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WITNESS LITERATURE - A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: *The present paper aims at answering some of the questions prompted by the post-totalitarian analysis of a rather new concept: that of witness literature - a hybrid concept that has been so far only sporadically and delicately addressed by literary theory and criticism. The article presents theoretical considerations regarding the more precise definition of the concept as well as practical aspects related to its relevance for contemporary literature. The positions of literary criticism generally polarize two subthemes: the specific claim of truth inherent to this type of text and the transition from upheaval to creativity turning the victim into testifying witness and writer. The interaction dynamics of literature, testimony and historiography is further investigated as to reveal and describe the shift of focus and mutations caused by totalitarianism in this respect.*

Key words: *testimony, post-totalitarian, witness literature, historiography.*

1. Introduction

The sinuous path of post-totalitarian societies is basically accounted for by the chronic perpetuation of the principles introduced by totalitarian rule (both by the extreme right wing national-socialism of World War II and by the subsequent communist rule in eastern European countries). Looking back to both instances of European totalitarianism of the past century, it is obvious that a detailed analysis of the practices of totalitarian national-socialism and communism are not easily attainable, because totalitarianism, in all its forms, has proven extremely efficient in concealing its secrets and leaving no witnesses behind, to testify: "*Truly successful misdeeds leave no witnesses.*" Engdahl [6] warns the literary historian and critic, referring to the difficulty of proving the national-socialist 'extermination policy' [9] as well as the countless missing pages from the 'black book of communism' [7].

And it is not the amplitude of these atrocities that places witnesses and their testimonies in a focal position of contemporary literature. It is the Orwellian "*horror over the systematic erasure of memory in totalitarian societies*" [6] that grants this type of literature a distinct place and reception algorithm.

For an accurate image of remnant implications of this totalitarian past, contemporary research requires adapting and reconfiguring several constitutive elements of specific domains (including historiography and literary studies), which become mandatory for a comprehensive description of the individual under totalitarian rule.

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If this profound fracture - by its first name 'totalitarianism'- still poses a potential or indirect menace to contemporary society, it should be overcome by prevention, by knowledge. And if prevention, in this case spelled knowledge, implies research and hereby appeal to the witness of totalitarianism, then it is testimony that becomes the foundation of any such endeavour.

The written account of witnesses - generally referred to as testimony - is also known by another name, more recently coined for this specific type of testimonial - depositional text, namely by the term *witness literature*.

2. Witness literature – a new term coined for a new concept

Witness literature is a relatively new concept, with its specificity residing in the type of event that produces witnesses and implicitly their written testimony, a particular kind of text, often referred to as witness literature. Over 30 years ago, E. Wiesel already acknowledged witness literature as an innovation of our times: "*If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature: that of testimony.*" [10]

Even though perceiving this point of view as an overstatement of the novelty of testimony in the realm of literature, literary critic admits it hereby correctly identifies the "*the most profound change in literature since the breakthrough of modernism.*" [6]

2.1. The Relationship between (Witness) Literature and Truth

There are various literary forms testimony can pertain to, however, in this particular instance, form is reduced to a secondary or tertiary aspect in point of relevance, whereas the focus remains firmly linked to the contents of testimony and its relationship to truth; a relationship based upon the claim of truth, and implicitly a claim to credibility, setting up a very particular type of relationship between the author and the reader of the testimonial text.

Beyond this rather generic aspect, any theoretical investigation of witness literature and testimony is prompted to answer a long interrogative series, starting with questioning the type of event that generates witnesses, to defining the witness and its relevant characteristics, identifying the conceptual framework of testimony in point of literary relevance, to aspects related to the representation ethics of the specific experiences witnessed, and brought as testimony into the literary field and their context related particularities.

2.2. The Witness

One interesting distinction relevant to the underlying argument - articulated by H. Engdahl in defining the witness - is that the literary witness does not acquire this quality as a mere observer (eye-witness) or as a participant to a certain event.

