

## THE NECESSITY OF SPEAKING DESPITE UNSPEAKABILITY IN *AND THE RAT LAUGHED* AND *THE READER*

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### **ABSTRACT**

"How do we tell a painful story? Does it change the way we recall it? How will our next recipient recall it in their own individual way? Is art the only way to transfer emotional memory?" (*And the Rat Laughed*). A review of *And the Rat Laughed* by Nava Semel indicates that these are the questions the novel raises. In actuality, these are the questions that every generator and even translator (Hirsch 8) of a Holocaust story asks themselves. Gabriele Schwab writes, "people have always silenced violent histories" (46). Other than the external communal, national, or even global silencing of some violent histories, the silencing she is referring to is an internal, extremely personal one. She goes on to stipulate, "some histories... are so violent we would not be able to live our daily lives if we did not at least temporarily silence them" (46). Other than this mere day-to-day survival, there are a plethora of other reasons that make it nearly impossible for those who have suffered violent histories to tell their story. Schwab herself theorizes that the coping mechanisms required to make daily life possible not only affect one's memory, but their language in regards to their memory. Furthermore, tellers need a mode with which to tell their stories, which when coupled with the amount of criticism regarding limits of representation and authenticity, is not a simple task. The grappling that occurs with how to tell, when to tell, and why bother telling is embodied in the fictional characters of the grandmother in Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed* and Michael Borg in *The Reader*. Silenced for so long, the grandmother reveals the inner turmoil that all tellers of a Holocaust story endure when faced with the reality of telling. Yet despite these obstacles, there also exists the paradoxical imperative to tell. Schwab depicts this paradox as a cannibal, with the tale of a violent history slowly eating its way out of the teller (45).

This personification of trauma as it relates to the imperative to tell is also expressed by Michael Borg in *The Reader*. Being silent about his relationship with the much older Hanna for so long, Michael decides to write down their story, stating, "the written version wanted to be written" (Schlink 216). Supporting the imperative to tell and the personification of trauma, one must also consider postmemory and what Carol Kidron refers to as the "Ethnography of Silence." Each of these concepts imply that even when trauma is not explicitly told, it is still transferred. This kind of transference, as seen in both *And the Rat Laughed* and *The Reader*, is not only harmful to those who receive the trauma, but to the story itself. Without the details of the trauma, one leaves their story unclear and subsequently those who receive the trauma are left to interpret it without guidance. But as Michael expressed, violent histories *want* to be told and will be transferred, whether by the will of the teller or the trauma itself. Thus, despite the plethora of obstacles that face generators and translators (Hirsch 8) of Holocaust trauma that attribute to the impossibility of telling, the imperative to tell is ultimately not dulled as exemplified through both *And the Rat Laughed* and *The Reader*.

The silencing of violent histories as a coping mechanism to maintain normality in daily life leads to the formation of a psychic crypt, the loss and dulling of memory and language, and ultimately the inhibition of telling. In her essay *Writing Against Memory and Forgetting*, Gabriele Schwab outlines how Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theory of cryptonymy applies to Holocaust survivors. Abraham

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and Torok argue that the creation of a crypt implies that in order to survive, “traumatic loss... needs to be silenced and cut off from the world” (Schwab 45). Schwab cites this as an often unconscious coping mechanism for those traumatized. However, the suppression of memory eventually leads to traumatic amnesia, in which a memory has been suppressed for so long that it is difficult to recall the memory (Schwab 48). Crypts not only have a detrimental effect on memory, but on language as well. When one attempts to recall and express an encrypted memory, the language they use to convey the memory “becomes haunted, and haunted language uses a gap inside speech to point to silenced history” (Schwab 54). Thus, the trauma becomes impossible to reveal in its entirety. Furthermore, for those who have decided to tell their stories, the process of remembering the suppressed memory and finding the language and mode with which to reveal it becomes difficult.

