

THE PREDICAMENT OF TESTIMONY**Laura SASU¹**

ABSTRACT: *THIS PAPER DEALS WITH THE CONCEPT OF WITNESS LITERATURE, FOCUSSED ON THE COMPLEX PREDICAMENT OF POST-TOTALITARIAN TESTIMONY. ONE IMPEDIMENT ORIGINATES IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND² UNDERMINING THE CONCEPT OF SUBJECTIVITY ITSELF, BY THE DESTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT OF ITS AUTHORITY TO INTERPRET THE HISTORIC EXPERIENCE OF CONTEMPORARY MAN, ESPECIALLY THAT OF TOTALITARIANISM ELIMINATING TESTIMONY BY ACTUAL EXTERMINATION OF WITNESSES. THE ERASURE OF ALL PROOF AGAINST THE PERPETRATING TOTALITARIAN POWER AND THE TYPE OF EXPERIENCE ITSELF POSE FURTHER LIMITATIONS: EXPERIENCING THE CONCENTRATION CAMP OR THE COMMUNIST POLITICAL PRISON BECOMES DIFFICULT TO RECALL, SINCE IN EXTREME SITUATIONS OBLIVION BECOMES AN INSTINCTUAL PROTECTION REFLEX. ANOTHER OBSTACLE IS THE FACT THAT MOST POTENTIAL WITNESSES ARE NOT LEFT ALIVE, THUS UNABLE TO TESTIFY. THE SURVIVOR OF TOTALITARIANISM MUST TESTIFY BOTH FOR HIMSELF AND FOR MOST OF HIS COMPANIONS SILENCED BY DEATH. HIS INCAPACITY TO ACCOUNT FOR THE COMPLETE EXPERIENCE IS DENOMINATED BY CURRENT CRITICISM AS THE LACUNA OF TESTIMONY. THERE ARE FAR LESS SURVIVORS OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMP OR OF THE COMMUNIST PRISON COMPARED TO THE NUMBER OF POTENTIAL WITNESSES WHO HAVE PERISHED BUT THIS VERY IMPAIRMENT ONLY PLACES ADDITIONAL EMPHASIS UPON THOSE FEW SURVIVING WITNESSES, UPON THOSE TESTIMONIES THAT CAN BE SHARED.*

KEY WORDS: WITNESS LITERATURE, TESTIMONY, TRUTH, POST-TOTALITARIAN, RECEPTION, IMPEDIMENTS;

INTRODUCTION

Subsequent to the historiography of totalitarianism, written upon command of the governing authority, there are only few remaining options left for finding out the historical truth of the period. These remaining sources, valuable for historiography as more reliable in point of credibility³, include the appeal to the witness and testimony, implicitly testimonial literature or witness literature, as it is also called.

¹PhD candidate, MA., Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania, laurasasu@yahoo.com

²initiated by Nietzsche in his critique to the notion of consciousness as supreme instance of personality, and continued by Heidegger in questioning authenticity as a whole;

³Substituting the technical historical sources with the testimony of the second party involved, has triggered numerous objections due to its subjectivity. Such objections not completely unjustified, since testimony is by definition fundamentally subjective. But, in this special situation, exactly this subjectivity of testimony harbours its credibility.

Testimony is defined by P. Ricoeur as the “original social institution”⁴, as the essential and fundamental core of the truth function⁵, a key principle the absence of which is able to deem both language and society ineffective. The path of coherence and operability of language, society and generally speaking of all human interaction relies on this type of shared conventional trust, that commences by defining truth as “nothing but that which a credible witness certifies”⁶, extending subsequently the area of trustworthiness to the point of “granting credence”⁷ to someone’s words by default and only questioning them in case there are serious doubts cast upon them; this leads to identifying the truth of testimony as the pillar of stability for all human communication and association.

MAIN TEXT

The truth of testimony and the trust therein becomes the “vital tissue that is damaged when social institutions make themselves guilty of corruption, mendacity, and concealment.”⁸

The more recent dynamics in the relationship between testimony and truth reaches, however, the point where the line is getting narrower, first and foremost due to a generic predicament of the notion of testimony, identified and further theoretically investigated by G.Vattimo under the name of “the dusk of the subject.”

