

Derrida on the Poetics and Politics of Witnessing

IRINA SANDOMIRSKAJA

The Problem of the Witness

This essay is a reading of Jacques Derrida's "*A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text*": *Poetics and Politics of Witnessing*".¹ Derrida's text sums up a long period of work on Paul Celan that resulted in numerous essays, lectures, and seminars on witnessing (one of which I myself witnessed during his visit to Moscow in 1991 at the dawn of post-Soviet Russia). An aspect of the essay that was important at the time of its writing is its response to claims by Holocaust revisionism to the status of historical research.² Today, Holocaust revisionism is regarded as a discourse of politically motivated denial, not as history. Is Derrida's critique still valid, and how is the issue in question – that of "politics and poetics of witnessing" – still problematic?

The central assertion of Holocaust revisionism specifically concerned the status of witnessing and testimony as a historical source. It denied the truth of testimonies by Holocaust survivors and, on the basis of this, the truth of the Holocaust as a historical fact.

It is precisely because witnessing has both a poetics and a politics – a provocative statement Derrida makes in the title of his essay – that the witness has been doubted as a source, and not only by deniers. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt disqualifies witnesses as inadequate precisely because they have a political and aesthetic agenda.³ Her criteria for a qualified witness are difficult to meet: a true witness should be a "righteous" man with an ability of dealing with the story, its "poetics and politics",

...the rare capacity for distinguishing between things that had happened to the storyteller more than sixteen, and sometimes twenty years ago, and what he had read and heard and imagined in the meantime. ... [The court found out] how difficult it was to tell the story, that – at least outside the transforming realm of poetry – it needed a purity of soul, an unmirrored, unreflected innocence of heart and mind that only the righteous possess.⁴

It is not because of the absence of righteousness among the witnesses, but because of the nature of testimony itself in its relation to the world, that Primo Levi speaks of a “lacuna” and that Giorgio Agamben uses this notion to construct the paradox of the impossibility of witnessing. According to Levi,

...witnesses are by definition survivors and so all, to some degree, enjoyed a privilege... I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses – we are those ... who did not touch the bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute – the submerged, the complete witnesses...⁵

The survivor’s ability to witness, and, moreover, to make a judgment, is also questioned by Tzvetan Todorov in his discussion of Primo Levi’s project “to understand the German mind”, that manifested itself in Levi’s aborted attempts to exchange views with Albert Speer (described in *The Drowned and the Saved*).⁶ According to Todorov, this project collapsed under the weight of its unstated goal: “not to understand the others [the Germans] but to convert them.” (Ibid., 270)

The witness appeals to the immediate presence of truth in his statement (“I have been there!”), and feels bitterly betrayed when confronted with a dismissive attitude in the listener. An old Russian saying seems to be confirmed in all its cynical realism. A man who lies through his teeth, it says, “lies like an eyewitness”. A similar line of reasoning disqualifies the witness as witness, not only in the falsifications of the denier but in the constructions of bona fide theorists as well as, it would seem, in the testimony of the witness himself: the impossibility of surviving *and* witnessing, of surviving *and* judging. The witness is essentially unreliable precisely because there are always a poetics and a politics in the act of bearing witness.

Derrida seems to confirm this view when he chooses as his point of

departure a phrase from a poem by Paul Celan, “No-one bears witness for the witness”.⁷ Indeed, one testimony cannot be affirmed by another in which a second witness attests to the former’s capacity or incapacity of bearing witness. Testimony has no meta-level. It is, by definition, no proof, and this is why revisionism, as if in agreement with Primo Levi, rejects survivors’ testimony by alleging that

... the survivor cannot be a certain and reliable witness to what happened, in particular of the existence for this purpose, the purpose of putting to death, of gas chambers or ovens for cremation – and that therefore he cannot bear witness *for* the only and true witnesses, those who have died, and who by definition can no longer bear witness, confirm or disprove the testimony of another. (200–1)

What, then, is the meaning of Celan’s “no one bears witness for the witness”, if we refuse to hold this “revisionist thesis to be fundamentally indestructible or incontestable” (ibid., 202)? Derrida proposes an affirmation of the problematic, paradoxical nature of witnessing and testimony – and a warning about the perversity that allows us to disregard its complexity. Testimony is not information, and witnessing is not a speech act that produces knowledge. By asserting this thesis repeatedly, Derrida seems to defeat the witness himself and the latter’s claim to the immediate truth of the testimony (“I have been there”). Where does his affirmative gesture actually lead us?

