



## What Testimony Does to Literature

Frédéric Detue, Charlotte Lacoste

### ► To cite this version:

Frédéric Detue, Charlotte Lacoste. What Testimony Does to Literature. *Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, 2021, 13, pp.22-36. 10.12681/syn.27559 . hal-03377579

**HAL Id: hal-03377579**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03377579v1>**

Submitted on 14 Oct 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## What Testimony Does to Literature

Frédéric Detue and Charlotte Lacoste

### Abstract

This article sheds light on a literary practice that critics began to reflect upon in the twentieth century: witnessing. This genre, by adopting a narrative model based on statements of evidence presented in the courtroom, distinguishes itself from other forms of expression practiced by witnesses. Survivors of political violence take up their pens and describe the situation they have been subjected to, so as to attest to historical facts and prevent erasure of the event through forgetting, denial or negation. This enterprise, which seeks to document lived experience and thereby pay homage to victims who did not survive, constitutes both a source of evidence for legal procedure and a contribution to the writing of history. Witnessing, however literary it may be, is founded on a pact of veracity, in which witnesses are bound to relate no more than their own experience and to do so with precision. Finally, witness accounts are addressed to society at large or even to humanity as a whole, in the hope of emancipating it from such violence by raising awareness of its intolerable nature. Though witnessing still lacks legitimacy within the literary field, the link it establishes between ethical, aesthetic and political positions makes this genre exemplary of what literature is capable of.

### Keywords

just art; documentary; poetics; justice; Testimony; Jean Norton Cru; Témoins; Primo Levi; witnessing

For a long time, one did not ‘testify’ in literature.<sup>1</sup> It is a relatively recent literary practice for survivors of political violence to write and publish detailed accounts of the events they have witnessed, to bring them to widespread attention. For acts of testifying to become a distinctive social phenomenon required the development of a democratic culture, from the nineteenth century onwards in the West. But the real expansion of such practices came in the following century, when the world wars and the numerous crimes against humanity and genocides forced so many to face what Miguel Abensour called the “modern terror” (231).<sup>2</sup> As Jean Norton Cru observed in 1929 in his analysis of the writings of First World War combatants, the practices of witnesses are diverse: diaries, reminiscences, reflections, letters and novels (*War Books* 45); and other forms should also be included, such as poetry or theatre. Yet among these testimonial practices, the one which particularly interests us here emerged as a new literary genre in the mid-twentieth century, at the same time as a new international law of human rights was being established: testimony which, in diary form (*in medias res*) or in the form of memoirs (after the fact), is written “as a judicial act”<sup>3</sup> and whose distinguishing feature is the use of a narrative model inherited from the legal deposition.

### Testifying through literature: a judicial act

World War I marked an important step towards the establishment of testimony as a genre. Several factors combined to produce an unprecedented growth in testimonial practices at this time. The devastating effects of increased firepower, which led to new ways of “waging war” and dying from it, are not the only explanation. Also significant was that the shock of war affected massive numbers of civilians

at a time when the average level of education was higher than in previous centuries. As such, the soldiers' ignorance of the realities of battle appeared all the more "inconceivable" (Cru, *Témoins* 411) to them at their first taste of action. The "need for truth" that compelled many of them to write their testimonies originated in their stupefaction at such unprecedented political violence,<sup>4</sup> which it was important to make known to as many people as possible. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the crime perpetrated at the same time in the Ottoman Empire, which targeted the entire Armenian people and which was difficult to name. Both cases involved the social construction of an intolerable,<sup>5</sup> which in the 1940s led to the creation of the legal concepts of 'war crime,' 'crime against humanity' and 'crime of genocide.'

This was an historic recognition, and depended on three phenomena that emerged in the nineteenth century, besides the rise in literacy: the 'age of rights' ushered in by the American and French revolutions, which enshrined the universal idea of human rights; the gradual formation of the social sciences, at first in close association with literature, which led in particular to a renewal of the history discipline; and, finally, the unprecedented development of printing techniques, which encouraged the publication of all types of written material. The role played by the press should be stressed, first because newspapers published or supported the publication of survivor testimonies very early on,<sup>6</sup> and second because the rising figure of the reporter in the second half of the nineteenth century accustomed readers to a documentary standard based on witness accounts. WWI combatants and Armenian survivors had a cruel knowledge of the war or genocidal event that decimated them and recognised its significance for humanity; consequently, for the press to be drafted into the service of state propaganda and for the event, whether silenced or falsified, to escape the awareness of their contemporaries was quite simply intolerable.

