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Obligations of the secondary witness to testimonies of historical trauma in European literature

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Abstract

The role of the reader as a “secondary witness” to testimonies of historical trauma must be carefully considered. Adopting the position of the secondary witness entails a particular responsibility: to understand authorial intent while resisting preconceived imaginings of our role as the secondary witness. As non-witnesses, we are compelled to read historical trauma, such as the experience of the concentration camp in Europe. This compulsion should be mediated by deliberate and considered positioning as the secondary witness, by heeding the tacit demands of the author, which are woven into the fabric of their testimony. This article proposes that there are innumerable roles (plural) that the author of historical trauma may require of us. Drawing on three examples of European testimonies of historical trauma, this essay hopes to guide how we can identify our roles as secondary witnesses.

Keywords: Alexander Solzhenitsyn; Charlotte Delbo; European literature; historical trauma; Primo Levi; secondary witness

Introduction

As experiences of the concentration camps, whether in Nazi Germany or a Soviet labour camp, recede from popular consciousness, our obligation as readers of testimonies of historical trauma becomes increasingly consequential and complex. Ongoing self-critical reflection is paramount in theorising about our role as a “secondary witness” to these testimonies. Sociologist and historian Jan Gross emphasised that “we must be capable of listening to lonely voices reaching us from the abyss” (2001). This capability is informed by our self-understanding as readers of testimonial writing, a preoccupation which will facilitate the ensuing discussion. This thesis seeks to carefully construct the role of the secondary witness as contingent and mutable, rather than static, so as to appreciate the unique and fragmented nature of historical trauma as memory. In order to illustrate this, a case will be made for the differing intents of testimonial authors and our corresponding obligations to these aims as readers. The argument is derived from several case studies, namely Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*, Aleksandre Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man*.

The shifting role of the secondary witness

Scholars of historical trauma offer opposing approaches to the act of witnessing. Hans Mommsen discourages the representation of major historical processes through personal history, describing it as a “reduction” that is “completely inappropriate” (Vann 2004). Conversely, Dominik LaCapra emphasises that essentialising context, making blanket categorisations and hegemonic treatment of historical literature should be avoided (1994). Similarly, Gary Wiessman argues that historical events such as the Holocaust must be understood as “dispersed and fractured” into a multitude of representations (2004). It is upon this backdrop of scholarly discourse that this essay frames its primary proposal. No single role applies to the secondary witness of European testimonies of historical trauma, and the attempt to identify such a position is reductionist of the myriad of literature in this canon. Instead, this discussion suggests that these texts should be treated as distinct and unique, and that in identifying the intent of the primary witness, one can best perform their corresponding role as the secondary witness. To ground this argument in practical application, three significant European testimonial writings will be analysed, before drawing a final conclusion on the respective roles (which is importantly plural) of the reader. This essay does not seek to identify all possible reasons for writing testimony. It may be useful, however, to consider conceivable objectives to testimonial writing and the complementary obligations of its readers. Two such intents will be studied: that of the mourner and that of the ethico-political missionary.

Trauma work and Delbo

Testimonial literature can be understood through the paradigm of trauma therapy, which in turn characterises our role as the secondary witness. Freudian psychoanalysis suggests that trauma can be integrated with the self to an extent “by narrating it to others” ((Trezise 2013, p. 155). Post-Freudian discussion elaborates; Lacan proposes that by representing trauma in the “Symbolic”, that is the written form, one facilitates “integration” (Lacan 1985). “Performing” the unconscious is what Lacan designates “acting out”, a form of therapy characterised by compulsion, repetition, silence and descriptions of *the Sublime* (LaCapra 1994). Žižek defines the Sublime as an object so powerful it is beyond perception, an “unrepresentable kernel of experience” (LaCapra 1994, p. 206). Psychoanalytical frameworks of acting out and working through complement understanding of historical trauma testimony. It is therefore appropriate to draw on such principles in interpreting the works of trauma victims, in order to identify within the fabric of their writings the intent of the author.

Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*, is one such testimony that can be read within this psychoanalytical framework. Characteristics of Lacan’s acting out can be prised from the Holocaust survivor’s work, and in doing so we can understand the writing as an attempt at trauma recovery. Repetition and anaphora permeate the text with an urgent and compulsive pace, evincing what Laplanche and Pontalis describe as an essential feature of working through trauma: “Run--schnell--the gate--schnell--the plank...--schnell—the gate...run run run schnell schnell schnell...” (2014, p. 94). According to Laplanche and Pontalis, this repetition can “facilitate the subject’s freeing from repression mechanisms”, and so Delbo’s writing can be understood as an attempt to grapple with her trauma (1988, pp. 488-89). Further, the notion of the Sublime manifests in Delbo’s descriptions of her sensorial memory, or *mémoire profonde*. Describing an orange section in intimate detail, “the juice spreads under my tongue,

touches my palate, my gums, flows into my throat” Delbo establishes a negative pain, as having “chase[d] after” the sensation, she is affronted by the dryness of her mouth: “the paste of rotting leaves” (2014, p. 75). This description of absolute sensation, immediately followed by a lack of sensation, a “dryness”, can be interpreted through psychoanalysis as the experience of sensorial, alimantal and emotional deprivation in Auschwitz. Characteristic of post-Freudian notions of trauma work, Delbo’s sensorial narration of absolute intensity again substantiates the understanding of *Auschwitz and After* as a work of trauma recovery.

Having established the testimony as a form of therapy, it is appropriate now to ask what our corresponding role is as the reader. Importantly, Freud points to “the presence of an empathetic witness” in order to enable the effective working-through process (Santner 1990, p. 25). Freud argues that mourning necessitates “a supportive or even solidaristic social context”, in order to restore the loss of affect suffered by the trauma victim (Santner 1990). Emotional co-presence therefore constitutes our role as the secondary witness. In order to effectively facilitate the healing and mourning process, a social ritual is required. Within this ritual, our position is that of the obliging and quiet audience. It is important to resist understanding these psychoanalytical ideas of trauma work as individual. Delbo’s compulsion to work through her trauma does not take place in isolation from the reader. Reconciling oneself with trauma requires transcending the role of the “victim”, achieved by reconstructing an identity distinct from the past self (LaCapra 1994, p. 9). By reading testimonial writing, the author’s working-through process is preserved, as they transcend their past self, and by extension their victim-self. Rather than pursuing a juridicial inquiry, the aim of the reader should be anchored in empathy and the undertaking of the mourning process. Secular interpretations of historiography can be isolating and detached: the social ritual of shared mourning can supplement historical investigations in order to provide a meaningful interaction with European testimonies of historical trauma.

Moral imperatives and Solzhenitsyn

The treatment of trauma memory as fragmented requires the reader of testimony to be perceptive to the various purposes of literature in this canon, and to respond accordingly in their situating as the secondary witness. In drawing upon Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, hereafter *One Day*, this essay will attempt to contextualise a de-essentialised approach to understanding trauma testimony. Rather than an attempt at trauma recovery (although this is evident in the text), *One Day* acts as an overwhelmingly ethicopolitical work, rooted in Solzhenitsyn’s doctrinal writing.

Solzhenitsyn’s preoccupation with the moral implications of the camp and the broader socio-political context is implicit in his writing. Solzhenitsyn’s edifying work is grounded in an ethical crisis and questioning, and it is proposed that his “mission of memory is closely tied to abstract moral criteria” (Oja 1988, p. 63). The conflation of *One Day* with doctrine applies to his work more broadly and is captured in the opening of *The Gulag Archipelago*, in which he quotes a Russian proverb: “Dwell on the past and you’ll lose an eye; forget the past and you’ll lose both eyes.” (Oja 1988, p. 62). This situates an analysis of *One Day* within the context of Solzhenitsyn’s idealism, moral mission, and “fierce criticism” of Stalinist Russia (Mahoney 2009). Solzhenitsyn regards his work as an ideological apparatus, purposed with ensuring that the past is not forgotten. His intentions do not end here: Solzhenitsyn’s writing demands that the past not only be remembered but be appraised critically. This ethico-political mission

can be understood from the author's deliberate choice of literary devices. *One Day* draws on binary notions of good and evil in order to simply yet powerfully posit indignation towards Soviet power.