Derrida proceeds from the hypothesis that “all responsible witnessing involves a poetic experience of language” (ibid., 181). Two components of this hypothesis require discussion. Firstly, what is “a poetic experience of language”? And, secondly, what is “responsible witnessing”? To answer the first question, Derrida defines “poetic experience” as a constellation of three singularities: “a *singular* act, concerning a *singular* event and engaging in a *unique*, and thus inventive, relationship to language” (199, emphasis added). Thus, testimony as a speech act is determined by a triple irreproducibility: the singularity of the event means that there is no collective experience or memory of it, hence no sharing, and hence no “witnessing for the witness”. Whether it produces a poem or a piece of undecipherable traumatized speech, the relation between language and singular experience is also unique. “Responsible witnessing”, on the other hand, presupposes the presence

of politics – but how, in this case, does it relate to truth? Should truth be entrusted to a traumatized, possibly fabricating narrator?

As if to confirm “the indestructibility of the revisionist thesis”, Derrida questions the direct relationship between witnessing and truth, “. . .whether the concept of witnessing is compatible with a value of certainty, of assurance, and even of knowing as such. . .” (182) Testimony, he agrees, is not proof. Moreover, the act of bearing witness only makes sense when the witness is testifying to something unprovable because witnessing to what can be proved is not testimony but simple tautology, just as forgiving the forgivable is not forgiveness, as Derrida argues elsewhere. A real act of real forgiveness would be forgiving the unforgivable. Likewise, “. . .as soon as it is assured as a theoretical proof, a testimony cannot be assured as testimony.” (ibid.)

That “bearing witness” is not “proving” is a fact universally acknowledged in legal practice, where testimony can be checked against other testimonies, confirmed or invalidated, accepted or rejected as evidence – evidence that, in turn, may or may not qualify as proof. However, as Carlo Ginzburg insists, the work of the historian is different from that of the judge: even though history was strongly influenced by the imagery of the courtroom, history does not judge, but understands, i.e. collects a different kind of evidence and interprets it in a different way.⁸ Revisionism occurs in the general context of “the debate about the status of bearing witness and of survival”. For Derrida, these are different modalities of the same phenomenon. One is testifying in the sense of ‘being present as a third person in the deal of the two’ (Lat. *terstis*, ‘third’, in the root of *testes*, ‘witness’). The other is *superstes*, ‘survivor’, a figure that connects the reality of now (the moment of bearing witness) with the reality of then (the event testified to); a figure endowed with a double presence, present there and present here at the same time. As *terstis*, he is present to “the dealing of the two”, as *superstes*, to the horror of the past, and hence cannot be “objective” and “impartial”.

Incidentally, the etymologies of these terms in other languages do not confirm Derrida’s Latin etymology, and “language cannot of itself alone . . . be guardian or guarantee of a usage.” (p. 188) “Bearing witness is not proof” is “an axiom we ought to respect” (ibid.) and not seek to prove. “Witnessing appeals to the act of faith with regard to a

speech given under oath, and is therefore itself produced in the space of sworn faith" (ibid.), not in the space of objective knowledge and proof. "I bear witness" means, first of all, "I swear": "I swear that I have seen/heard/touched/felt", "that I have been present". Since testimony is given under oath, perjury is possible, yet perjury only confirms the structure of the situation in which it is committed. Since testimony is the statement of a perception, mistakes made in good faith are also possible. Such are the risks involved in the very situation of bearing witness. The perlocutionary force involved in the production of testimony hinges on the fact that in bearing witness one appeals to the good faith of the addressee. Every statement of witnessing is preceded by a vocative: "*You* have to believe me." The listener can refuse to believe, but, once again, without eliminating the general framework of sworn faith.

