Testimony *(trad. de l'article « Témoignagne »)*

Like the diary, memoirs, or autobiography, but at a later period than these three related forms, testimony gradually developed into a literary genre from a complex set of practices, both ordinary[1] and institutional. It is, inseparably, both a practice and an aesthetic form, and it is also caught between two temporalities: on the one hand, the long time frame of religious beliefs (such as Christian martyrdom, which is testimony through an act of faith), legal techniques (since antiquity, rhetoric has formalized the use of testimony, which in a trial provides "extra-technical" proofs), or disciplines such as history (originally, the *histôr* was a witness of "what he had seen", a third party vouching for events that pitted two groups against each other); on the other hand, there is the shorter time frame of its recognition as a literary genre, which can be traced back quite far – in France, for example, it dates back to the Wars of Religion, and more precisely to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre – but which is now widely associated with the First World War, because for the first time a whole generation that had learned to read and write made use of diaries, notebooks, letters, or memoirs to tell the experience of war as it was lived in the trenches. As Raymond Aron pointed out, the Great War, being "so much defined by the law of numbers, coal, and steel" (*Dimensions de la conscience historique* [*Dimensions of Historical Consciousness*], 1961), marked the disappearance of traditional heroes in favour of the unsung soldier. More importantly, the identification and legitimisation of testimony as a model for writing was promulgated as early as 1929 by a veteran, Jean Norton Cru, whose critical project was based on the primacy of direct experience (as he wrote in *Du témoignage* [*On Testimony*] in 1930, "that which contradicts our experience *is not the case*, whether it derives from the generalissimo, from Napoleon's memoirs, the principles of the Military Academy, or the unanimous opinion of all military historians"), and therefore on the need to distinguish between true witnesses and the materials produced by "non-witnesses" – whether the latter are involved in distortion, intentional lies, fabrication, aestheticisation, etc. Jean Norton Cru's position was radical in that it called into question both the methodological principles of historians (who are called upon to listen to those whom they would prefer to confine to the status of oral sources) and the fundamental values of literary writers (who are committed to the defence of fiction or style). He thereby set the criteria for the recognition of testimony as a genre.

The conditions for the recognition of testimony as genre

However, this recognition only arrived some time later. In "Témoignage du camp et poésie" ["War Testimony and Poetry"] (*Le Patriote résistant*, May 1948), Robert Antelme spoke of a "real profusion of expression" after the Liberation, which Annette Wieviorka later confirmed in *Déportation et Génocide* (Plon, 1992). Nevertheless, the conditions were still not in place at this time for a full legitimisation of the genre, nor were these conditions present at the moment of the controversies surrounding testimonies on "the question" published in the second half of the 1950s in order to condemn the crimes of the French army in Algeria. Although the Eichmann trial in 1961 marked the advent of the witness as a central figure in the public sphere, as Annette Wieviorka pointed out in *L'Ère du témoin* [*The Era of the Witness*] (Plon, 1998), the turning point did not really come until the late 1970s and the beginning of the "moment of enunciation", as Gilles Philippe put it, in which priority was given to the study of various pacts, starting with the autobiographical pact, and then later with the gradual shift to the "moment of memory", exemplified by the vast editorial undertaking of *Les Lieux de mémoire* [*Sites of Memory*] directed by Pierre Nora (Gallimard, 1984-1994). At this time the national history, shaken by the delayed aftermath of the Holocaust and tainted by the national memory of Vichy, was being reshaped by the collective memories that constituted it and that were breaking apart its ideological unity, while paradoxically calling for an act of arbitration. This socio-historical context provided a propitious ground for those developments of testimony from earlier in the century to finally come to fruition: Jean Norton Cru's undertaking in the 1920s had shown that it was necessary to reorganise the system of literary genres and create a space in it for texts in which the testimonial functions (which Charlotte Lacoste divided into four categories: attestation, homage, criticism, and education) are closely linked to the aesthetic dimension of the texts. Since this time a whole corpus has slowly emerged, dominated by the works of Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, David Rousset, Jean Cayrol, Charlotte Delbo, Élie Wiesel, Jorge Semprun… – testimonies from the Algerian war (such as those of Henri Alleg, Noël Favrelière, or Abdelhamid Benzine) have unfortunately not benefited from the same retrospective rehabilitation.

