

PHILOMELA'S TONGUE: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON WITNESS LITERATURE

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Since Ovid's *Metamorphoses* accommodates all that is human and divine, it also includes a myth about testimony. The Athenian, Procne, has married the Thracian King, Tereus. But she misses her sister Philomela, who has remained with their parents. Procne asks her husband to arrange for her to see Philomela again. Tereus goes to Piraeus. As soon as he sees Philomela, he grows hot with desire for her. Her father allows her to leave if she promises to return soon. Tereus takes her in his ship to the coast of Thracia. There he shuts her up in a cabin in the forest and rapes her. Crushed with shame, Philomela begs Tereus to kill her, threatening otherwise to cry out his misdeed. He becomes frightened, draws his sword, ties the girl's hands behind her back, pulls out her tongue with tongs, and cuts it off. Ovid does not spare us the horrendous image:

the tongue is seen to quiver on the ground
to a murmur strange. Like a serpent's severed tail it writhes,
dying, towards the maimed maiden's foot.¹

When Tereus returns home to his wife, he lies that her sister died during the journey. Philomela remains in her prison, incapable of speech. But she works out a stratagem. She weaves a white vestment disclosing the crime in purple letters and manages to have it sent to Procne. Procne reads the woven testimony and realises what has happened. She is seized with burning hatred of her husband. At the annual festival of Dionysus, she sets out into the woods with the Bacchantes and frees Philomela. The two sisters consider how best to take their revenge. For a time, they contemplate castrating Tereus, but decide upon something even more hair-raising. Procne kills her child by Tereus, their son Itys, and serves his flesh for her husband's dinner. So that Tereus may realise what he has eaten, Philomela suddenly comes in with the lad's bloody, severed head.

And more intensely did she never
wish to speak and clothe in words her gruesome joy.²

Ovid pictures an extreme situation in which testimony is nearly stifled, succeeding only thanks to the fact that speech, its usual medium, can be replaced by writing. According to the classical view, the substitution of script for speech means that Philomela's utterance must, for its realisation, loan another's voice. One can imagine how Procne, when she receives the white vestment, sounds the words to herself so that her silenced sister's cry is heard through her.

It is tempting to see in the Philomela myth a harbinger of literary mediations of testimony, even though it is improbable that the poet had any such thought. Be this as it may, his poem helps us make an observation: it tells us that that testimony is more than merely a true story; that it has a direct connection with the event and with the victim; and that it is a sequel of an evil deed, like revenge. In Ovid's story, revenge and testimony are sisters.

One does not become a witness only by observing an event with one's own eyes. A witness is a person who speaks out and says, "I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!" As an act of speech, testimony is inseparable from this kind of self-reference and from the accompanying claim to immediate credence. Pronounced by a different person in a different situation, the same series of words could be a fable. Language lacks a special marker for truth. Testimony is an utterance that presupposes a certain kind of speaker, perhaps even a special way of speaking. We like to think that we can specify its typical traits: directness, seriousness, absence of the devices of rhetorical pleading, spontaneous emotion showed through anger, tears, pauses—like the purple colour of Philomela's written characters.

In *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Memory, history, oblivion), Paul Ricoeur has described testimony as an original social institution, the basis for the truth function without which language and society would not work. Truth is initially nothing but that which a credible witness certifies. "Step by step, this link of trust is extended to all exchanges, contracts, and pacts and renders concurrence with the other's words the principle for social cohesion, to the point at which it becomes habitual in respectable circles and, indeed, a general rule: first grant credence to the other's words; then put them into question if there are strong reasons to do so."³ This primary trust in what the other says is the basis for human association and for the emergence of a kind of common sense that corrects occasional mistakes and lies. It is this vital tissue that is damaged when social institutions make themselves guilty of corruption, mendacity, and concealment. The prohibition against false witness is one of the ten fundamental commandments the God of the Old Testament enjoins upon mankind.

