in reality a victim of the Shoah sharing the fate of his objects of study" (116–17).

⁹Lanzmann's stunning and very complex film raises multiple questions about testimony, art, and the nature of "eyewitness narratives"; an excellent new collection of essays edited by Stuart Liebman provides some of the key discussions. At its extreme, the collapse of distance would suggest that the viewer of *Shoah* should undergo something similar to the experiences of the victims, and should in turn be severely traumatized. Shoshana Felman's discussion of *Shoah* and of video eyewitness accounts in her book *Testimony* gestures in this direction.

underlie all that it portrays — failures that stem from a refusal to accept what is alien (what is extrinsic, what remains remote) within the possible horizons of “our experience.” Paradoxically, in order to understand and begin to grasp these processes of de-subjectification and transformation into something other than a human subject — that is, processes that eradicate sympathy, imagination, and intersubjectivity — it is the archive that one must experience: an alien perspective on the self, a transformation into records and files.

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Recently, I was directing a program for students studying for a semester in Berlin. I took them on visits to museums and historical sites, and when thinking of how best to introduce them to the importance of the Stasi (the state security agency) for life in the former East Germany, I was faced with the choice of taking them to the Stasi Museum, located in a wing of the Stasi’s former headquarters, a huge administrative complex with vast archives, or to the Memorial at Hohenschönhausen, the site of the Stasi prison and interrogation center, where the tours are all given by former inmates. In one place we would see the ministers’ offices, with the death mask of Lenin on Erich Mielke’s desk and the bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky (founder of the Cheka) in the hallway, decor resembling that of the first James Bond movies, and a fascinating collection of spying apparatuses. In the other, we would see the cells where inmates were tortured, and hear accounts of what it is like to experience the powers of surveillance, coercion, false accusation, and trial at the hands of a repressive regime. The perspective of the victim, or of state power: the eyewitness, or the archive.

Choosing a visit to Hohenschönhausen would suggest that the Stasi should be understood through its most extreme effects: the thousands who were brought in for harsh interrogation and imprisonment, rather than the millions who were surveilled or had files kept on them. A visit there emphasizes the eyewitness as the path to knowledge: only someone who has been there and suffered directly — and not just by having lived in the GDR — can convey the impression of the true power of the state security apparatus. This risks a metonymic effect, in which life in the GDR gets reduced to the more extreme examples of victimage: the notion that torture, confession, and being labeled an enemy of the state constitute the experience of living in a communist society. It also suggests that what has been written on the body — if not marks of torture,

at least the bodily experience of deprivations, confinement, and brutalization — is to be privileged as a mode of understanding over what has been written on paper (the files that describe the Stasi's observations of others, and its inner workings). At Hohenschönhausen, one is even invited to gain a bodily memory of being confined in a torturous position: not only to see the place where others had been made to stand or sit very uncomfortably for hours, but literally to put oneself in that place, at least for a few moments.

Conversely, what is introduced by a visit to the former Stasi headquarters? The operation of state power *exceeds* what can be witnessed. At the Stasi Museum, the tours are more about networks of information than stories of transformation. One learns about the breadth of the Stasi's information gathering systems, the depths of its penetration into most layers of society, its persecution of particular groups, and its relation to the ruling party (the SED). But it is much harder to convey the *ordinary* effects of this huge effort to collect information. Even if the casual visitor were allowed access to the miles and miles of files, simply perusing a few observation reports or reading some of the state's portraits of its citizens does not really go far in helping one understand how under this regime, to use Foucault's words, "destiny takes the form of a relation with power" (162).¹⁰

In juxtaposing these two sites, I want to suggest that only by considering the archive can one begin to grasp what the eyewitness actually bears witness to. I am not thinking here of the archive as primarily the place where one can find the "facts" (as Agamben seems to suggest), as the place where the raw and detailed elements of history are stored; nor as a place where secrets are revealed or where one can now find truths that had been hidden (though all of these aspects are important as well). The Stasi archive helps us to see the working of the archive both in a more ordinary sense — in modern society, the archive is the memory of the

¹⁰ Foucault is writing about the brief traces of lives left in eighteenth-century prison archives. He is fascinated by these texts "that played a part in the reality they speak of — and that, in return, whatever their inaccuracy, their exaggeration, or their hypocrisy, are traversed by it: fragments of discourse trailing the fragments of a reality they are part of" (160). He goes on: "All those lives destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear without ever having been told were able to leave traces — brief, incisive, often enigmatic — only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power. So that it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp them again in themselves, as they might have been 'in a free state'; they can no longer be separated out from the declamations, the tactical biases, the obligatory lies that power games and power relations presuppose" (161).