According to G.Vattimo, the concept of testimony seems to be associated with a point in European cultural history, namely the period shortly after World War II, basically identifiable as the emergence of existentialism. Therefore, he finds it only justified to pinpoint “a certain impression of anachronism”⁹ determined by the concept of testimony, at least for those culturally and historically bound to this period, thus revealing the fact that the notional component of the term reached there a turning point. G.Vattimo infers that, both from a theological and from a philosophical point of view, the term *testimony* contains an inherent link to the *pathos* of existentialism towards “the unique existence of the individual and its special and extremely individual relationship to the truth, a relationship engaging the person, solely and entirely.”¹⁰

A subsequent delineation refers to this pathos, as mentioned in K.Jaspers’¹¹ thesis on Galileo and Bruno, according to which the certifiable, scientific truth of the heliocentric theory remains an absolute one, remaining completely unaltered by the withdrawal in front of the Inquisition, whereas Bruno on the other hand - in case of recanting - would demolish the *philosophical truth*, which exists solely based on his *testimony*. The important distinction operated at this point is differentiating between several types of truth to be testified for, based upon coining the scientific truth as “non-historic and universal”¹² regardless of what testimony is brought about it, in contrast to the philosophical truth, which cannot pertain to any other meaning than being “the truth of one’s existence, one who professes it and proposes it to the world”¹³ by means of testimony.

⁴ P. Ricoeur *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2000, 20.

⁵ firstly safeguarded by the fundamental prohibition against false testimony as one of the ten commandments man receives from the God;

⁶ P. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2000, 207.

⁷ H. Engdahl, *Witness Literature - Philomela’s Tongue .Introductory Remarks on Witness literature*, Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium, Stockholm: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.2002, 3.

⁸ Engdahl, *Witness Literature - Philomela’s Tongue .Introductory Remarks on Witness literature*, 3.

⁹ G. Vattimo , *Aventurile diferenței* , Ed. Pontica, Constanța, 1996, 49.

¹⁰ Vattimo , *Aventurile diferenței*, 49.

¹¹ K. Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube*, Frankfurt, Artemis, 1948, 11-12.

¹² G. Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței* , Ed. Pontica, Constanța, 1996, 49.

¹³ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 49.

G. Vattimo hereby unveils the existence of a certain lack of impact and echo within the contemporary philosophical background of both the aforesaid issues as well as that of the core constituents of „classical existentialism”¹⁴ (the individual, the option, death, responsibility) advancing the idea that any discussion on the topic of testimony should mandatory start with the „dusk of existentialism and, more profoundly, the crisis of the notion of subject itself”¹⁵ perceptible as the intrusion of a „wave of impersonalism”¹⁶ both in the realm of philosophical research, as well as in that of cultural models.

Simultaneously perceived as the result of a real inversion in the way of thinking as well as a transformation in the realm of existence, this type of impersonalism is considered not only a negative trend but a rather unacceptable one. G. Vattimo justifies labelling the concept of testimony as anachronous by showing how, as main promoters of this wave of impersonalism in contemporary culture and philosophy, F. Nietzsche and M. Heidegger have set the means of keeping the concept of testimony “in check”¹⁷ by their „radical criticism upon the very notion of subject, as it has been acknowledged ever since Descartes.”¹⁸ This abolishment of the subject is brought about by the Nietzschean negation of consciousness as the “supreme instance of personality”¹⁹: paradoxically, that “passion for the truth”²⁰-consciousness - has reached the point where, in its very own quest for the truth, it has put itself “in crisis”²¹ by ascertaining the fact that its own nature is that of a mere “passion like any other.”²² In this case, the testimony brought by the individual, defined in terms of the “supremacy of conscience over the other instances of personality”, is thought to be deficient of the validity necessary for being seriously taken into consideration, whereas Nietzsche’s rationalization thereof consists in metaphorically declaring the individual as being, in this respect, neither full age nor self-contained: „That supremacy of consciousness based upon which one is responsible for himself and testifies is actually only an illusory supremacy, profoundly undermined by that veiled mutiny of the other passions (...); it is also undermined (...) by reaching the point of acknowledging its own superficiality.”²³