The act of speech which we are discussing appears early in the history of poetry. Classical tragedy depends on the witness account since the most important actions, acts of violence, may not be

shown on the stage. Instead, someone rushes in and reports to the Chorus what he has seen with his own eyes, and the Chorus attests to the truth of the testimony by expressing grief and horror. To be complete, the testimony requires an answer from the human community. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, this service is rendered by the author himself or, more precisely, by his alter ego, the wanderer in the netherworld, who learns about the dead by listening to the stories they have to tell. One after another, they press forth and testify to their fates. "Siena mi fe', disfece mi Maremma" (Siena made me, Maremma unmade me), to quote from the shortest testimony in world literature, yet long enough to save a murdered woman from being swallowed up by oblivion.⁴ The Dante of the poem receives the words of the dead; through him, they appeal to the justice of posterity. His work is a dress rehearsal for the Day of Judgment.

Testimony in literature, then, is more than a simple act of disclosure. To start with, it differs in two decisive impulses: *in giving voice to the silenced*, and *in preserving the victims' names*. In his *Rome, Naples et Florence*, Stendhal describes his stay in Southern Italy in 1817.⁵ He writes in his usual conversational manner, *allegro con spirito*. Then something happens to the text. It changes tone as if converting to a different linguistic mode. The voice of the dandy fades and gives way to that of an informer, who, with clipped objectivity, recounts the atrocities that accompanied the suppression of the republican revolt in Naples in 1799. This account takes ten pages of four hundred, but it has repercussions for the entire book. In these pages, the author stops wanting to impress the reader and forgets himself in favour of something that must not be forgotten. This is as remarkable as when Goethe breaks off his circling and dissociated style in *Die Belagerung von Mainz* and seems to be writing with no other purpose than to get down on paper *what it was like*: outrages were committed; he showed composure when he prevented a mob from lynching a fleeing revolutionary. The story was

published many years after the event. Goethe hesitated before speaking out in this way, conscious of the account's explosive power.

When Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn presented *The Gulag Archipelago*, the result of his investigations of the Russian camp system, he explained that he considered this work literary.⁶ It bore the subtitle *opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniya* (*An Experiment in Literary Investigation*.) The Russian formulation is deliberately contradictory: *issledovaniye* is the normal word for a scientific treatise, but the qualifier *Literary* indicates that the book is the work of a writer and not of a scientist. It is not based on the method of historical science but on the voices of witnesses and on the author's ability as a former internee to give the right meaning to the victims' words. Underlying the methodological difference there is another, more fundamental one. Historical research describes concluded events. For the witnesses and their interpreters, the event never stops happening. Solzhenitsyn's prose annihilates the time between the perpetration of a crime and our reading of its account.

Truly successful misdeeds leave no witnesses. It was only just possible to substantiate adequately the Nazi policy of annihilation. The black book of communism has large gaps, as Solzhenitsyn shows in *The Gulag Archipelago*. Of the worst wave of deportation, in 1929 and 1930, there is scarcely any memory, any testimony. Millions of peasants were purged and sent to the taiga, Stalin's most serious crime. "This wave poured forth, sank into the permafrost, and even our most active minds recall hardly a thing about it."⁷ It is the same with Stalin's massive resettlement programmes of 1944–46. They involved mainly millions of simple people who wrote no memoirs. The purge of 1937, on the other hand, is well known because of the large number of city-dwellers and intellectuals it affected. Elie Wiesel asserted as long as twenty-five years ago that witness literature is the literary innovation of our time: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle,

and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.”⁸ He exaggerates the novelty of the thing, but I believe he puts his finger on the most profound change in literature since the breakthrough of modernism. Perhaps it is not the scale of twentieth-century misdeeds that has placed testimony in the centre; but rather our horror over the systematic erasure of memory in totalitarian societies.