The witness is defined as the one who *can* (is still alive and still has the ability to) speak up and does so in testimony: "*I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!*" [6]. In this threefold definition of the witness, simultaneously complying with all three mandatory provisions - that of presence, that of perception and that of transmission – testimony emerges as an act of speech having the capacity of reproducing the experiential circumstances of the real event. But in the context of totalitarianism, survivors of the national – socialist extermination camp or of the communist

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gulag are only exceptions, thus witnesses who *can* and *do* utter the word of testimony also speak for the majority, who were silenced for good (hereby granting the testimony of the surviving few an even higher degree of credibility). Thus, as an act of speech "*testimony is inseparable from this kind of self-reference and from the accompanying claim to immediate credence.*" [6]

The aspects discussed above only lead to the next research question that needs further investigation: what is the relationship between testimony -as experience, perception and ultimately as an act of speech - and literature.

3. Testimony and/or Literature

Immediately after the end of totalitarian rule (both in post-national socialist Germany and in post-communist Romania), the absolutely natural and predictable interest in learning the truth, and in exposing the secrets, the misdeeds, the so called "*arcana imperii*" [1] of the totalitarian regimes generated an impressive "*depositional effervescence*" [4] conferring a new type of discourse to memoir literature, that is not easily defined, circumscribed or attributed to general literary categories.

The option of subsuming these types of discourse to a hypernym, an umbrella term such as "*memory literature*" (to include everything from depositions, actual diaries, memoirs, confessions, (auto)biographies, to articles and even interviews) implies admitting that such a denomination is "*wide and permissive up to complete imprecision*" [4] and it can also be operated based upon other terms, according to the classification criteria considered relevant.

General considerations, regarding the affiliation to a certain literary genre or questioning the literary species it should be attributed to, may be of interest to literary criticism, provided that the absolute lack of literary ambition of such texts is not overlooked: this particular type of discourse has not been meant as literary creation.

3.1. Unintentional literary affiliation

Quite opposite to that, in most cases, the authors adopt defensive positions when their writing is 'accused' of literary value. Not only do they display absolute disinterest towards the evaluation of the literary quality of their writing, but they often adopt protest positions, vehemently delimitating their writing from any literary ambition, in various forms clearly and firmly stating it out loud: *we are not making literature*.

The authors of witness literature, rarely literates, write (also) driven by different impulses than those that generally determine the writer to lay a literary creation on paper: "*The testifying word is a heavy word (...) fundamental experiences, crucial experiences cannot remain confined, and by the mediation of words they gain the power of renewal along with that of liberation.*" [2]

Even though in some cases, several of these testifying witnesses end up becoming writers, without ever having intended to, in most situations they insist on being perceived as recorders of events, which by their exceptional nature, absolutely entail being recorded in written form.

3.2. Functionality versus Aesthetic Value

The author of this type of discourse reveals himself in his quality of testifying witness and not of writer (in the literary sense of the term).

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The emphasis of this aspect reaches the point where even the remote possibility of existing, unintended aesthetic value attributed by literary critics to their work, is perceived by the authors as some kind of flaw, as some type of disloyalty towards the declared objective of their writing: that of testimony.

4. Testimony and/or historiography

"*The opposite of the past is not the future, but its absence*" was part of E. Wiesel's discourse [10] at festivity for awarding the Nobel prize for peace in 1986.

It is therefore relevant to learn what *happened* in order to comprehend what *is happening* now to be able to decide what *is going to happen* in the future. Usually, for finding out aspects of the past, history is the first and most competent source to rely on. Adding several different empirical and implicitly more subjective perspectives offered by witnesses to the objective resources provided by historiography should normally be sufficient for such an attempt.

4.1. The unreliable historical document

However, the clean, scientific, objective page of history is rather useless in the particular case of totalitarian historiography, since it is seriously soiled by the gross forgery it has been subjected to.

The historiography, produced during totalitarian rule, cannot be used as a valid source for such an objective, since it is nothing but a mere discretionary enterprise of the totalitarian power and propaganda, including or omitting, misrepresenting or completely making up any aspects considered relevant to the political interest of the governing regime.

4.2. The Dynamics between History and Testimony

Therefore, the relationship between testimony and history is altered in this case, gaining a new specificity. Testimony is promoted - despite its subjectivity - to one of the few valid sources for the historiography of post-totalitarian times, whereas any official papers, statements, texts - in short all documents issued under totalitarian rule - are questionable and hence deemed unreliable for historiography.