The process of reclaiming the suppressed memory and finding the language with which to tell the story that contributes to the impossibility of telling, is illustrated through the grandmother’s inner monologue in the first part of *And the Rat Laughed* that exposes the crypt she has created. The narrator informs readers that what the grandmother should have talked about was “non-memory” (Semel 43). This term that Nava Semel uses is practically synonymous with cryptonymy and the void that it creates. As the grandmother is struggling to decide what and how to tell the granddaughter, she is also struggling to recall the memories accurately enough to tell them. The narrator explains that, “even in earlier times she’d been unable to put a face to the young man climbing down the steps. Couldn’t give him eyes or hair” (Semel 43). The grandmother’s inability to remember these details, that for her embody an incredibly traumatic event, is proof of encryption. Not only does the narrator reveal that the memories have been lost, but also the difficulty with which the grandmother restored them when they explain that, “only with great difficulty did the hazy silhouette of the farmer and his wife appear. She found excuses to avoid the hard labor of remembering, as if the time she’d spent in that hiding place had been excised” (Semel 43). This excised memory, as the book describes it, aligns perfectly with what Schwab would define as traumatic amnesia. The phrases ‘great difficulty’ and ‘hard labor of remembering’ are indicative of the formation of a psychic crypt in which the memories have been ‘excised’ to. After years of suppressing memory, the grandmother, even if she had wanted to, could not have given her granddaughter the details she was asking for, because the grandmother herself no longer had them. Thus, the grandmother’s formation of a crypt as described by Gabriele Schwab attributes to the impossibility of telling, as the grandmother’s story is now impossible to tell in its entirety.

A similar difficulty to recall memories, which ultimately contributes to telling becoming impossible, can be attributed to Michael Borg in *The Reader*. Parallel to how the grandmother grapples with the task of not only telling and finding the language to do so, but remembering the details of her trauma, Michael must also endure the difficult task of summoning suppressed memories. After Michael suffers the traumatic loss of Hanna, he exhibits behavior that is quintessentially cryptonymy. Specifically, the stark paradox of strong emotion and the subsequent lack thereof practically embodies the Schwab concept of haunted language. Schwab explains that, “as a rule, haunted language has vacated the emotions, the pain and terror pertaining to the silenced history” (54). Michael’s relationship with Hanna is his silenced history, or as Schwab would call it, his “secret.” Michael had “adopted a posture of arrogant superiority” (Schlink 88). Although the smallest gesture of affection would bring a lump to his throat, he could address his dying grandfather without emotion. Even to himself “this juxtaposition of callousness and extreme sensitivity seemed suspicious” (Schlink 89). Michael, in a parallel with language itself, has become ‘vacated of emotion,’ and therefore, was haunted just as language can be. Yet, even before the evidence of the crypt has become so obvious, there are signs of its formation and especially the effect it has on his ability to tell. Before Hanna had even left the city, Michael kept his “secret.” Michael is unknowingly discovering that he is in the process of encrypting Hanna when he admits that “I didn’t reveal anything that I should have kept to myself,” but “I kept something to myself that I should have revealed” (Schlink 74). Thus, Michael’s relationship with Hanna not only embodies the idea of a secret as this term is widely used, but also as this term is used by Schwab; the secret always refers to what is in the crypt (57). The trauma from his relationship with Hanna has prevented Michael from telling his friends about her. Although it seems inexplicable to him and he views it as a betrayal to Hanna, applying

Schwab's theory exposes the crypt that Michael has formed and the effect it has and will have on his ability to tell.

Other than the effects that suppression has on language and memory, authenticity, as it is described by Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, is yet another obstacle, another question that generators and translators of Holocaust narratives must confront, and in turn attributes to the overall impossibility of telling. Ezrahi describes the way in which critics judge a Holocaust story's authenticity as a system of concentric circles. In the center of these circles exists the concentrationary universe (58). Place and time are the two main concerns of authenticity. The longer one waits to tell their story, the further they are displaced from the "black hole" of the gas chambers, and the less authentic their work becomes. This means Holocaust purists will "validate only writing produced in the ghettos and camps themselves, claiming that their testimonial value adheres exclusively to that time and place" (54). Although there does appear to be more pressing matters for those who are grappling with how, when, or if to tell their stories, this validation of authenticity or lack thereof is something tellers are aware of and contributes to the impossibility of telling to some degree.