There is a clear objection to coupling testimony with literature. What we normally require of true evidence is the opposite at every point of what we usually allow in a literary work, since literature enjoys the privilege of talking about reality as it is not, without being accused of lying. It is also evident that testimony can be mimicked as can every other way of using language. The novel in particular, as Bachtin demonstrates, is primarily a portrayal of discourses and not of immediate reality. By simulating the position of the eyewitness, the artful writer can lend unwarranted authenticity to his text. This is an old problem. The best eyewitness account of Napoleon’s Russian campaign is given in Chateaubriand’s memoirs, but Chateaubriand sat out the war in the peace and quiet of his home in France. Without saying so explicitly, he invites the reader to believe that he followed on the heels of the French host to Moscow and back. And to choose a more complex example, it is hard to read Imre Kertész’s novel *Fateless* without believing one is reading a truthful account of the writer’s experience of German concentration camps.⁹ But Kertész, who really was interned in Auschwitz, denies that this book is autobiographical: “The most autobiographical thing in my biography is that in *Fateless* there is nothing autobiographical.”¹⁰ Perhaps he simply implies that he acts like an writer, that is to say, he reconstructs an experience without necessarily explaining its link to his specific case. The matter is particularly difficult here, since a distinguishing quality of the experience he represents is a certain kind of unreality. The novel is the biography of someone who has no individual fate and is,

for this reason, no autobiography. The one who testifies is, finally, “someone else” even if this other should carry the same name as the victim.

Nevertheless, the effect of such a book depends on the reader's conviction that the author is an authentic witness. What is the basis for this conviction? Do you just “know” (it says so on the dust jacket; the author says so himself)? Or is it the effect of a certain quality of the text? One would prefer the second answer, but in that case, one has to suppose a tone or a force that cannot be imitated, an idea which literary art is bent on contradicting. The discovery that an allegedly authentic testimony is a fiction or a plagiarism immediately robs it of its power. However, misrepresented facts in a testimony to some extent remain unimportant. A witness is allowed to err, but the writer may not pretend to be a witness.

Plato's most forceful criticism of literature is the one given at the end of the *Protagoras* dialogue and which turns up in a different form in his best-known text, the *Apology*: namely, his reproach of its ingratiating nature and susceptibility to manipulation. Socrates is, admittedly, attacking skilful orators, not poets; but the argument is of general validity. He readily concedes that his enemies are masters of verbal expression, but interprets their skill as an indication of mendacity.

My accusers, then, as I maintain, have said little or nothing that is true, but from me you shall hear the whole truth—not, I can assure you, gentlemen, in flowery language like theirs, decked out with fine words and phrases. No, what you will hear will be a straightforward speech in the first words that occur to me, confident as I am in the justice of my cause, and I do not want any of you to expect anything different.¹¹

Socrates, Plato's ingenious literary creation, initiates here a tradition of anti-literature: the struggle for literature's point zero, the uncoloured word, the speech of the truthful witness.

We should not disregard this conflict between testimony and literature. The authority principle in rhetoric lacks significance for the language of testimony—or should do so at any rate. Of course, we also test a witness's credibility, but this test has nothing to do with her or his appearance or way with words. It concerns only the tone in which the event continues to vibrate in what is said and to declare itself unfinished. The persona of a witness includes a certain loneliness or at least a withdrawal from ideological struggles. One cannot be a debater and a witness to truth at the same time. "The witness produces no theory, teaches no doctrine, does not attempt to convince one of his own world view", writes Renaud Dulong in *Le témoin oculaire* (Ocular witness).¹² In the company of testimony, the didactic and manipulative features of literature stand out with embarrassing clarity.

But allow me also to point out two dilemmas where literature and testimony converge. Philosophers and critics reflecting in recent years over the predicament of testimony—primarily in discussions of the Holocaust—have time and again come upon a peculiar thing. To be understood and to appear probable, the eyewitness account must rely for support on the community's shared perception of reality, common sense. At the same time, the witness sometimes harbours an experience that clashes with all normal sense. Similarly, one can view the form of the work of art as a deviation from general perception, and an effort to validate an individual vision in the face of the social arrangement we call "reality."