Other, on which our identities are always in part dependent — and also in an extreme and extraordinary version, in which the archive actively shapes and produces the identities of those it registers.

Our narratives of identity are not strictly our own. Who we are is always also now produced by archival machines that register, observe, and record our passage through the apparatuses of society — an inscription process which, to quote Plato again, “is external and depends on signs that belong to others” (79). The driver’s license, the school report card, the credit card receipt, the medical report are the artifacts we receive from our interactions with the gigantic bureaucracies of the state, the school, the financial system, and the medical-insurance complex. Our identities are also woven for us, and the archive is the loom.¹¹

The Stasi archives reveal a more active and coercive process. As Alison Lewis states, in an essay on the Stasi file as biography:

In almost all instances the Stasi manage to create something akin to the “biographical illusion” through its techniques of surveillance and its arsenal of policing measures. Thus, in many cases, the Stasi’s tales of dissidence converged with the lived experiences of the critical writers the Stasi pursued. Many of the individuals the Stasi branded as hostile or dissident were forced, sooner or later, to act out their Stasi-engineered destinies. . . . Invariably the two “stories” merged — that of the Stasi and the individual’s own life story — and these individuals were forced to live out the fiction that the state apparatus and the Stasi had fabricated about them. (387)¹²

In contrast to Oscar Wilde’s story of Dorian Gray, here someone comes to resemble the initially unrecognizable portrait that the masters had painted of their subject.

The archive is a treasure chest for biography, containing residues of social interactions and glimpses from the perspective of an organization and other people. These materials exceed what can be remembered and are not screened by the filters with which we understand and view

¹¹ Jefferson Adams states that Joachim Gauck, the head of the archives, “has rightly characterized the MfS [*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, that is, “Ministry for State Security” — JW] files as a ‘treasure trove of detailed information about daily life . . . which contemporary researchers can hardly ignore’” (31).

¹² Lewis’s notion of “biographical illusion” comes from Norman K. Denzin’s *Interpretive Biography*. Lewis writes that “the ‘biographical illusion’ only emerges when there is a correspondence between the logics of an individual’s life story, as perceived by the subject of the experiences, and of the history of a social group, field or culture” (387).

ourselves. From contact with the archive — and I am suggesting that modern life is a continual series of contacts with archiving mechanisms — what is recorded is reflected back to one in myriad ways, and shapes the sense of self and autobiographical narratives of identity. Autobiography is therefore also in part constructed out of the archive. Moreover, the archive is a haunting presence for all autobiography, as it incarnates a potential knowledge that exceeds our own: it generates the suspicion that someone or something knows us better than we know ourselves. Only in the unusual case (such as in East Germany with the Stasi) are there people in the archive assembling a portrait of a “suspect,” taking the bits of information and constructing a supposedly truer identity that the suspect keeps hidden from others. But the repository of bits of identity that are not under one’s own control remain for the (re)construction of others. This is the shaping power of *hypomnēsis* that Plato fears: control over oneself is lost when memory moves outside the self, and when the archive has the power to affect and change who one is.

Preservation of and access to the more than 180 kilometers of documents in Berlin presents a unique historical opportunity, where the eyewitness is no longer separated from the archive by any threshold, material or immaterial, and which infuses eyewitness narratives with archival memory, often requiring a drastic revision of what had been “experienced.”¹³ I want to take a quick look at a couple of examples, which describe encounters with the Stasi and later, after 1990, with the files that described these events. The first — that of Timothy Garton Ash — is an instance where the surveillance posed little danger to the subject, since he was a citizen of Britain. The second is at the opposite end of the spectrum: the victim, Peter Rügge, was imprisoned, interrogated, sentenced to death, and then after a reprieve forced to serve seven years in jail.