This point is decisive. Never before the early twentieth century had the fear been so literally expressed that the reality of such historic violence might be obscured by a project of denial. This is as true for the Great War as it is for the genocide of the Armenians, which produced the same thirst to tell the story, the same necessity for the survivors to testify to the facts they had witnessed. In the case of the genocide, the act of bearing witness was encouraged by an appeal launched at the initiative of the Committee for Assistance to Deportees on 22 November 1918, in an Armenian newspaper in Constantinople. Entitled "Armenian Martyrdom Must be Proven," this appeal no doubt contributed to the "sudden and widespread emergence of deportation writing" in 1919.<sup>7</sup> As survivors of mass crimes had often been urged to remain silent and forget, this exhortation to testify was particularly important. Faced with the world's deafness and strategies of denial,<sup>8</sup> some despaired at times of ever finding a sympathetic ear to listen and give credence to the narrative of their experience. Yet if "all Armenians who knew how to spell and who returned from deportation considered it their duty to describe what they saw" (Beledian "Le retour de la Catastrophe" 309),<sup>9</sup> it was because for the survivors of this genocide and, later, for the survivors of Auschwitz, "the need to tell our story to 'others,' to make 'others' share it, took on for us ... the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with other elementary needs" (Levi, Preface n.p.). In this respect, the efforts that victims made to bear witness even before they were out of danger are particularly moving. Armenian journalist Chavarche Missakian, while fortunate enough to escape deportation, clearly felt this need. He risked his life by remaining as a clandestine in Constantinople in 1915 because he considered that there was nothing more vital at that time than to thwart, through his testimony, the law of silence imposed by the perpetrators of the genocide (see Missakian 47–59). In a different context – Japan after the bombing of Hiroshima – Ota

Yôko was driven by a similar impulse to brave American censorship and write *City of Corpses*; as her French translator Maya Morioka Todeschini points out, “Ota feverishly recorded the events, writing on shreds of paper torn from the sliding doors typical of Japanese interiors or on toilet paper,” while “terrified of dying from radiation before she could complete her story” (136). Remarkably similarly, though the stakes were different, WWI combatants had already felt the vital need to pass on their experience of war, “not to counter its being passively forgotten, but to counter its deliberate cover-up.”<sup>10</sup> “When the humbug impresses us as too much, and is run off at the rate of millions of copies, a feeling of anger comes to us very quickly,” observed Raymond Jubert in his memoirs (qtd. in Cru, *War Books* 43) regarding the false praise received in the press; and indeed many, like Maurice Genevoix, were angry at “the windjammers who manufacture their heroism, and the collectors of extraordinary deeds of prowess, and the concocters of exploits especially for the rear” (qtd. in Cru, *War Books* 97) and what Jean Drève called “the blatantly deceitful splendour in which the slaughter is disguised” (qtd. in Cru, *Témoins* 295). As the war gave them “a horror of falsehood,” many soldiers took up the pen, driven, as Jules-Émile Henches was, by “the more ardent desire for truth” (qtd. in Cru, *War Books* 2).