The time and place aspects of authenticity are vital when discussing how late in life the grandmother is telling her story and why authenticity has contributed to the impossibility of telling that plagued her until her old age. As a child in the Holocaust, the now old woman is quite displaced in terms of time from the 'black hole' that Ezrahi describes. According to the concentric circle theory the grandmother's story has become more inauthentic through the years of silence. However, the grandmother does not express a need to please purists who may be critiquing her story in the future. What she does is evoke how authenticity effects one's language and contributes to unspeakability in a far more introspective sense. The grandmother's language is affected by the rage she feels, and "it is rage that is forcing the story off course. How inarticulate and evasive that story sounds to her as it breaks free of her, removing itself from her grip" (Semel 39). The narrator even concedes that, "had the old woman told her story earlier, she might have been able to stifle her anger just a little" (Semel 39). Thus, what the grandmother reveals is that she personally believes that had she told her story earlier, she would have better control over it and would be able to articulate it better; because she believes that the story would have been more articulate and controlled at an earlier time, the grandmother resists telling it 1999. What is truly being evoked in this passage is that, even though the grandmother does not explicitly name it, authenticity in the form of comparing her story to what it might have been had she told it earlier, is preventing her from expressing her story at the present time and thus contributing to the impossibility of telling.

An issue closely related to authenticity, and one that similarly aids the impossibility of telling, is that of witnessing. As Ezrahi herself explains, "parallel to the hierarchy of authority ascribed to temporal and physical proximity is the hierarchy of persons" (56). Thus, it is not just when and where the story is told in proximity to when and where the event occurred that affects the story itself, but who is telling the story. Dori Laub analyzes this concept, called witnessing, at length. Laub establishes three levels of witnessing: 1. being a witness to oneself, 2. being a witness to others' testimonies, 3. being a witness to the process of witnessing (61-62). In a discussion of the imperative to tell juxtaposed with the impossibility of telling, it is necessary to analyze being a witness to oneself. In order to qualify as a witness to oneself, one must be completely removed from "the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside so as to stay entirely *outside* the trapping holes, and the consequent identities" (Laub 66). However, if trauma is to be personified as Schwab described, that is, trauma is a living entity attempting to breach the body of the teller, then "the Holocaust created... a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*" (Laub 66). If one cannot be a witness to oneself then one cannot produce a truly authentic story. Thus, for those affected by the Holocaust, the impossibility to be witnesses to themselves directly coincides with the impossibility to tell their stories.

If separation from the event and the trauma of said event is necessary to be a witness to oneself as Laub believes, then it would be impossible for either the grandmother or Michael Borg to be considered witnesses to themselves; accordingly, their respective failures to be a witness to themselves contributes to

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their longstanding inability to tell. It is clear from the way the narrator refers to the old woman that she has not yet separated herself from the traumatic events of her childhood. Not only does the narrator, as an introduction, explain that “the old woman is the little girl who once was” (Semel 6) but they then henceforth consistently refer to the grandmother as ‘the-little-girl-who-once-was.’ Now the verbiage in this introduction of the grandmother is extremely important. It may be the little who once *was*, but the old woman *is* the little girl. The implication is that since childhood, there has existed, at every age, within the woman, the little girl who she used to be. In a way, the little girl has been preserved and has existed, stagnate, within the woman her entire life. Nava Semel herself describes that when children survive the Holocaust and go on to live their adult lives that there always remains a “frozen child” within them (“Classroom Interview”). If the explicit description of the old woman remaining the child she once was, not only from the narrator but from Semel herself, was not enough proof, then it is surely made even clearer in the way in which the grandmother acts at certain points in the first part of the novel. Despite the passing of nearly seventy years between the first part of *And the Rat Laughed* (happening in Tel Aviv in 1999) and the time where the little girl’s parents left her, “whenever the doorbell rings... she walks to the door. As she faces the closed door, the sharpest spike of all jabs into her. Perhaps they’ve returned. They promised, didn’t they?” (Semel 52). The grandmother’s anxiety, or perhaps uncontrollable and illogical optimism, is indicative of her inability to separate from her trauma and by extension the events that caused it. The separation from the event is necessary to be a witness to oneself, and therefore, the grandmother cannot be one, a fact that augments her inability to tell.