In his book *The File*, Garton Ash excerpts a few pages from his Stasi file about a visit he made to East Berlin in October of 1979, with details such as:

¹³One notorious example is the case of Vera Wollenberger, who discovered that for years her husband had been reporting on her to the Stasi. Another is that of Sascha Anderson, the chief impresario of the Prenzlauer Berg avant-garde scene in East Berlin in the late 1970s and 1980s. Many had refused to believe Wolf Biermann’s accusation that Anderson was a collaborator, but the files proved him to be correct, and the entire thrust of that cultural movement now needed to be reconsidered, if not simply dismissed.

16.07 hours

“246816” [the alias given him by the Stasi] was taken up for observation after leaving the Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse frontier crossing. The person to be observed went to the newspaper stand in the upper station concourse and bought a *Freie Welt*, a *Neues Deutschland* and a *Berliner Zeitung*. Then the object walked questioningly around the station.

16.15 hours

in the upper station concourse “246816” greeted a female person with handshake and kiss on the cheek. This female person received the code name “Beret.” “Beret” carried a dark brown shoulder bag. Both left the station and went, conversing, to the Berliner Ensemble on Brechtplatz. (7–8)

Later Ash returns home and reads his journal entries for those days and remarks:

The Stasi’s observation report, my diary entry: two versions of one day in a life. The “object” described with the cold outward eye of the secret policeman, and my own subjective, allusive, emotional self-description. But what a gift to memory is a Stasi file. Far better than a madeleine. (12)

The Stasi file, more in the style of Alain Robbe-Grillet than Proust, is a *mémoire involontaire* of a very different sort: the opposite of the Proustian conflation of memory and originary experience.

For Garton Ash, the file is a gift to memory because it allows him to recall and even track down the people whom he had encountered many years earlier, including the people who observed and recorded his activities. Later he describes reading his file as “being carried off by your poisoned madeleine” (42); the file, with a distance of nearly twenty years, presents a picture of himself that he now hardly recognizes and which produces embarrassment. As Derrida’s analysis of the *pharmakon* in “Plato’s Pharmacy” emphasizes, the drug (or madeleine) of memory is always also a poison. Yet this is more than a clash between two modes of memory, or between the outward and inward eye. The real poison of the file did not require a distance of twenty years. Despite the apparently neutral and objective character of the observations in the file, these memories of oneself by another were used by the Stasi to establish the true purposes and identity of the subject. Everything that falls under observation is opened to an ideological and political interpretation. The file contaminates every human interaction; “the cold outward eye of the secret policeman” intrudes the Stasi’s interpretive power into every encounter and conversation.

Garton Ash, like so many other readers of their files, describes how these seemingly innocuous, trivial, “objective” bits of information were assembled by the Stasi: “seemingly harmless snippets of information were stitched together into something altogether more harmful. That was how the whole system worked” (122); it was “precisely those tiny fragments they were interested in. Afterward they put them together, like archaeologists reconstructing a Roman pot” (139).

For Garton Ash, the Stasi mosaic of a potential spy — they were wondering whether he was working for the British intelligence agency (and he had in fact interviewed with the agency for a potential position) — did not take on a completed form, and he was only banned from reentering the country after publishing a harsh book about life in the GDR. As someone who was only a visitor, and who did not believe in the ideology of the state, Ash was relatively immune to the power of the archival apparatus. But one sees its coercive and transformative force acting on those who informed on him, who supplied these “seemingly harmless snippets of information,” especially on the *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IMs), the “unofficial employees” — or “collaborators,” as it is often translated — who informed on their colleagues, friends, and sometimes even spouses.

The Stasi’s own documents recognized the IMs as the “main agent in the struggle against the enemy” (Dennis 8): not what one sees in the Stasi Museum, or in the film *The Lives of Others*; not the listening and recording devices, or the low-level Stasi officers.¹⁴ The key element in the archiving system is the IM, the acquaintance, colleague, neighbor, friend, relative, or lover through whom every action, thought, or expression can find its way into a file. The IM is the medium by which the intrusion of the State into all spheres of life brings every detail of someone else’s life not into the open, but rather into the secret space of the archive.