But what is believing? The truth of a proof, as well as that of a syllogism, does not require "belief" as a necessity ("*you have to*"). "To believe" can refer to two different acts: namely, an act of faith in which a testimony (or a poem) is effective by virtue of being a signature or a unique attestation of a singular event; or, alternatively, as an intellectual act pertaining to the order of knowledge. "Truth" is similarly ambiguous referring as it does to a non-lie on the one hand, and to justice, i.e., the order of law, on the other. Believing is necessity constructed within the relationship between witness and addressee, the two actors, who in the act of bearing witness, are joined by a sworn contract involving law, faith, and conscience (190-1). Testimony "... must not essentially consist in proving, confirming a knowledge, in assuring a theoretical certainty, a determining judgment. It can only appeal to an act of faith." (191)

For what is conscience? It is "a presence to oneself." (192) No testimony affirming one's presence would qualify as testimony in the space of sworn faith if it did not presuppose the presence of the witness to himself.

A witness can only invoke having being present at this or that, having tried out or experienced this or that, on condition of being and having being sufficiently present to himself, as such, on condition of claiming, at any rate, to have been sufficiently conscious of himself, sufficiently present to himself, to know what he is talking about. (192)

Thus, “responsible witnessing” is present to its conscience and aware of its own politics and poetics. It is only guaranteed by the witnesses’ critical awareness in three modes of attentiveness – of attending, in good faith – to the internal truth of the act of bearing witness: presence to the self, presence to the event, and presence to the listener. Such is the triple condition of answerability:

In witnessing, presence to oneself, classic condition of responsibility, must be coextensive with presence to something else, with having-being-present to something else, and with presence to the other, for instance to the addressee of the testimony. It is on this condition that the witness can be answerable, responsible, for his testimony, as for the oath by which he commits himself to it and guarantees it. (Ibid.)

“A Past Citable in All of Its Moments”

Thus, indeed, “no one bears witness for the witness” in any sense of “for”. Not in the sense of “in favor of”, nor in the sense of “in place, or instead of”, nor even in the sense of “in front of, before” (199–200). The witness stands alone and is irreplaceable. The necessity of faith – “you *have* to believe me” – is addressed to the listener and obligates him. It is this “you” upon whom the project of bearing witness entirely depends. The truth of the witness, even supported by his triple answerability of conscience (presence to himself), memory (presence to the event), and communication (presence to the addressee), still does not become the truth until the “you” of the listener commits to his part of the contract and responds to the imperative of faith. In this sense, Carlo Ginzburg’s opposition between the judge and the historian (and, alongside this, the opposition between the judgment of law and the so-called “judgment of history”) ceases to apply. The judge and the historian coincide in the figure of the “you” who, in the act of bearing witness, is of necessity required to believe. In the face of this necessity of faith, such a listener becomes a second-degree witness, attesting as he does to the very act of bearing witness. His position in listening amounts to the same triple answerability as that of the original witness i.e., presence to oneself, to the potential listener, and to the event of witnessing. It is only by their answerability that

the judge or the historian can justify their verdicts or claims to understanding. As formulated by Derrida,

...the judge, the arbiter, or the addressee have to be *also* witnesses; they do have to be able to testify, in their turn before their consciences or before others, to what they have attended, to what they have been present at, to what they have happened to be in the presence of; the testimony of the witness in the witness box. (200)

The answerability of the addressee, – the “you” involved in the act of sworn faith, an actor in the *sacramentum* of bearing witness – is such that the addressee, even when rejecting the testimony or denying the survivor’s right to testify, does not disentangle himself from the framework of relations imposed by the ethical foundations of the act of bearing witness:

...he (the addressee, the you. – I.S.) remains a witness even if he contests the first testimony by alleging that, since he has survived, the survivor cannot be a certain and reliable witness to what happened, in particular of the existence for this purpose, a purpose of putting to death, of gas chambers or ovens for cremation – and that therefore he cannot bear witness *for* the only and true witnesses, those who have died, and who by definition can no longer bear witness, confirm or disprove the testimony of another. (200-1)

Thus, even a Holocaust denier is a witness: he can deny the fact of the Holocaust yet cannot extricate himself from the position of being a “you”: a second-degree witness in the performance of bearing witness. His is a “you” in bad faith, someone who desecrates the *sacramentum* and whose revisionist claims violate the courtroom oath and cannot be justified to others (just as David Irving failed to justify himself in court in 2000).