It is on the basis of this critical consciousness that testimony became established in literature as a “judicial act.” While published testimony has sometimes led to the opening of a judicial enquiry or even been included in the prosecution’s case in a trial, literary testimony is more commonly intended to prepare the ground for the court of history to judge the events it documents. After the Nazi occupation of Europe, Jewish survivors who had managed to produce and preserve testimonial writings entrusted them, with this aim in view, to the Jewish Historical Commissions that were formed at the time. Leon Weliczker’s genocide diary, part of which was published in 1946 under the Polish title of *Brygada śmierci* [*The Death Brigade*] by the Central Jewish Historical Commission at Łódź, was used as evidence at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, in addition to Weliczker’s testimony which it had made possible; but this use of his testimony illustrates precisely what helped make the Eichmann trial a trial for history. In 1929, Jean Norton Cru had endeavoured to advocate such use of testimonies in *Témoins*. This “Analytical and critical essay on soldiers’ memoirs published in French from 1915 to 1928,” which was the first corpus study based on the authors’ status as witnesses, aimed to bring to light the truth content of the accounts and was intended “particularly” for historians (26). This was no mean challenge given that, as Cru pointed out, military historians had until then deemed the materials produced by troops unworthy of submitting to criticism and had dismissed them as potential sources. What Cru’s work shows is that literary testimony as a “judicial act” entails not only telling the truth but also *proving* that it is true. Soldiers took so keenly into account the risk of being neither heard nor believed that their attitude as authors was often modelled on the oath of a witness testifying in court –who swears to tell ‘the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.’ Cru hailed “this concern for scientific accuracy which is the honour of our century” (*Témoins* 412) and which, in his view, allowed those who fought in the Great War to “surpass by far any attempts of past generations to give those who did not fight an image of war” (*Témoins* 226). Indeed, one perceives in the corpus that Cru studied, and especially in the prefaces he signed himself, an approach that already outlined the contours of the testimonial contract – a contract that exemplifies, in many respects, *what testimony does to literature*.

### **‘The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’**

The attestatory function of testimony determines the terms of the testimonial contract, which is fundamentally a pact of truthfulness. Its first requirement is an attestation of the witness's presence – “I was there,” “I saw,” “I lived it” – which not only lends factual weight to the author's words, but can at times be contentious. According to Cru, when Jean Bernier wrote that “The man who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it,” he expressed “the alpha and omega of all war literature by witnesses” (*Témoins* 575).<sup>11</sup> For Cru, it was a question of contrasting the knowledge of the troops who “had [their] shoulder to the wheel” (*War Books* 16) and who, “from private to captain,” were exposed to danger, with the ignorance of the high command who “could not know for only their intelligence was in contact with the war” (*War Books* 14).<sup>12</sup> Bearing witness to what one “understood with one's flesh” under bombardment thus amounted to testifying against the staff officers who were supposed to know but who, through blindness and/or ignorance (disinformation is denounced in many testimonies), were responsible for countless deaths. It is not immaterial that the testimonial genre originated as a protest from individuals who had no say in the war that was destroying them, directed against those most authorised to speak about it. The witnesses emphatically claimed the authority of experience while at the same time warning against all forms of deceit, especially those clothed in political, media or literary legitimacy.

The attestation of presence, which is the cornerstone of the witnesses' testimony and concern for accuracy, is therefore crucial. By stressing this aspect, Cru initiated, in the name of the WWI combatants, a materialist-inspired critique of culture: “What we see, what we live, ‘is’; what contradicts our experience, ‘is not’, whether it comes from the general-in-chief, from the Memoirs of Napoleon, from the theories of the War College, or from the unanimous judgment of all the historians of war” (*War Books* 14). Testimonial writing relies on the empirical reality of events to assert what is, counter to both the most militant ideological discourses and the most insidious preconceptions. As Eric Hobsbawm explained, “unlike earlier wars, which were typically waged for limited and specifiable objects,” the First World War “was waged for unlimited ends”; “the only war aim that counted was total victory: what in the Second World War came to be called ‘unconditional surrender’” (30). What the testimonies attest to is that such a programme of destruction could only have been consistently based on a false representation of war, inherited in large part from the nineteenth century and the heroic representation of Napoleon's campaigns. Therefore, to describe war as it is, i.e., as a material, historical and political event, is at the same time to demystify all that Cru condenses into the word “legend” (*War Books* 27) and which tends to make a phantasmagoria of war.

Hence the requirement for testimonial concreteness and accuracy, which guarantees the text's truth value and serves to preclude abstraction. It is a matter of breaking with the tradition of idealism, from which stems an ideological blindness to the very principle of mass crime. Indeed, their terrible experience of the shock of war led many witnesses to a “resolute refusal of the concept of ‘timeless truth’” (Benjamin 463) and to reduce the very idea of “truth” to more reasonable proportions. The truth the testimonies aim for, as Cru observes in *Témoins*, is not “dogmatic, absolute or transcendental truth, but an all-human truth, the truth of the sincere witness who says what he has done, seen and felt, a truth accessible to any intelligent man who knows how to see, reflect and feel” (661). Yet this materialist standpoint is not self-evident in literature; moreover, with few exceptions, witnesses who were already writers before going to the front and who wanted to get across the “truth of the war” preferred the

historical fiction of the novel to the veracious narrative of the diary or memoir, convinced that they were reaching a higher truth. The rise of testimony brought with it a real literary schism.