Is testimony (really) a genre?

The existence today of a certain canon, centred mainly around the representation of concentration and extermination camps, and including the wars of decolonisation or contemporary mass killings (such as the genocide of the Tutsis in 1994, to which Catherine Coquio devoted the essay *Rwanda : le réel et les récits* [*Rwanda: Reality and Narratives*]), should not, however, obscure the difficulty of defining testimony as a literary genre, and thereby marking its boundaries. The first difficulty is that the more its identity as a model becomes clear, the more we are confronted with the question of the chronological limits that should be imposed on it. Why limit ourselves to the twentieth century alone when the

recognition of the genre across this period was largely retrospective? We can extend this process further back in time, if we assume that the vagueness of the categories being used allows us to recognise a certain permanence of practices across the ages. This operation is often undertaken, yet the process of going further back in time raises more questions: if we consider that testimonies make us "brush history against the grain" in order to wrest from the homogeneous course of history an oppressed past, situated in a "constellation overflowing with tensions" (Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History"), this same preoccupation may also encourage a propensity to anachronism, an abusive reinterpretation of past events according to social, historical, and ethical criticisms that are alien to the people who were contemporaries of these facts, but which we justify to ourselves with the good conscience of those who apprehend history according to exclusively memorial and ethical criteria.

The second difficulty is that of deriving from ordinary testimonial practices or from testimony as a discursive genre a model of composition that can be identified with certain enunciative, formal, or stylistic characteristics. The tensions between testimonial "literarity" and "authenticity" have been debated extensively – particularly in the collection edited by Carole Dornier and Renaud Dulong, *Esthétique du témoignage* [*Aesthetics of Testimony*] (Caen, Éditions de la MSH, 2005). In her article "'Le récit de rescapé est un genre littéraire' ou le témoignage comme 'genre de travers'", Catherine Coquio emphasised the "transgeneric" character of testimony, which "cuts across" not only the first-person genres with which it has long been conflated (memoirs, travels narratives, self narratives, diaries, letters), but also the three major modes (narrative, drama, and lyric), according to a logic that "transcends" the literary – "testimony is not *born* a literary text, it becomes one, and it also may not become one". Even more than for other forms of self narratives, a strict division between fiction and non-fiction seems to guarantee the value of testimony. But this is not without difficulties: Robert Antelme notes in *L'Espèce humaine* [*The Human Race*] that the stories of his comrades, "all of them true", could not overcome the disbelief of their interlocutors or readers because it takes "a lot of artifice to make people accept a morsel of truth". The use of novelistic methods nevertheless gave rise to violent debates, after the First World War as well as after the Second World War – in April 1953, Jean Cayrol, who had previously been deported to Mauthausen-Gusen, condemned in his essay "Témoignage et littérature" ["Testimony and Literature"] (*Esprit*) a voyeuristic and commercial use of concentration camp fiction, making use of arguments that Jean Norton Cru had used before him, and which would be used again in the last third of the century to criticise audiovisual fictions such as the television series *Holocaust* or the film *Schindler's List*. These debates touched on historiographical issues (the risks of blurring the boundaries of fiction and history, as reflected in Carlo Ginzburg's objections to Hayden White's theory of "metahistory"), ideological issues (in particular the risk of lending credence to the denialists, the real "murderers of memory", as Pierre Vidal-Naquet expressed it), and also ethical issues (as Paul Ricœur pointed out in *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* [*Memory, History, Forgetting*]). From this point on, the foregrounding of aesthetic qualities inevitably involved a certain ambivalence: while it is motivated by the desire to defend a corpus that gives a new lease of life to writing from the past, by bringing to light its narrative, rhetorical, and stylistic aspects, this gesture also increases the risk of distorting the reading of these texts, or of undermining precisely the quality that distinguishes authentic testimonies from both their fictional counterparts and their forgeries, that is, false testimonies.