Allusion to ascetic ideals is the vehicle through which Solzhenitsyn invites us to make moral judgement. Permeating *One Day* are various Christian Topoi, integrated in motifs (Alyosha's Testament), similes (the artist who "painted the number on your hat...like a priest anointing your brow") and characterisation (Pavlo "crossed himself" after a meal) (Solzhenitsyn 1962, p.28, p.67). This theme thrusts the text into a religious context and the ethical preoccupations of Solzhenitsyn are mediated through ascetic principles. These biblical references act as an aid as Solzhenitsyn measures good and evil, creating a universal benchmark through which the Gulags are critiqued. Christian asceticism is grounded in mental discipline, martyrdom and stoicism. Within Russian orthodoxy, martyrs hold a special status. Boris and Gleb, the first canonised martyrs in Russia, were innocent victims of political crimes (Kobets 1998, p.665). Shukov and the fellow *zeks* suffer a similar fate, and narration of their plight as biblical casts the camp, and by extension the Soviet State, as its diabolical antithesis. The inmates are referred to as a flock, as opposed to the camp authorities, whose attempt at commanding power is feeble and inadequate: "Any herdsman can count better than those good-for nothings" (Solzhenitsyn 1962, p. 136). The camp commandant's name, Volkovoi, carries the Russian word for wolf, *Volk*, as Solzhenitsyn spells out his disdain for the camp authorities. This disdain extends to the Soviet system, as the inmates label the moon hanging over Shukhov's village the "Wolf's sun" (Solzhenitsyn 1962, p. 134). Stalinist Russia has perverted the natural order, appointing a wolf to herd a flock. The camp as an "anti-world", or hell, is thematic of *One Day*, the query of: "can a man who's warm understand one who's freezing" suggesting the incongruity of the world "outside" with the world "inside" (Solzhenitsyn 1962, p. 23). Soviet authorities are thus criticized as not only incapable, but as evil. In this way, the author elevates the prisoners to the divine, and denounces the Soviet State as "The First Circle", eponymous of the Solzhenitsyn's 1968 novel.

Having established that Solzhenitsyn's mission is that of the ethico-political critic, it is necessary to glean his moral preoccupation more specifically. In doing so, we can be informed in our positioning as the effective and purposeful secondary witness. Solzhenitsyn continues to draw on simple symbols to concisely yet forcefully spell out his moral fixation with Stalinist Russia. The author's political dissertation uses food to symbolize that which has been robbed of Russia by Soviet authorities. Lacking food translates to the inmates' inner lack of national identity. Solzhenitsyn establishes home as the locus of alimantal satisfaction "whole pots full of potatoes...milk enough to bust their guts" (Solzhenitsyn 1962, p. 49). By comparison, under Soviet rule, a "bowl of soup – it was dearer than freedom" (Solzhenitsyn 1962, p. 134). Under Soviet control, food (or national identity) has been displaced. For Solzhenitsyn, the dispossession of Russian national identity is considered worse than being robbed of freedom.

Again, we are faced with the question of what this implies for us as readers. Following the same thread throughout this argument is the sustained need for self-critical analysis contingent on the text we are witnessing. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to apply the same principles to *One Day* as was applied to *Auschwitz and After*. While being an empathetic reader is a suitable response, we are better equipped to fulfil our obligation as a reader of Solzhenitsyn by remaining perceptive to the "complexity or nuance of [his] political judgement" (Mahoney 2009, p. 45). Careful analysis of his

work enables us to understand Solzhenitsyn's "ferocious righteousness with which he regards the Gulag system and the larger political structure which spawned it" (Oja 1988, p. 62). Jean Amery proposes that "history must be grounded in moral comprehension and involve moral judgment", which Solzhenitsyn similarly demands of us (Weissman 2004, p. 210). We are therefore obliged to respond to the author's call for moral appraisal, outrage and action. Rather than quietly observe Solzhenitsyn's plight, we have been asked to cast judgement and approach our understanding of this historical process with indignation. The forcefulness and simplicity with which Solzhenitsyn makes his argument is impossible to ignore, as he assigns us the moral duty of understanding the Soviet system through his measures of good and evil.

Convergence and Levi

Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* offers a compelling example of the complexity of our role as a secondary witness. Understanding testimony of historical trauma as unique in its purpose for the contemporary reader requires acknowledgement of the intent implicit within the text. *If This is a Man* provides a powerful case of both trauma work as well as moral application. It is the site of convergence between the aforementioned authorial objectives, and postulates that it is a righteous mission in of itself to undertake shared mourning and remembering. This holds significance for the reader, as what is most crucial to Levi is not *how* we witness literature of historical trauma, but rather that we simply do witness. Yosef Yerushalmi emphasises that modern historiography contradicts Jewish understandings of memory. Until the sixteenth century, Jewish belief was "concerned not with history but with collective memory in a living ritualistic...tradition" (LaCapra 1994, p. 11). This ethno-religious context casts Levi's work as a call for a return to the simple act of witnessing, not only as a social practice, but as a moral imperative.