It is also Michael Borg’s inability to separate from the traumatic event in his life that inhibits him from being a witness to himself and ultimately assists the impossibility of telling. Although the image of a frozen child is not as poignant as it is in *And the Rat Laughed*, Michael’s stagnate life does evoke a similar sense of lack of separation from the trauma in *The Reader*. The lack of removal from the event becomes evident when Michael must confront the daughter, the Holocaust survivor, on behalf of the deceased Hanna. The daughter seems impressively perceptive to trauma, and consequently is very observant to the trauma Michael suffered from his relationship with Hanna. After Michael discloses to the daughter that he and Hanna had started a sexual relationship when he was a boy, she remarks, “did you ever get over the fact that you were only fifteen when she... No, you said yourself that you began reading to her again when she was in prison” (Schlink 233). What the daughter is ultimately recognizing in Michael is his lack of separation from the event that traumatized him. Just as a frozen child existed in the grandmother, the boy who was madly in love with Hanna continued to haunt Michael. When Michael married he admitted that, “I could never stop comparing the way it was with Gertrud and the way it had been with Hanna” and even goes on to explain, “I wanted to be free of Hanna” (Schlink 172). Even though Michael is at the time a young adult, he is not ‘free’ from the woman who had left him years previously. Hanna is still very present in his life, as exhibited through the way in which he consistently compares his wife to Hanna. Even when the marriage was over, Hanna was still there. Since Michael believes that the problems that he and Gertrud had stemmed from her dissimilarity to Hanna, in approaching his future relationships he “admitted to [him]self that a woman had to move and feel a bit like Hanna, smell and taste a bit like her for things to be good between [them]” (Schlink 173). The haunting effect that Hanna consistently has on Michael proves that he is incapable of separating himself from her, and by extension, their relationship which serves as his traumatic event. The person telling the story is key to its authenticity as Ezrahi explains, and in turn a person can only be a legitimate witness to their own trauma if they are separated from the traumatic event; thus the inability for Michael to be a witness to himself and his trauma stimulates the impossibility of telling with which he struggles with.

Now that the when, where, and who of telling have been established as obstacles to trauma’s speakability, the how of telling must also be addressed. The way in which a story can be represented is a topic analyzed by both Hayden White and Berel Lang. Both theorists discuss how many attempt to represent the Holocaust as a historical event, meaning that there is an intense amount of emphasis placed on the ‘truth’ by critics of Holocaust literature. Although Lang goes on to argue that they are ultimately malleable and constantly changing, he does concede that, “limits are referred to as if given—as though, notwithstanding disagreements about what or where they occur, there could be no question that they exist” (53). White makes a similar concession when he discusses that if the events being represented are

to be considered as having a plot or story then “we can confidently presume that the facts of the matter set limits on the *kinds* of stories that can be *properly*... told about them” (39). Specifically, White described controversy over the genre in which Holocaust literature can be represented (38). Although both White and Lang go on to theorize how they qualify representations and whether there even are representations that are valid or invalid, the recognition that they both make, that there are these innumerable limits that are conceived for Holocaust literature, does contribute to the inability of those attempting to tell their stories to do so.

It is evident that the limits of representation manifest themselves in the grandmother’s inability to tell her story in *And the Rat Laughed*. From the very first line of the novel, it is clear that limits will be an obstacle: “How to tell this story?” (Semel 1). Not much farther along, the other poignant question when discussing limits arises: “How should this story be told?” (Semel 1). It is no wonder that these questions weigh heavily on the grandmother throughout the first part of the novel. The grandmother begins to tell her story in one way, stops, decides that mode is not the right way to tell the story, then proceeds to try a different way. The grandmother thinks of starting her story with “once upon a time, there was...” as that is the usual format for telling the type of story she knows her granddaughter is expecting, but “the story refuses to be told that way” (Semel 8). There is even the worry that referring to what her granddaughter is asking her to tell as a ‘story’ “implies something fictional, and may even allow the harsh details to be turned into anecdotes” (Semel 9). Just as White expounded on how genre contributes to the limits of representation, the grandmother grapples with what mode to tell her own account. As is revealed in the second part of the novel, the grandmother ultimately presents her story in the form of a legend. Just as White and Lang expand upon, when an *interpretation* of the facts is presented, rather than the mere facts themselves, as is done in an historical narrative, there are bound to be events left out, as there are in the grandmother’s legend. Yet it is clear that the grandmother struggled with how to tell her story, and imposed limits on how it could be represented, which led to not just those moments of silence but many years of silence, although the old woman did finally disclose her secrets in a mode that suited her.