The novelty in the dynamics of this relationship is an unprecedented mutual animosity between history and testimony: a deeply rooted distrust of science in the highly subjective perspective offered by testimony paralleled by the reluctance of the witness to accept the generic explanations offered by history, which "unravels the secrets of the past, neutralises the conflicts, and absolves the faults" [5].

This explanatory function of historiography is contrary to testimony, since it attempts to render the unacceptable reality of the witness understandable to the outsider.

Some critics go one step further, considering that "*historical explanations are 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.*" [6]

History prefers by definition technical proof and documents, yet in the case of post-totalitarian historiography it reaches the point where its most reliable source left is testimony.

Nevertheless, the substitution of the technical historical sources with the testimony of the other directly involved

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party, has raised - and continues to do so – numerous objections regarding its subjectivity.

4.3. Subjectivity and Subjectivism

These objections are indeed justified, because - no matter how hard the witness may try - testimony is and remains fundamentally subjective.

But, exactly here - within this subjectivity of testimony - is nested its credibility and without credibility, the value of testimony would not exceed the strictly aesthetic boundary of any form of fiction. "*Of course everything, absolutely everything in memoir prose can be only subjective. This aspect has already been discussed by our literary criticism (...) rejecting de plano the subjectivism objection, on the same grounds, that memoirs can only be subjective.*" [8]

The liaison between testimony and truth is one of the fundamental assertions of this type of discourse, its credibility being granted, but simultaneously questioned by its intrinsic subjectivity. Hence, in the context seriously unbalanced by the erasure and rewriting of history according to the interest of totalitarian rule, this appeal to the witness is far from being dismissible as a flawed procedure, but rather acceptable as a form of rebalancing and compensating for the impairment created by totalitarianism in the distribution of reliable sources available for historiography.

The appeal to the testimony of witnesses of totalitarian rule may thus assume this indissoluble bond between the credibility and the subjectivity of testimony and take it consequently into consideration.

The subjectivity of testimony differs however, from the subjectivism of the history 'created' in the totalitarian laboratory: "*being subjective means not altering – according to circumstances – a point of view, and expressing it frankly and clearly. Being subjectivist is something different - it means failing to comply with the assumed duty of always presenting facts as they are, with no parti pris, and it means to arrange them in such a manner as to have them lead to a predetermined conclusion.*" [8].

From this point of view, the imprint of subjectivism weighs its heavy burden upon the historical document, completely undermining its credibility, whereas the subjectivity of testimony becomes the very premises for its credibility, under the quite abnormal circumstances of totalitarianism.

This unique inversion is either implicitly acknowledged or explicitly confirmed by most historians concerned with historiography in post-totalitarian nations.

As a historian, L. Boia confirms the credibility and validity of this type of texts as reliable historical sources as follows: "*most part of the information (...) is extracted directly from sources. From several archive funds. From the media of the time. From the numerous memoirs and personal diaries that have been published in the past two decades*" [3]. The historian does so by positioning testimonies, or witness literature and archive sources as equals in the equation of history writing.

Despite the subjectivity of testimony and despite the subjectivism of official documents both are hereby declared equally valid and equally reliable sources for historiography, and generally for learning about the totalitarian past in the pursuit of a safer future.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary literature harbours a new type of writing, a new type of text, a new type of author all partly pertaining to the specificity of literature and partly to that of

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history, forming a hybrid concept of scientific interest for both domains: history and literature.

The unprecedented extermination practices of totalitarian rule and the specific erasure of data and memory places massive emphasis upon any credible source recording the events of those times.

The interested party consists not only of historians looking for valid historical sources, but it also includes an immensely wider reader group – a fact gauged by the considerable success of such (literary) productions.

This may be also explained by this special relationship between reader and writer, which relies on the specific claim of truth and hence to credibility of testimony.

Written testimony is assimilated both to historiography as historical documents and to literature as literary works, thus creating a hybrid concept bearing a new specific configuration of its constitutive elements: objectivity and factuality, credibility versus forgery, subjectivism versus subjectivity, functionality and transitivity versus aesthetic value and literary affiliation.

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