The discussion on the topic of testimony is at this point apparently voided of most of its meaning because it is “the subject of testimony that actually disappears; the witness is reduced to a pure symptom: he is no longer a last active interpretation centre, but offers himself, instead, as object of subsequent interpretation.”²⁴ Nietzsche’s critique upon the notion of subject appears as some form of anticipative intuition of the rather absolute annihilation it will be further subjected to by the development of analytical psychology. The ulterior notional mutation performed by psychoanalysis by “reversing the traditional hierarchy of the instances of the individual psyche”²⁵ also contributes to the instauration of this anachronism of the notion of testimony, as an “obsolete”²⁶ notion.

Regarding the same critique of the notion of subject, Heidegger proposes a similar conclusion, reached by means of the preponderantly ontological approach of “outgrowing

¹⁴ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 50.

¹⁵ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 50.

¹⁶ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 50.

¹⁷ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 51.

¹⁸ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 51.

¹⁹ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 56.

²⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Werke*, Ed. Musarion, vol. XIV, 176.

²¹ G. Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, Ed. Pontica, Constanța, 1996, 55.

²² Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 55.

²³ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 56.

²⁴ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 57.

²⁵ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 57.

²⁶ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 57.

subjectivity as a constitutive feature of man, commencing from the very existentialist Kirkegaardian and Augustinian positions²⁷ that are the igniting points for the issue of testimony. The formal definition of testimony, here under a more ample debate, shows that the conceptual proximity of testimony to that of the Heideggerian authenticity²⁸ consists in the hypothesis according to which testimony „implies the idea of an existing constitutive relation between individual and truth – whereas the truth is his without ceasing to be truth, and on the other hand it is truth solely and to the extent it is somebody’s truth, who testifies”²⁹.

Thus, the dusk of the subject and the implicit predicament of testimony can be understood in terms of the two fundamental constituents of the so-called crisis of the subject (the Bourgeois-Christian subject and afore, the transcendental subject): „the dusk of the hegemonic role of consciousness (firstly understood as awareness), both towards the other interior forces that form the person, as well as towards the historical powers.”³⁰ In order to place additional accent upon this double crisis of the notion of subject in relation to the analysis of testimony, G.Vattimo shows that the issue of testimony, with its meaning restricted here to the “nexus person-truth”³¹, represents repositioning this special human condition under the magnifying glass of analysis and interpretation.

Far from merely acknowledging the crisis of the subject and its direct and indirect implications, G. Vattimo also advances a solution for surmounting the predicament of the notion of testimony in the following terms: “The notion of testimony and, more generally, of the significance of man’s historical action it is linked to, can find its meaning again, after the dusk of the subject, only to the extent we succeed to free ourselves of any objectivist residues in envisaging the being, and simultaneously to cease to regard the Bourgeois-Christian subject as the only possible subject of history”³².

The predicament of testimony is therefore twofold: on one hand we are dealing with a generic destitution of the subject from its authority of interpreting and testifying the “historical experience of today’s man”³³, and on the other hand we are dealing with historical experience itself - under discussion here totalitarianism - able to literally eliminate testimony (entirely or most of it) by the programmatic, factual extermination of witnesses. The latter is another impediment in the path of testimony, specific to that about the totalitarian experiments, emerging directly from the ratio of those who can become testifying witnesses. The quality of witness pertains to many, who may have plenty to testify for. However, of these many potential witnesses only few survive the totalitarian experience in its most acute manifestations and still have the ability to utter their testimony. So, additionally to the more generic, abstract philosophical impediments of testimony, we are dealing here with another more specific, concrete impossibility: the actual, literal extermination of witnesses, and herewith of their testimony, specific to totalitarianism, which by its practices made the surviving witness a mere exception, the very existence of testimony being thus governed by pure chance.

²⁷ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 58.