More precisely, the materialist position which is at the heart of the testimonial genre and its value as a historical document, and which prompts the authors of testimonies to prove their presence, sincerity and good faith, leads them to make what we call, following Miguel Abensour, the “choice of the small.”<sup>13</sup> The expression rightly emphasises the modesty of the testimonial undertaking as expressed in the oath to tell ‘*nothing but the truth*.’ This focus on experience, this choice to stick to what one has experienced –seen, heard, felt and thought– is a prerequisite for not speaking abstractly about war. Yet to most professional writer veterans who wrote a novel about the Great War, such a restriction seemed incompatible with their idea of literature, which entailed offering a panorama of the war that went beyond the limited perception of the witness. In *Témoins*, Norton Cru shows that these novelists sought to have it both ways: even though they “pride themselves on speaking as witnesses serving the cause of truth, revealing the war to the public as it really was” (*War Books* 51), they rejected the constraints of truthfulness that witnesses imposed on themselves– which did not stop them from being read and taken at their word.

These novelists doubtless still owed much to the naturalists’ approach. While attached to the “documentary content” of their works, they nonetheless intended the “objectified facts,” by the grace of the novelistic plot, to be “transfigured ... into a ‘vision,’ which orders and organizes the present by plunging it back into the pathos of epic and theological, evolutionist and historicist rhetoric” (Chevrier and Roussin 5). This is clearly how the witness-novelists of the Great War continued to think of their art at the beginning of the 1930s when they claimed *both* the authority conferred by experience *and* the absolute freedom of the artist, and considered the experience of the witness as simply ‘raw material’ to be transcended. Heirs to the romantic theory of literature, these novelist witnesses were convinced that the liberty of artistic invention must *surpass* the constraint of experience, and that it is in this movement that the transubstantiation of the real into art takes place. “Why copy when you can create?” asked Roland Dorgelès (34), recalling Balzac’s words on “truly philosophical writers” who “invent the true” (Balzac 52). The power to invent the true knowing no limits, Dorgelès could thus profess a “higher” goal: “not to recount *my* war, but *the* war,” (33) and aim to produce a synthesis of the war that gives access to a higher truth. This tradition has not disappeared. It is among these ‘inventors of the true’ that Jorge Semprún should be counted, according to François Rastier; in *Literature or Life*, Semprún claims “a narrative ‘I’ that draws on [his] experience but goes beyond it, capable of opening the narrative up to fiction, to imagination” (Rastier 118).

By aiming for quite the opposite, the testimonial ‘choice of the small’ critiques the main pillar of literature as defined by the romantics, namely the dogma of the independence of art. Cru helped clarify this criticism by highlighting the collusion between the dogma of aesthetic independence and the ideological blindness of which witnesses were victims and which they denounced in their writings. In particular, he demonstrated that despite their ‘second sight’ supposedly able to compete with the historian’s gaze, the synthetic truth that novelists in fact produced was nothing but a fictitious web of errors of detail and fable –thereby doing a proud service to those who deny reality. What the ‘choice of the small’ brings to light, in contrast, is that the greatest challenge in art lies *both* in a living act of creation *and* a content of experience. It is the art of truth –in which, like Genevoix, one “refrains from any fabricated arrangement, any imaginative licence after the fact” (9)– that is most difficult.

In one sense, it is true, witnesses' knowledge is limited and their accounts are partial; but they at least know what they are doing:

The fighter has short views. ...

But because his views are narrow, they are sharp; because they are restricted, they are clear. He doesn't see a lot, but what he does see he sees plainly. Because his own eyes and not those of others inform him, he sees what 'is.' (Georges Kimpflin qtd. in Cru, *War Books* 16)

Nevertheless, to share this knowledge, witnesses must work on writing without sacrificing anything in artistic quality for the sake of factual precision. The very transmission of the testimonial voice is at stake here, as the documentary value of testimonies depends on their literary value. The difficulty lies in how to balance the 'whole truth' of the testimonial oath with the 'nothing but the truth.' Far from getting around the difficulty by confusing, as some novelists do, 'the whole truth' with *the absolute truth*, the witness who makes the 'choice of the small' aspires to nothing more than to tell "the truth about *his war*" (Cru, *Témoins* 36). Thus, the ethical duty to "work well" (Broch 63) takes precedence above all else.