The struggle with limits and the mode with which to tell a traumatic account is not as explicit in *The Reader*, however it is undoubtedly present and does clearly compound itself into the plethora of factors within the impossibility of telling. Just as the grandmother began to draft many versions of her story, Michael admits to having different forms of his as well. Since making the decision to write down the story of the relationship with Hanna “I’ve done it many times in my head, each time a little differently, each time with new images, and new strands of action and thought” (Schlink 216). Although Michael is not too specific about what the differences between the different versions of his story were, the fact that there exist multiple versions along with the one he wrote proves that Michael struggled with how to tell his story. Furthermore, Michael specifies that it was “soon after her death” that he decided to write the story of him and Hanna, and yet at what is presumably the time he actually wrote it all down “all this [had] happened ten years ago” (Schlink 216). An entire decade had passed between the point at which Michael decided that he was going to tell the story, to the time when he was actually able to write it. This proves that he was not only being careful drafting his story, but struggling with which version of his story would be the one to be written. Thus, not only the decade of silence between the decision to tell and the actual telling of the story but the years of silence previously can be attributed to questioning the way in which to tell his story, and perhaps the limits that restricted that telling.

In spite of not only the limits placed on representations of trauma, but the questions of authenticity and witnessing a traumatic event, along with the psychological effects that cryptonymy has on memory and language, the imperative to tell proves to be just that: imperative. In a response to a survivor who expressed the desire to survive the camps simply in order to be able to one day tell her story, Dori Laub eloquently wrote, “survivors did not only need to survive in order to tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive” (63). This coincides with Schwab’s personification of trauma as a cannibal that violently eats its way out (45). If the memories, traumas, and stories of the violent histories effecting the survivors are attributed life, and then accordingly their own desire to be told, then it perpetuates the idea that survivors and tellers must actively seek to silence the

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histories and keep them buried. Yet, as the old woman in *And the Rat Laughed* exhibits, the story's will to be told can eventually overcome the will of the body it lives in. Thus, despite the plethora of factors that contribute to the impossibility of telling, the personification of trauma assists the imperative to tell to overcome all of them.

The inherent power attributed to traumatic stories through personification is illustrated in *And the Rat Laughed* as not only being present, but as creating an environment where telling becomes imperative. On the very first page of the novel, the grandmother expresses just how much power she believes her story has when she fears that "if she were to give it a voice, the story would burst through without her being able to contain it, and its severed limbs would scatter in all directions" (Semel 1). The grandmother expresses a fear for the story as if it were living, as if it could physically harm her. This same thought is explicated later on when the story is given a voice; it says:

Don't turn your back on me, the story seems to be imploring in an almost human voice. The deeper it was buried, the wilder and stronger its roots, though the old woman had deluded herself into thinking that she had managed to sever its limbs and eradicate it. Now it is her turn to implore, to beg her memory to set her free (Semel 20).

Although it would be natural to assume that one is the master of their own memories, their own stories, their own trauma, it is clear that this is not always the case. This passage expounds upon the idea that after years of suppression and silence, the trauma's will may become stronger than the will of the traumatized person it exists in. When even later in the novel it is revealed that, "the story keeps egging her on" (Semel 39), it proves that the story has a will of its own, and that it wants to be told. Perhaps the pressure to tell her story at this time and place did come from her granddaughter, but the overwhelming amount of evidence indicates that the pressure was primarily coming from within. The personification of trauma was able to overcome all of the other factors that had so long plagued the grandmother with silence and she was finally able to express her story almost seventy years after the events occurred.

Compounded with the personification of trauma, the concepts of postmemory and an ethnography of silence, encompassing the idea of transmission, explain why the imperative to tell can become much more overwhelming than the impossibility of telling. The common thread between Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory and Carol Kidron's theory about an ethnography of silence is that trauma and memory can be transferred without the originally traumatized person ever explicitly relaying their story. Simply and paradoxically put, telling can happen without telling. Specifically, Kidron stipulates that, "ethnographic accounts of Holocaust descendants depict the survivor home as embedding the nonpathological presence of the Holocaust past within silent, embodied practices, person-object interaction, and person-person interaction" (1). In everyday life, in seemingly simple interactions, the traumatic past can be transmitted to another. Hirsch transcends the mere ethnographic analysis of the transmission and expands it to encompass memory by arguing that the:

descendants of victim survivors as well as of perpetrators and of bystanders who witnessed massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they identify that connection as a form of *memory*, and that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transferred to those who were not actually there to live the event (3).

In accordance with what has been previously discussed, the significance of how strong the connection can be between the survivor and those they interact with can be attributed to just how strong the trauma itself is, and perhaps even just how much it fights to be told. What Hirsch's and Kidron's theories emphasize is that in spite of silence from the traumatized, the memory and trauma of the event will be transferred. The implication of this is not just that the imperative to tell is so strong that even those who have chosen silence will unwittingly transmit their trauma in some way, but that perhaps if one is aware of this, they may choose to make their story explicit so that it will at least be transmitted with some control.