Analysis of *If This is a Man* offers parallels to Delbo's trauma work and drawing again upon psychoanalytical principles of acting-out, Levi's oeuvre can be understood as a cry for an active participant in healing. Initially, the testimony functions as a "sfogo, an outlet" (Sodi 2007, p.43), however the text develops a multidimensional profile, which requires dialogistic participation (Sodi 2007, p. 43). The impetus behind the work evolves to "the need to tell our story to 'the others' to make 'the others' participate in it" (Levi 1958, p.7). The compulsion to expel trauma into the written form is articulated by Levi as a performance of catharsis and is what Suzette Henke terms "scriptotherapy" (1998, p. 7). Levi describes "the need to tell our story" as a "violent impulse" (Levi 1997, p. 138). The sublime as a function of working through trauma is recurrent throughout the memoir, as Levi struggles to articulate the immensity of his suffering: "I am filled with a serene sadness that is almost joy" (1958, p. 37). Delbo's nightmare of listeners that "turn toward the wall, become silent, indifferent strangers" (2014, p. 63) is mirrored in Levi's work, whose "ever-repeated scene of unlistened-to-story" casts a sombre spectre over the memoir (1958, p. 66). The testimony can therefore be framed within the psychoanalytical paradigm of acting out, and thus requires an empathetic witness to share the burden of Levi's "serene sadness".

Unlike Delbo's wandering poetics and non-stories, Levi's work is driven by a forceful narrative, imbuing the story with a missionary dimension, similar to that of Solzhenitsyn. Indeed, the author is incessantly preoccupied with moral crises regarding his role in constructing a representation of the Holocaust, as well as the necessary role of the reader of this representation.

Levi agonises over his own responsibility in writing an account of the concentration camp, which can be read as a nexus between testimonial writing as a form of trauma work and that of the ethico-political mission. The spectre of the “collaborator” haunts Levi’s work, as his notion of the “grey zone” renders him culpable. His ability to bear witness arises from his survival: a feat he ascribes with a degree of accountability: “the worst survived, that is the fittest; the best all died” (1986, p. 82). The *menaschka*, with which Levi carries extra rations of soup (and thus the means by which he survives), becomes symbolic of his enlistment in the system of the *univers concentrationnaire* (Sodi 2007, p. 50). In his poem, *The Survivor*, Levi questions whether anyone “died in my place”, as he struggles with his role as a witness. This self-punitive acting-out, as Levi critiques his own role in the universe of the concentration camp, can be understood as the Lacanian concept of *méconnaissance* of truth, which fragments identity and misinforms our self-perception (LaCapra 1994, p. 208). He therefore constructs trauma work with a moral imperative, to acknowledge and punish his own perceived wrongs.

Levi’s second moral preoccupation is that “liberation may lead to another kind of silencing...despite the absence of gates”, and that this silence will “be no less formidable in its own way” (1958, p. 157). Yehuda Bauer writes that “the warning contained in the Holocaust is surely that the acts of the perpetrators might be repeated” (2002, p. 19). Levi’s work acts as such a warning, and his example of Resnya’s story urges that above all else we must remember the trauma: “He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but, it was certainly sorrowful, cruel and moving,” (1958, p. 71). Levi emphasises the imperative of self-recognition within the reader: he writes in hope “that the reader will realise what is in it pertains to him” (Levi 1997, p. 1385). The “tragic, disturbing necessity” of the “hundreds of thousands of stories, all different” must be witnessed (Levi 1958, p. 71).

Conclusion

To conclude, the secondary witness must adopt an agile and mutable approach to their role. They must resist regarding the texts in a singular canon as hegemonic in their intent. Instead, the secondary witness should be self-aware, self-critical and conscious of the author’s purpose in each case. Informing their self-positioning by analysing the intent of testimonial authors enables effective and meaningful engagement with trauma writing. By participating in a shared undertaking in mourning, the secondary witness fulfils the author’s wish to transcend their victimhood. Delbo requires such a participant in the process of understanding and recovering from trauma. Alternatively, by casting moral judgement, the morally outraged author is able to proffer their ethical teachings and open political discourse. The reader of Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day* is obliged to closely read the text to identify these teachings and share in the author’s indignation. By performing the righteous task of remembering, the reader enables important trauma work while also sharing the author’s moral mission of preventing historical trauma from falling into obscurity. Levi must recount his self-perceived complacency to an empathetic reader, while also instruct the same reader to witness and remember the horrors he has recounted. Within just three testimonies of European historical trauma, nuanced and complex examples of authorial intent can be identified. Each of these intents carry a corresponding role for the secondary witness. The canon in its entirety has innumerable purposes and requirements of its readers. In order to meaningfully engage with European testimonies of historical trauma, readers must thoughtfully heed the tacit demands of the author.

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