### **Ethics, aesthetics and politics of testimony**

Telling 'the whole truth' does not mean telling *the whole* of one's experience; it means telling what, in that experience, is most representative of what others subjected to the same treatment have also undergone. To avoid distorting the perspective, and so as not to fuel the imagination of readers eager for sensationalism, singular extremes are excluded. But some of the abominations recounted in testimonies nonetheless appear implausible. The art of testimonial truth therefore contrasts squarely with the art of novelistic verisimilitude as theorised by Maupassant.<sup>14</sup> The attestation of presence and recurrent references to places and dates (in memoirs as well as in diaries) are also there to counter the reader's disbelief—so bitterly feared by the witnesses. As the dates act as "a reminder to honesty" for the authors themselves (Cru, *War Books* 45), these precise and precious references often guarantee the reliability of their testimonies. The space-time framework is especially important because it helps to make reality felt in its materiality and to convey, as André Pézard does in *Nous autres à Vauquois*, "the facts—not bare, but with their atmosphere" (Cru *Témoins* 226).

Testimony, which is a personal document, should therefore not be confused with that other documentary practice: the report.<sup>15</sup> It was by setting out to express "the war in its most intimate, concrete, human and essentially observable aspects" that the best witnesses of the Great War succeeded, according to Cru, in capturing the "atmosphere of the front which gave things all their value, strength, charm and horror" (*Témoins* VIII and 226), and thereby conveying a "psychological" truth that had never before got through. This is essential for "turning what had affected [the witness] into something that could affect [readers]" because, as Georges Perec wrote in an article on testimony, "facts do not speak for themselves. It is a mistake to think they do" (142). In *Là-bas*,<sup>16</sup> First World War veteran Guy Hallé gives a palpable sense of the terrible anguish he experienced before the attack on Douaumont on 22 May 1916, and enables us to better understand that "the hell of the soldiers [was] above all a hell of ideas" (*Témoins* 161).

More precisely, testimonial writing is dialectical; it differs both from the report, based on a positivist conception of the facts, and from novelistic technique which aims to immerse the reader.

Testimonial narrative rejects the pathos of action that gives readers the illusion of participating and lets them take refuge in easy emotion. On the contrary, the psychological truth of testimony is developed through distance, which reflects the distance between the witness who saw and experienced the events and the survivor who produces the retrospective account of them. Even if he or she relives the events while narrating them (sometimes very shortly afterwards), the witness “interposes [between his experience and us] the entire grid of a discovery and a memory and a consciousness which carry things through to the end” (Perec 143), following a writing process which, Perec asserted, led Robert Antelme to provide, with *The Human Race*, “the finest example ... of what literature can be” (150).

If the intention to attest to the facts one has witnessed so as to give readers the means to rightly understand the event is not incompatible –far from it– with literary craft, if –indeed– “the testimony of survivors remains the honour of literature” (Rastier, “Témoignages inadmissibles” 127), it is based on a sparse eloquence. Stylistically speaking, the ‘choice of the small’ results in a form of sobriety. Those who drafted the appeal of 22 November 1918 urging all survivors to bear witness and “prove the Armenian martyrdom” understood this perfectly, as they instructed authors to write “incisively (*gdroug*) and without embellishments (*ansetheveth*)” (qtd. in Beledian, “Traduire un témoignage” 111).<sup>17</sup> Against exaggeration in all its forms (stylistic ornaments, retrospective embellishments, sensationalism), witnesses professed a “rejection of the gigantic and the apocalyptic” (Perec 142) that opened up new perspectives for literature. Whereas through spectacular fictions, as Jacques Rivette has observed, “everyone surreptitiously grows used to the horror” (54), restraint is exercised in testimony so that the reader does not become used to what witnesses have to say.