Although the novel opens on the grandmother about to tell the story to the granddaughter, the narrator is careful to explain that the story had never been explicitly given to the old woman's daughter. The narrator is similarly careful to explain that this was a mutual act of avoidance, stating, "somehow it always seemed as if the story could endanger the offspring and maybe even jeopardize the chain of birth-giving" (Semel 31). This is precisely what happens even despite the fact that the old woman never shared her story with her daughter. The unwitting transference of trauma is embodied in the fact that the daughter believed that "she had a story too, one that was no less important than her mother's" (Semel 46). This feeling of having a story like her mother's is evident that some of the trauma from the mother's story has transferred to her daughter through the ethnography of silence. In order to believe that her story is as important as her mother's, the daughter must have received some of the trauma and thus, feel traumatized as the old woman feels traumatized. The transference of trauma that occurs highlights how the will of trauma to be told contributes to the imperative to tell. Subsequently, the grandmother also seems to exhibit a recognition that not telling her daughter the story did not prevent her from being traumatized by it. This recognition can be proven by her willingness to not only tell the granddaughter the story, but to allow the granddaughter to have the power over the story after this first telling. The grandmother recognizes that "at a different time in her life, as late as possible, the granddaughter will arrange the story anew." This recognition causes a positive response in the old woman as she "smiles once again. In relief" (Semel 59). This relief could be a result of the old woman correcting the mistake of silence that she made with her own daughter. Ultimately, the grandmother did transmit trauma through the ethnography of silence to her daughter, and then in an attempt to correct this, told the story explicitly to her granddaughter, exhibiting both the will of the trauma to be told and the will of the traumatized to tell as these wills relate to the imperative to tell.

The workings of the ethnography of silence are exhibited in *The Reader* when the Holocaust survivor daughter is able to understand just how much Michael has been traumatized by Hanna, without him disclosing that information or possibly even understanding it himself. The extraordinarily perceptive Holocaust survivor is able to construct the events of Michael's life perfectly with just a few small pieces of information. Michael never discusses, or even really seems to recognize at this point, just how much the relationship he had with Hanna had influenced the path his life took. Yet, with just knowing that there had been a sexual relationship between the two when Michael was fifteen, and that he had gotten married afterwards, the survivor knows that, "the marriage was short and unhappy, and you never married again, and the child, is there is one, is in boarding school" (Schlink 213). Michael proves that this sequence of events is not one that he ever considered linking to his relationship with Hanna when he replies, "that's true of thousands of people, it doesn't take a Frau Schmitz" (Schlink 213). All evidence indicates that Michael's entire life had been affected by the pedophilic abuse he suffered at the hands of Hanna. Whether this was knowledge Michael had or not, the daughter was clearly able to gain that knowledge through a very brief conversation with him. This seemingly ordinary "person-person interaction" as Kidron would call it, yielded Michael's trauma being revealed without him consciously decided to reveal it. The imperative to tell is exposed through the ability to relay trauma without explicitly discussing it, as is exhibited by this interaction between Michael and the daughter.

In spite of the various obstacles that confront those with traumatic histories to divulge, the imperative to tell those histories is able to overwhelm those obstacles that contribute to the impossibility of telling. Laub comments on the imperative to tell by explaining, "there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech" (63). Michael and the grandmother did grapple with the words with which to tell their stories, the time at which to reveal their histories, and who to express their accounts to. Yet, the most prominent piece of evidence to prove that the impossibility of telling can be overcome by the imperative to tell is also the most obvious: Michael and the grandmother told their stories. Despite the formation of psychic crypts that crippled their memories and their language, despite not being lucid witnesses to their own stories and their concerns over creating authentic works, and finally despite the pressure that developed over the limits within which their stories could be told, Michael and the old woman told their stories. Michael created the written account of *The Reader* to articulate his story. The grandmother expressed her history

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through the legend of *The Girl and the Rat*. There certainly exists, "in each survivor, an imperative need to tell, and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself" (Laub 63). This imperative, in spite of all the impediments and all the questions posed at the beginning of this essay, ultimately drives victims of violent histories such as the grandmother in *And the Rat Laughed* and Michael Borg in *The Reader* to do the impossible and speak the unspeakable.

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