By thus eliminating the difference between the judge and the historian, Derrida returns us, on a new level, to Schiller’s idea of universal history, *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, in which *Weltgericht* means ‘judgment of the world’ both in the sense of the ultimate historical interpretation and in the sense of the Last Judgment. In assigning so prominent a role to the “you” of the addressee – the listener, the arbiter, the judge, the historian – Derrida resolves the paradox of witness-

ing by relocating history into the sphere of messianic time. In messianic time, all history seeks to achieve what Walter Benjamin referred to as completeness of citability, i.e., a fullness of the past that is granted only to a redeemed humanity.

The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course, only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day.⁹

Citability not only refers to literary quotation but has a legal sense. To cite means ‘to summon to appear before a court of law’ or ‘to refer to or mention as by way of example, proof, or precedent’. To quote Hannah Arendt, “Everyone, everyone should have his day in court”¹⁰, and especially “the anonymous”, because, as Benjamin remarks,

It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated ... The historical construction is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous ... The eternal lamp is an image of genuine historical existence. It cites what has been – the flame that once was kindled – in perpetuum, giving it ever new sustenance.¹¹

Notes

1. In *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. Michael P. Clark (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2000), 179-207.

2. See, for instance <http://www.hdot.org/trial> for a detailed documentation of the legal process *Irving v. Lipstadt* in 2000. The historian Barbara Lipstadt was accused of libel by David Irving when she described him as a “a dangerous spokesperson” for Holocaust denial. In the verdict, the judge declared that Irving “misrepresented, misconstrued, omitted, mistranslated, misread and applied double standards to the historical evidence in order to achieve his ideological presentation of history.” (ibid., accessed May 7th, 2011). Irving was thus defined as an ideologist, in contrast to his own self-identification as a historian.

3. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994 [1963]), 223-4.

4. Though imperfect, witness accounts nevertheless afford redemption, as in the moment of silence that occurs when one witness tells a story about a German sergeant who helped to save his life. These moments of silence “were like a burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness” (ibid., p. 231).

5. Primo Levi, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York:Zone Books, 2008), 33–4. Agamben’s detailed discussion of Levi’s notions of complete vs. incomplete witnessing (op. cit., 15–40) confirms Derrida’s idea about its politics and poetics: the impossibility of (“complete”) witnessing is what makes possible a poem (as with the poem by Celan which Derrida analyzes in this essay). Unfortunately, however, Agamben’s reasoning does not seem to be fully convincing in the eyes of the survivor who wants her memory to be, not exclusively encrypted in “obscure writing” (Levi’s description of Celan), but narrated and ethically reflected in plain words. In a seminar recently, I witnessed just such a discussion concerning Agamben’s concept of the *Muselmann* in which one participant, a former inmate of Auschwitz, expressed dissatisfaction with Agamben’s thesis about the impossibility of witnessing. The seminar failed to provide an answer to her question, “What am I, a former *Muselmann*, to do?”

6. Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York : An Owl Book, 1996), 268–271.

7. Paul Celan, *Aschenglorie*, quoted in the same essay by Derrida. Even though both the poem and Derrida’s reading of it deserve a special discussion, I have set them aside in order to concentrate on Derrida’s account of the structure of witnessing as a performative act.

8. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on the Late-Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice* (London and New York : Verso., 2002), 12–18.

9. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” in *Selected Writings. Volume 4. 1938–1940* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003 (1940), 390.

10. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 228.

11. Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History””, ibid., p. 406–7. The “eternal lamp” is a citation from Exodus 27:20, on the need to maintain a lamp at all times in a sanctuary as a sign of God’s presence.