Commenting in 1976 on his writing of *If This Is A Man*, Levi states:

[...] I deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of the witness, not the lament of the victim nor the outrage of the avenger: I thought that my words would be most credible and useful the more they appeared objective and the less they sounded fervent. Only in this way does a witness fulfil his function, which is to prepare the ground for the judges. The judges are all of you. (“Appendice” 187)

This choice of sobriety can be found in an author such as Marcel Cohen, who clearly expressed “the feeling [that writers of his generation have] of having been altogether swindled by a great deal of the literature of their century: too much ‘fine work’, charm, ego, stylistic effects, ‘little airs’ and great organ” (220). They are even less inclined to the literature of effects because they see it as a sinister sign of complicity. The work of the collaborationist writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline represents an exemplary deterrent since, in his post-1945 novel trilogy, the author used his “little airs” to deny the testimonies of deportation to the Nazi camps.<sup>18</sup>

More generally, testimonial sobriety determines the “mental attitude” that Rithy Panh believes is part of the legacy of the finest witnesses of the twentieth century,<sup>19</sup> and which is not unrelated to what Levi says about the “theme of indignation” (*La Zone grise* 63). This “mental attitude,” which stems from a search for accuracy as a corollary of the desire for justice, harmonises with the three main functions of the genre –to attest, to pay homage and to educate– which are inseparable. Testimonies are more often written using “we” than “I,” not least because, as Panh does in his *L’Élimination*, witnesses dedicate their works to their missing ‘peers’ in an effort to pay off the debt they have incurred towards them. The homage function of testimonies, which gives them a quality akin to a tomb, should not be confused with the all-too-familiar ‘duty of remembrance.’ This point must be stressed, as it concerns the politics of



testimony and therefore, also, its legacy. If witnesses find it important to relate the real agony experienced by their dead friends or relatives, it is because sounding out the depths of this suffering might allow for the motives and nature of the crime to be rigorously determined. This means that the fight against denial involves not only attestation (against the criminals) and paying homage (to the other victims) but also education (for future generations). In this regard, witnesses are ‘messengers,’ to borrow the title of Laëtitia Tura’s and Hélène Crouzillat’s documentary film on the violence of contemporary migration policies (Crouzillat and Tura). Witnesses seek knowledge of the past in the hope of averting the perpetuation or repetition of the crime they suffered, and thus argue in favour of a form of literature viewed as a warning device. In doing so, witnesses initiated an art of writing that encourages us to rethink the relationship between artistic freedom and the ethics of responsibility, renews the notions of both author and creation, and redefines the forms of ‘engagement’ in literature.

The history of the reception –both public and critical– of the genre reveals that the literary schism brought about by testimony resulted in its long being poorly received. It still often remains “on the edge of literature,” as sociological research on literary fields in particular has shown.<sup>20</sup> It is our hope, however, that the work we and others are doing will help, apart from its establishment as a genre, to substantiate it as literature– not only in law but in fact.

*Translated from the French by Jessica Edwards*

## Works Cited

Abensour, Miguel. “Le choix du petit.” Postface to Theodor. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Réflexions sur la vie mutilée*, Paris: Payot, 1991, pp. 231–243.

Balzac, Honoré de. Preface. *La Peau de chagrin*. 1831. *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 10. *Études philosophiques*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992, pp. 47–55.

Beledian, Krikor. “Le retour de la Catastrophe.” *L’Histoire trouée. Négation et témoignage*. Ed. Catherine Coquio. Nantes: L’Atalante, 2003, pp. 299–328.

—. “Traduire un témoignage écrit dans la langue des autres.” *Mémoires du génocide arménien. Héritage traumatique et travail analytique*. Eds. Vahram Altounian and Janine Altounian, Paris: P.U.F., 2009, pp. 97–112. <http://memoires.ommx.org/book#97>

Benjamin, W. (1999) *The Arcades Project*. Translated by H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Bernier, Jean. *La Percée. Roman d’un fantassin, 1914-1915*. Marseille: Agone, 2004.

Bourdelaïs, Patrice and Didier Fassin, eds. *Les Constructions de l’intolérable. Études d’anthropologie et d’histoire sur les frontières de l’espace moral*, Paris: La Découverte, 2005.

Broch, Hermann. “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch.” 1950. *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*. Ed. Gillo Dorfles. London: Studio Vista, 1969.