The IMs falsified the lives of others. Not by misreporting the details of events, conversations, and plans to the Stasi but by potentially making every interpersonal interaction into something other than what the persons being informed upon thought it was at the time. Yet the IM is perhaps the person most corrupted or corroded by the intrusive power of the State (though of course not among those who *suffered* most from its

¹⁴Dennis’s essay provides a good introduction to the work of the Stasi in the 1970s and 1980s, and especially of its efforts at “operational subversion” — *Operative Zersetzung*. *Zersetzung*, which could also be translated as “decomposition,” “disintegration,” “disruption,” or “demoralization,” was a key objective for the Stasi in this period.

power).¹⁵ To enter into a prominent position in the GDR (such as becoming a professor), or simply to continue to believe in state socialism, required endorsing the logic of the state, and its power to carry out its most fundamental task, of remolding its citizens into a new generation capable of building and carrying forward a socialist society (and of eliminating its enemies). The official task of the IM was to “contribute to the comprehensive and secure evaluation and control of the politically operative situation and help clarify the question of ‘Who is who?’” (Miller 4). But in a society where everyone may be something other than they seem — any person can be a secret informer — to clarify “Who is who?” becomes impossible, and most of all for the IM. The IM is transformed into something *that one does not recognize as oneself*. It is not really surprising that Christa Wolf claims that she had completely forgotten that she had served as an IM when she was young, and that she recalled it only when reading her own file. A bitter madeleine indeed. The IM — and the line here between victim and perpetrator is often not easy to define — exemplifies but is unable to fully bear witness to the coercive, corrosive, and corruptive effects of the state’s desire to assemble and create portraits of its citizens. The archive haunts the IM: the loss of control over narratives of identity — providing accounts of a second person for a third party, but with all these memories to be stored, processed, and pieced together elsewhere, and by another — marks everything that the IM recounts and remembers.

At Hohenschönhausen, my tour of the prison was led by Peter Rüegg, who had been imprisoned there (and in Potsdam) for 18 months, between 1959 and 1961. At the time of his arrest he was an officer in the East German border police, did his work conscientiously, and was not opposed to the state. When they came to arrest him, he was quite sure that the people who knocked on his door and said that he needed to leave immediately were about to offer him a promotion. He was accused of attacking the basic ideological principles of the socialist state, of hindering the

¹⁵The IM was often a member of a church, peace, environmental, or cultural group that was seen as potentially resistant to the State — that is, he or she was already working in some measure to transform society. To report on one’s colleagues was often justified (by the IM) as bringing visions for reform to the attention of someone in a position of power, although of course it also subverted whatever resistance may have been at the heart of the group’s activities. The contradictions, from the outside or in retrospect, seem unsupportable: to violate the trust of one’s friends and colleagues, while claiming to work toward building a better society. In this inability to recognize something wrong in becoming part of the archival machine one sees its insidious operation.

effectiveness of its armed forces, and of thwarting the implementation of the party's decisions. All this came as a complete surprise, and through months of interrogation, he came to know the flimsy basis on which these accusations had been brought — in each case, a chance remark to a colleague, acquaintance, or friend that did not praise the work of the border police or of the Soviet Army had been reported by someone, recorded in a file, and interpreted as slandering the GDR.¹⁶

The Stasi operated through an immensely suspicious form of reading: any chance remark acknowledging problems or difficulties in daily life could be construed as an attack on the ideology of the State. Rüegg himself asks, in a book about his experience that he finally wrote in 2005, “How can one make a premeditated felon out of an innocent man who hasn't committed any crimes?” (162), and he responds: “Very easily, like from a recipe book. One looks for a suitable victim, and one compiles, through informers (Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter, IM), many small pieces of a mosaic” (163). The Stasi needed a scapegoat (as an excuse for any shortcomings in the operation of the border police and as a warning to others about what might happen if they were to express discontent), and through a diligent collecting of fragments from someone's personal life, the desired portrait — of an enemy of the state — could be assembled for anyone.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect is the way in which these seemingly distorted portraits begin to resemble more and more the person they are meant to describe. For the dissident, less change is necessary; individuals who sympathize with socialism but who openly resist some of the policies of the state, are (in the words of Alison Lewis that I have quoted), “forced, sooner or later, to act out their Stasi-engineered destinies.” For Rüegg, who started with no antipathy to the GDR, Hohenschönhausen is the place of transformation. The more he is made to see how he is viewed by others (which is also the more he comes into contact with the perspective and logic of the Stasi), the more he understands