²⁸ „The end of the notion of authenticity and generally the loss of meaning of the concept of subject are closely related” because inauthenticity is the non-truth that necessarily accompanies and serves as foundation for the truth as an aperture.” Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 60.

²⁹ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 58.

³⁰ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 65.

³¹ Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 66.

³² Vattimo, *Aventurile diferenței*, 70.

³³ Acknowledging this shortcoming represents ”the true meaning of the ontological reversal of Heideggerian thinking subsequent to Sein und Zeit”, Ibidem, 64.

There are infinitely less testimonies than witnesses in this equation, transforming it thus into an inequality, but it is this very disparity that harbours the additional emphasis, cast almost automatically, on those few existing testimonies and on those few surviving witnesses able to testify.

This rather elliptical nature specific to testimonies about the totalitarianism is doubled by a fracture in the referential level of the possible and existing testimonies. H. Engdahl also approaches this difficulty of manifest testimony, which has been under critical and philosophical discussion for some time now. This referential predicament, as I would refer to it, consists in the reception difficulty of the testimony of the totalitarian experiment. In order to produce an effect upon the conscience intended as receiving party of communication, testimony needs to rely on shared schemata in the perception of reality; yet, the witness brings in this particular case - that of totalitarianism - the testimony of an experience opposed to any type of reason. It has been already established, that the difficulty of testimony in coherently reflecting the ordeal suffered by the surviving victims of the Holocaust or of the Gulag is accounted for by the "irrational of their persecution."³⁴ The impediment, in the way of testimony here, is the failure of the human mind to conceive and comprehend the insanity of the national-socialist extermination programme or that of communist mass arrests and re-education experiments. Basically, the communication gap of post-totalitarian testimony is also bifocal: it is not only due to the reader's incapacity of understanding but - as odd as it may seem - it is also accountable for by the victim's own incapacity to coherently rationalise his own experience. In testimonies about totalitarian experiments, both sender and receiver of the testimonial message seem to be equally disconnected from the object of communication; to a certain extent both are "equally foreign to the event."³⁵

CONCLUSION

In the specific context of totalitarian rule, the realm of testimony becomes an ellipsis, a space of silence – occasionally and merely exceptionally – echoing the words of testimony, the contents of which partly remain incomprehensible, both to the one testifying and to the one listening to the testimony.

Possibly anticipating the fact that everything about these unprecedented practices is deemed to be erased from history, from memory and thus partially from reality, Salmen Lewental, a member of the so-called Sonderkommando³⁶, left his testimony to an uncertain, unknown future reader, written on a few pages buried³⁷ next to one of the Auschwitz crematories: "no human being can imagine exactly how these events happened and, actually, it is unimaginable that our experiences be presented exactly as they were...we - the small group of obscure beings that shall not waste too much of the historians' ink."³⁸

Yet, since the secrets, the so-called *arcana imperii*³⁹ of national-socialism have been revealed despite of all predicaments by the testimonies of the surviving witnesses⁴⁰, similarly,

³⁴ H. Engdahl, *Witness Literature - Philomela's Tongue. Introductory Remarks on Witness literature*, Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium, Stockholm: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.2002, 8.

³⁵ Engdahl, *Witness Literature - Philomela's Tongue. Introductory Remarks on Witness literature*, 9.

³⁶ Sonderkommando – group of detainees, having the specific task of leading their own companions to the gas chambers and afterwards preparing and introducing the corpses into the ovens of the crematory.

³⁷ and most important of all, found and brought to daylight seventeen years after the liberation of the concentration camp;

³⁸ S. Lewental apud G. Agamben, *Ce rămâne din Auschwitz. Arhiva și martorul*, Cluj, Ed. Idea Design & Print, 2006, 7.

³⁹ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Puterea suverană și viața nudă*, Cluj, Ed. Idea Design & Print, 2006, 11.

⁴⁰ or, in exceptional case such as Lewental's buried pages, also by the surviving testimonies of those who did not survive to testify.

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for learning more about the individual in the context of communist totalitarianism the first segment of interest should be this type of testimony, depositional literature or witness literature - as it is often referred to - written after 1989 by the few survivors able to testify the truth about communist political prisons.

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