Chevrier, Jean-François and Philippe Roussin. “Présentation.” *Communications. Le parti pris du document : littérature, photographie, cinéma et architecture au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, n° 71, 2001, pp. 5–11.

Cohen, Marcel. “Faire avec presque rien, ou le métier d’un écrivain stupéfait.” *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 207–220.

Cru, Jean Norton. *Témoins. Essai d’analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*. 1929. Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2006.

—. *War Books. A Study in Historical Criticism*. N.d. TS. BU des Fenouillères - Arts, lettres et sciences humaines (Aix-en-Provence). *Odyssée*. [https://odyssee.univ-amu.fr/files/original/1/452/MS-73\\_Cru-Norton\\_War-books.pdf](https://odyssee.univ-amu.fr/files/original/1/452/MS-73_Cru-Norton_War-books.pdf)

Detue, Frédéric and Charlotte Lacoste. "Ce que le témoignage fait à la littérature." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 3-15. <https://bit.ly/2JByPue>.

Detue, Frédéric and Charlotte Lacoste (ed). "Ce que le témoignage fait à la littérature." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016.

Dorgelès, Roland. *Souvenirs sur les Croix de bois*. Paris: À la Cité des livres, 1929.

Dulong, Renaud. *Le Témoin oculaire. Les conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle*. Paris: Éd. de l'E.H.E.S.S., 1998.

Genevoix, Maurice. *Ceux de 14*. 1950. Paris: Le Seuil, 2007.

Hallé, Guy. "Là-bas. Avec ceux qui souffrent." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 16-36.

Hartmann, Marie "Négation et détournement des témoignages concentrationnaires : la trilogie allemande de Louis-Ferdinand Céline." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 99-114.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. London: Abacus, 1995.

Jubert, Raymond. *Verdun. Mars-avril-mai 1916*. 1918, posth. Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1989.

Kimpflin, Georges. *Le Premier souffle. Un fantassin sur la trouée de Charmes, août-septembre 1914*. Paris: Perrin, 1920.

Leperlier, Tristan. "Témoins algériens de la "décennie noire en France." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 178-191.

*Les Messagers*. Directed by Hélène Cruzillat and Laetitia Tura. The Kingdom / Territoires en marge, 2014, 70 min.

Levi, Primo. "Appendice per l'edizione scolastica di *Se questo è un uomo*," in Primo Levi, *Opere, Volume Primo*. Torino: Einaudi, 1987, pp. 171-201.

—. *Auschwitz Report* [1946]. Translated by Judith Woolf. London: Verso, 2015.

—. *La Zone grise. Entretien avec Anna Bravo et Federico Cereja*, Translated by M. Rueff. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2014.

—. *Œuvres*. Paris: R. Laffont, 2005.

—. *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*. Edited by Ann Goldstein. London & New York: Penguin Classics.

—. *Si c'est un homme*. Translated by M. Schruoffenegger. Paris: Pocket, 2003.

Levi, Primo, Benedetti L. De. *Auschwitz Testimonies, 1945-1986*. Edited by Fabio Levi and Domenico Scarpa. Translated by Judith Woolf. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.

Maupassant, Guy de. "Of 'The Novel'". Preface to *Pierre et Jean*. Translated by Clara Dell. New York: Collier & Son.

Missakian, Chavarche. "La Grande Crise." Translated by Krikor Beledian. *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 47-59.

Morioka Todeschini, Maya. "Écrire la bombe. Ôta Yôko, *Ville des cadavres*." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 135-138.

Panh, Rithy. "L'art du survivant, une attitude." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 162-177.

Perec, Georges. "Robert Antelme, or the Truth of Literature." *On Robert Antelme's The Human Race*. Ed. Daniel Dobbels. Translated by Jeffrey Haight. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003, pp. 139-152.

Rastier, François. "L'odeur de la chair brûlée. Témoignage et mentir-vrai." *Europe. Témoigner en littérature*, no. 1041-1042, 2016, pp. 115-134.

—. "Témoignages inadmissibles." *Littérature. Écrire l'histoire*, vol. 159, no. 3, 2010, pp. 108-129.

Rivette, Jacques. "De l'abjection." *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 120, 1961, pp. 54-55.