Testimony not only preserves the event in the present tense but also retains its alien and incomprehensible traits. It has been asserted that the difficulty of finding any strategy for survival in the concentration camp, and the subsequent difficulty of the victims to produce a coherent account of what they were subjected to, had to do with the irrational quality of their persecution. Camp existence defied any conception of purposeful human

behaviour and was therefore opaque. The prisoners were often incapable of grasping the absurdities of the rules, the behaviour of the SS-men, the reactions of the Kapos and the other prisoners. Nothing matched, as it did in the outside world, with what a person learns. To testify, one must understand the logic in the course of events one is describing. But normal capacity for thought was defied by the unprecedented madness of the Holocaust just as much as by the seeming meaninglessness of the Soviet mass arrest. The difficulty in communicating is therefore not only due to the audience's lack of experience of the kind of privation represented, but also to the witness's inability to bring coherence to what he has experienced. In some sense, the speaker and the listener are equally foreign to the event. The difference is that the former has been subjected to its violence and therefore in spite of everything bears a physical knowledge of it. How does a woman get a male audience to understand what her body has been subjected to in a culture that doesn't take seriously the human rights of women? It seems so trivial, they do not see what she means. The body murmurs strangely, like Philomela's severed tongue.

For a tie to be re-established between the victim and humanity, perhaps they have to meet in this very lack of understanding of what happened.¹³ Elucidatory historiography represents an obstacle to such a meeting and therefore must be bracketed. Testimony's worst enemy is not silence but the ready-made explanation. Renaud Dulong says that the mutual animosity between historiography and testimony, which can easily be demonstrated in discussions of scholarly method and which is paralleled by the courts' sceptical attitude to testimony and preference for "technical evidence," concerns not only the question of proof but also the witness's distaste for general explanations, which represents an uncomfortable obstacle to historical and legal procedures:

The message [of testimony] is, rather, directed at upholding the past as enigma, as scandal, and as interpellation. Hence, it appears that no historical genre, by the very function of its discourse, is able to recapture this. History unravels the secrets of the past, it neutralises the conflicts, and absolves the faults; it synthesises the swarm of events, places them in order: the linearity of chronological series and the arrangement of facts assumes control, whatever precautions one takes in the name of the relationship between cause and effect. The one-dimensional character of chronological presentation is synonymous with progression and evokes the notion of progress...¹⁴

Historical explanations are a kind of anodyne. Feelings aroused by human suffering are put to rest when what happened is seen as a logical sequence of cause and effect and therefore to some extent inevitable. The victim's reality is broken off from our own and posted to another region of being: the region of historical events. That happened, we tell ourselves, but in a different reality to our own. Only testimony with its perpetual present tense and its direct touch can lift out of us this delusion and destroy the semblance of necessity, logical end, and meaning. It does this not by clarifying: the witness talks of something that is incomprehensible in the hope that someone else will make it possible to understand and with the certainty that any explanation must be rejected as inadequate. In the revolt against explanations, testimony and literature are unified.

The other dilemma that brings the two together may be expressed in the following paradox: the true witness is the one who cannot testify. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the French writer Roger Laporte wrote a series of slim volumes, eventually collected in a volume entitled *Une Vie*, in which he step by step explores an unknown reality, foreign to literature, that presses upon him in his writing.¹⁵ He tries to listen to what is inside the language and to find the gap between speech and silence, through which the unknown has to push its way. He builds intricate

theories for his own text, in the end only to find them arbitrary. Towards the end of the work, he realises he must take upon himself the weakness and muteness of this unknown “thing”; otherwise, the wordless suffers in his place and the trial to which he subjects himself is illusory. But how can a writer take this muteness upon himself and yet continue to write? What he is groping towards is an ultimate trial which, were it possible, would rob him of speech and which, as long as it is impossible, renders his words superfluous. Such is, to Laporte, the nature of writing.

The same paradox appears in Primo Levi, when he declares that it is not the survivors of the concentration camps who are the true testifiers.¹⁶ He writes,

We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the “Muslims,” the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance.¹⁷

“Muslims” was the nickname for the prisoners who had given up: an anonymous and continuously topped-up mass, people in whom the divine spark had gone out, who had grown too empty to actually suffer. The silent Muslim with bent back and a face that reflected not a single trace of thought, is for Levi an image of our age. He considers that only the silenced are “complete witnesses”: only they know what it means to be wholly deprived of one’s human status, which simultaneously means the loss of the ability to say what it is like.