Testis unus…

Renaud Dulong's definition of testimony as an "autobiographically certified account of a past event", which is guaranteed by the author's physical presence at the event, highlighted the social, political, and memorial role played by the "historical witness" in preserving the factual truth of collective traumas in the public space. "*Testis unus*, *testis nullus*": the gesture of self-designation that is undertaken by an individual witness is ultimately validated only through the convergence of different witnesses' testimonies, the attention given to them by multiple authorities (readers, critics, historians, etc.), and the progressive constitution of a network in which each work reinforces the validity of the other texts in circulation. Nevertheless, every testimony contains a blind spot, of which Primo Levi provided the most extensively commented example in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), in which he posits the figure of the "Muselmann" as a "complete witness": if the absolute witness is the one who, having seen the "Gorgon", cannot return to tell the story, testimony is therefore only possible by delegation to the survivors, those who who occupy what Primo Levi called the "grey zone" and take upon themselves the impossibility of witnessing, with the result that the privilege now granted to the social figure of the witness does not necessarily resolve the question of *who* is the subject of testimony. In *La Perversion historiographique* [*The Historiographic Perversion*], Marc Nichanian radically criticised the way historical discourse reduces testimony to the status of an archive, dependent on its evidential value, and regarded this approach above all as a way of perpetuating the injunction made by the persecutor to the survivor, by the denialist to the witness: "Prove it!". Just as problematic as this assimilation of testimony to its status as a document is, in his eyes, its fixation as a monument: whether it adheres to the the "realist option" or the "emblematic option", contemporary testimony misses that which lies at the very heart of the genocidal event, namely the elimination of the witness and the very destitution of the fact.

However, despite these difficulties, testimony has come to play an important role, and we are still working to understand its impact. The example of Binjamin Wilkomirski's false testimony is a case in point. When he published *Fragments: Une enfance, 1939-1948* in 1995, it was widely praised by critics

and awarded major literary prizes, but it was withdrawn from sale four years later when the deception was discovered: the author, whose real name was Bruno Grosjean, had indeed been abandoned, but rather than having entered an orphanage in Krakow illegally after escaping from the camps, he had been entrusted by his single mother to a Swiss couple named Doesseker. In this case, the intentions of Grosjean / Doesseker / Wilkomirski matter less than the decisive effect of this biographical revelation on the reading of *Fragments*: it now lacked the guarantee of the author's physical presence at past events. One may consider that the value thus accorded to the authenticity of a testimony is disproportionate. Nevertheless, the recategorisation of *Fragments* as false testimony is not due to these biographical and historical revelations alone: it modifies the text itself, which is literally identical but with a completely reversed meaning and implications. Few genres tie the letter of a text so strongly to the referents that it relates to, and few genres have ideological and ethical stakes capable of throwing a community's shared memory into crisis.

This can be seen in the passionate debates that have been provoked by Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* [*The Kindly Ones*] since its publication in 2006: the violent criticisms of this fictional testimony placed in the mouth of a Nazi who contributed to the mass killings, Maximilien Aue, show that in the eyes of our contemporaries, the tolerance that had gradually been granted to writers since the nineteenth century, particular under the banner of the rights of fiction and, more generally, of an ethic specific to literature (Gisèle Sapiro retraces this history in *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain* [*The Responsibility of the Writer*]) is coming into conflict with a renewed historical and ethical awareness, of which testimony now appears to be the most demanding exponent.

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- 1. Translator's note: "Ordinary" ("ordinaire" in the original text) is used here in the sense of writing practices that are apparently spontaneous, and not elicited by a specific institutional context.

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Mots-clés:
Témoignage

Traducteur(s):

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Pour citer cet article:

Jeannelle Jean-Louis, Ferguson Sam (trad.), « Testimony (trad. de l'article « Témoignagne ») », dans *Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie*, dir. F. Simonet-Tenant, avec la collab. de M. Braud, J.-L. Jeannelle, P. Lejeune et V. Montémont, Paris, Champion, 2017, p. , en ligne, URL : https://ecrisoi.univ-rouen.fr/dictionnaire/testimony-trad-de-larticle-temoignagne, page consultée le 16/12/2024.