Roy, Michaël. *Textes fugitifs. Le récit d'esclave au prisme de l'histoire du livre*. Lyon: ENS Éditions / Institut d'histoire du livre, 2018.

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of an earlier publication in French, the introduction to a special issue of the journal *Europe*: see Detue and Lacoste (3-15). We have kept the references we made to other articles in this issue where we felt it appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> The expression refers to the mass political violence of the twentieth century. "The modern terror," wrote Miguel Abensour in 1982, "took hold with the First World War, 'the Great War'" (231).

<sup>3</sup> Primo Levi said of *If This Is a Man*: "I saw this book as a judicial act. I wanted to testify" (*Œuvres* 992).

<sup>4</sup> "A need for truth compelled [the soldiers] to write, a need to fully measure the formidable reality from which they had just escaped, to repeat to themselves: 'I was there. I lived through that... And here I am, still myself'" (Genevoix 710).

<sup>5</sup> On the intolerable as a social construction, see Bourdelais and Fassin.

<sup>6</sup> In the northern states of the United States before the Civil War, abolitionist newspapers played this role in promoting the testimony of African-American slaves. See Roy.

<sup>7</sup> For details of this appeal published in the daily newspaper *Artaramard*, see Beledian ("Traduire un témoignage" 110-111). Moreover, according to Beledian, the list of questions in the appeal "provides the general framework for most of the testimonies of the period" (111).

<sup>8</sup> In "Testimony for Eichmann" (1961), Primo Levi cites several such strategies of denial: "Why do we go on talking about atrocities? Are they not over and done with? ...Why sow more hatred? Why trouble the consciences of our children?" (text published in *Europe*, 94, English translation in Levi *et al.*, *Auschwitz Testimonies*).

<sup>9</sup> Beledian cites the "Literary and satirical overview" published in January 1920 of Yervant Odian's productions of 1919. Odian, who published his own diary of deportation as a serial in the daily newspaper *Jamanak* in 1919, was the first to note the emergence of "a new literary genre that we might call the literature of the return from exile" (*ibid.*).

<sup>10</sup> Renaud Dulong rightly points out that Jean Norton Cru's entire project in *Témoins* is based on this concern (75).

<sup>11</sup> See Bernier (56). Cru, who considered the genre of the novel "false," nonetheless judged Bernier's novel to be the truest in his corpus and "comparable to memoirs."

<sup>12</sup> Cru added that "war is not to be perceived by the intelligence alone (thus far, at least, as this intelligence works only on the basis of the legend)" (*War Books* 14).

<sup>13</sup> In his afore-mentioned article, Abensour proposes "the hypothesis that ... against the total mobilization that came with the First World War, at its extreme opposite in fact, an original figure of resistance has appeared within modernity which could be described as the choice of the small" (234). We believe the author's analyses of Kafka's allegorical literature also shed light on what was at stake, at the same time, in the genre of testimony.

<sup>14</sup> Maupassant was well aware, in the words of Boileau, that "at times truth may not seem probable." But, in opposition to a "theory" of realism that could be summed up "in these words: 'The whole Truth and nothing but the Truth,'" he considered that "since the end [that novelists] have in view is to bring out the philosophy of certain constant and current facts, they must often correct events in favour of probability and to the detriment of truth." (Maupassant xiv).

<sup>15</sup> The difference between the genres of reporting and testimony can be gauged by comparing, for example, two texts that Primo Levi published a few months apart: *Auschwitz Report* and *If This is a Man*.

---

<sup>16</sup> This testimony was published in 1917 with cuts made by military censors. In the issue of *Europe* that we edited, we published three chapters of this work, restoring for the first time the passages that had been redacted in the original edition. See Hallé (16–36).

<sup>17</sup> The adjective *ansetheveth*, Beledian specified, “means at once ornate, affected, mannered, and invented, embellished” (111).

<sup>18</sup> On this subject, see Hartmann in the special issue of *Europe*.

<sup>19</sup> Rithy Panh is the author, in collaboration with Christophe Bataille, of *L’Élimination* (2012), in which he recounts his experience of the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The quotation is taken from the interview he gave us about the book (Panh 171).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Tristan Leperlier’s study of the reception of Algerian testimonies on the “black decade” in France (178–191) in the special issue of *Europe*.