¹⁶For instance, one morning when a group of men did not get out of bed early enough to perform their required morning gymnastics, and when an older officer — who had served in the German army during WWII — complained to him about that at breakfast, he remarked: “And how would that situation have been handled when you were in the Army?” When told that it would have been handled by a sergeant, without needing to call in a captain, Rüegg responded, “Back then [when the Nazis were in power] a sergeant had more authority than a captain today” (48, 114). He was charged by the Stasi with glorifying fascism, and with opposing the anti-fascist GDR by suggesting that the fascists were better able to motivate their troops. All translations from Rüegg are mine.

the repressiveness, irreality, failings, and injustice of the State. He thus comes to accept the portrait made of him in two ways: he openly confesses his “crimes” in order to put an end to the humiliating, frightening, and exhausting process of interrogation; and he begins to think critically and antagonistically, that is, to think almost in the manner described in the accusations made against him. It is almost impossible to avoid this internalization of the identity that others have constructed. The archival portrait becomes his own reality — it is not only written on his body (through the physical coercion of imprisonment) but also written on his soul, and is no longer simply “hypomnesic” or the signs of others.

The eyewitness here is also a product, even a function of the archive. Rüegg can only really bear witness to the transformative power of the archive — to the archival assembly of the fragments of a life into the detailed portrait, and to the power that this portraiture exercises — after 1989, after gaining access to his file. Throughout the judicial process, in a Kafkaesque manner, not only the contents of his file but also the full slate of charges were kept secret from him. Before 1989, he could testify to the mental and physical anguish that he had undergone — to the psychic pressure, inhuman imprisonment, uncertainty about what was happening to his family, and especially to his self-doubt (168). But only later was it possible to answer the question of *How* he was made into an enemy of the state. Gaining access to the archives helps defuse the psychic pressure and uncertainty that had transformed him into someone and something else, but it is not restorative: it does not make him “whole” again or return him to an earlier condition or fuse the “heterogeneous dimensions of remembrance.”

The archive helps us understand the powers of transformation illustrated by eyewitness narratives, but returning to the archive cannot itself provide a compensatory transformation — one that would restore a feeling of autonomy, or of concord between self and society, or reconcile disparate forms of memory. Nor can the encounters with these materials make us “whole” again, filling the gaps in our knowledge, overcoming our belatedness, and letting us finally know “what it was really like” or “how it really happened.” I am not suggesting, therefore, that we attempt to bring together the eyewitness and the archive so as to meld these differing perspectives into a more complete vision. There will always remain a threshold between different dimensions of remembrance.

The Stasi archive presents an exceptional opportunity for considering the tensions between the eyewitness and the archive. In this instance, the transformative power of the archive has behind it the coercive force of the

secret police, and the potential violence of the State against its citizens. The apparent neutrality of observations such as “in the upper station concourse ‘246816’ greeted a female person with handshake and kiss on the cheek” belies the power of the authorities to shape in part the destiny of those under their surveillance, and, at the limit, even to execute their targets. It is also an extremely extensive and largely intact archive. Not only the potential but the actual archivability of the event is at work here — material records can be consulted, and to an almost infinite extent. The massive records, along with the recent plethora of writings by and about those who were subjects of interest for the Stasi, offer a rare opportunity to juxtapose individual eyewitness and archival accounts. The language of observation can be contrasted with the narrative of lived experience; the impersonality of the bureaucratic apparatus can be set against the urgency, drama, or suffering of an (auto)biographical voice; and the disparities but also the interactions between sharply different purposes and frameworks of interpretation can be graphically displayed.

I want to conclude by suggesting the extension of this analysis beyond these particular examples. The contrast I have drawn here between the eyewitness and the archive, and even the claims about the power of the archive to shape and transform the eyewitness, do not depend mainly on the contingent factors of this particular archive — its production by the most coercive branch of state power, the continued existence of the archival documents, and the recording of information about so many particular individuals. These effects are to some extent generalizable, dependent on archivability, rather than on a specific archive. In contrast with the memories of the eyewitness, the archiving of an event involves a different form of registration, of retrieval, and of institutionalization. An archive offers the possible encounter not only with the traces of memory, but also with systemic processes of ordering and transforming experience. The archive and the eyewitness are the dominant, competing, and intertwined modes of authority that structure and perturb twentieth-century works of history, memory, and commemoration. We must engage and interrogate these modes if we are to do more than place (as Jean Améry exhorts us) “the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history.”

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