The survivors’ truth is not the ultimate truth simply because certain states, characterised by the most profound torment, are impossible to recall once one has left them. In *Zapiski blokadnogo tjeloveka* (Notes from the blockade), Lidija Ginzburg speaks of the difficulty of remembering enormous hunger once it no longer

ravages. Everything changed when one was starving: time, space, the nature of objects, the relationship between body and soul. A new being arose: “blockade man.” Once conditions improved and one’s old personality returned, the blockade guard and his feelings disappeared without trace. Ginzburg refers to the law of oblivion as the cornerstone of life.

There are also accounts of how torture destroys any confidence in humanity so that it can never be restored, which renders testimony impossible. Total loss of purpose leads to silence. Nazism erased from its victims the feeling that there was a “thou,” writes the psychoanalyst Dori Laub, herself a childhood survivor. You could not testify *even to yourself*.¹⁸ Testimony presupposes that the victim regains the listener inside himself, who receives his own silent voice and its words for what has happened. Shoshana Felman, Laub’s co-author, maintains that literature gives a model for the creation of this kind of internal address when the external, social address becomes impossible. The person who is writing seeks a confident beyond all known recipients, who exists only in the space of the text and who anticipates the reception that is ultimately necessary for the testimony. “As an event directed toward the re-creation of a ‘thou,’ poetry becomes, precisely, the event of *creating an address* for the specificity of a historical experience which annihilated any possibility of address,” writes Felman.¹⁹

Philomela’s wish for death means that her soul has already been murdered. Shame is the suppression and dissolution of the subject, and the severed tongue represents with terrible literalism the impossibility of address. However, the transition to writing does not seem as hopeful in the myth as in the therapeutic world vision. The purple characters presage the bloody revenge. Philomela is not reconciled by testifying. She is overcome with an archaic rage that lies beyond all reason even for Ovid. It is the unbridled revenge of which we, uncomprehending, see traces in the reports from contemporary theatres of war. When Philomela’s

writing cancels out her speechlessness, there remains a worse and more complete muteness, that of the butchered Itys. With cunning literary artistry, using the very rhetoric Socrates despised, Ovid makes the killing of the child a culmination equally repugnant to the rape. Who will testify for Itys? Perhaps the poet, the liar, despite everything. It is probable that only the phantasmagorical account of the revenge makes it possible for the average male reader of the poem to grasp the depth of the violation, in the same way that Tereus realises what he has done only when he sees Itys's severed head.

Ovid's tale ends with all three—husband, wife, and sister—finally losing their humanity and being changed into birds (a hoopoe, a swallow and a nightingale). For the people of antiquity who knew the myth, this does not mean that they were silenced and forgotten. When you heard their animal cry or song, you remembered their story. This is perhaps the ultimate limit of what a testimony can be.

Notes

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6:558–60.
2. *Ibid.*, 659–60.
3. “De proche en proche, ce lien fiduciaire s'étend à tous les échanges, contrats et pactes, et constitue l'assentiment à la parole d'autrui au principe du lien social, au point qu'il devient un *habitus* des communautés considérées, voire une règle de prudence: d'abord faire confiance dans la parole d'autrui, ensuite douter si de fortes raisons y inclinent.” Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 207. My translation.
4. Dante, *The Divine Comedy* 5:134.
5. Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).
6. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
7. *Ibid.*, 1:24.

8. Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, ed. Elliot Leifkovitz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 9.
9. Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992).
10. "Das Autobiographische in meiner Biographie ist, daß es in 'Schicksalslosigkeit' nichts Autobiographisches gibt." Imre Kertész, *Galeerentagebuch* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1993), 185. My translation.
11. Plato, *Socrates' Defense (Apology)*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Patheon Books, 1961), 4.
12. Renaud Dulong, *Le Témoin oculaire: Les conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle* (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1998), 225. My translation.
13. This is the chief theme of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's path-breaking work, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
14. Dulong, 220. My translation.
15. Roger Laporte, *Une Vie* (Paris: P.O.L., 1986).
16. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
17. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
18. Laub, *Testimony*, 82. On Laub's background, see the note on page 75.
19. Felman, *Testimony*, 38.

Translated from the Swedish by Tim Crosfield