

Introduction: From Witnessing to Testimony

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The 1972 colloquium on testimony, organised by Enrico Castelli in Rome, brought together contributions from over 30 renowned philosophers and theologians, including Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, Gabriel Marcel and Alphonse de Waelhens, to name a few. Despite the great number of prestigious thinkers engaged in the debate and whose very presence there justified the relevance of this theme, one of the guests, Gianni Vattimo, did not hesitate to declare in the opening of his communication that the question of testimony is one shrouded in anachronism. In his opinion, the attempt of reviving this question that is strongly associated with existentialism, years after the extinction of this philosophical current, was threatened by obsolescence. However, the last five decades of the history of contemporary philosophy contradict this claim. Indeed, testimony is gradually gaining the attention that it deserves within philosophical reflection: it does so by opening up a field of research so wide-ranging and profound that it raises the need to build more comprehensive approaches and to construct dialogues between the various disciplines that are involved in deciphering its complexity. The half-century that separates us from the time of the Castelli colloquium has known major events, historical trials, and technological innovations in which witnessing and testifying have played a fundamental role in establishing the truth of past events, captivating irreversibly the attention of the humanities. From historiography to epistemology and from memory studies to cultural anthropology, all these disciplines have tried to identify structures, dynamics,

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categories, attitudes, and beliefs that are specific to the experience of witnessing, especially in the light of the events that have profoundly marked our recent history. Let us recall some of these events endowed with a great socio-cultural radiating force.

The opening of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale in 1982 is a good example to start with, as it came as a confirmation of a growing international public concern, felt as a moral duty, to listen to the stories of concentration camp survivors and provide the most appropriate framework for their preservation in the (recorded) memory of humanity. In addition to this symbolic event, the following years were marked by some major trials of the mass murders of Nazism and its collaborators—engaging civic concerns for understanding and coming to terms with the past, historical debates, and laws punishing Holocaust denial. The gradual surfacing of Gulag literature, ending with the editorial upsurge of both memoirs and fictionalised writings of camp survivors in the late 1980s, has opened another significant range of reflections, regarding the conditions of the possibility of writing testimonies within an ongoing repressive system. Another landmark is the official recognition of the Armenian genocide by France, Germany, and the US, among others, in the first two decades of the 2000s. The qualification as genocide of the massacres that were perpetrated by the government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 was made by France in the name of the duty of memory, while in the US it was intended as proof that the acts of inhumanity will not go unacknowledged, even if it took a century for that and eyewitnesses disappeared. Among the voices that are finally being heard—regardless of the time that has passed since the atrocities, of the amnesty programmes adopted immediately after the repressions, of the following indifference or policies of reconciliation—there are the feminist and postcolonial engagements with witnessing or the accounts of wounded memory of the Spanish Civil War, of the massive political violence and human rights abuses that were experienced by the countries of Latin America and South Africa, as well as Cambodia. Furthermore, we cannot overlook 9/11, the violent event that marked the beginning of this century and whose shattering magnitude affected the lives of millions of people, leading to numerous attempts to understand the atrocious core of terrorism and the traumatic traces of the event and to numerous memorial projects with the difficult task of commemorating the horrific event while encouraging a never-to-be-completed historical research of the recent past. We conclude, underlining the far-from-complete nature of this enumeration, with what has already been called by some “the trial of the century,” concerning the 13th of November attacks in Paris. With more than 1,800 civil parties in the trial and more than 330 lawyers, scheduled to last over nine months, this trial—which is just beginning today—captures a split picture in which the painful inability of some to speak about their traumas meets the symbolic need of others to testify in the pursuit of truth and justice.

We can say therefore that testimony holds a central place in the life of the polis, being omnipresent, under different forms, in many fields: justice, history, literature, religion, and art. Testimony is of crucial importance as a form of transmitting an individually attested truth experience, being involved in the intense current debates about the representation of the past, the reliability of the evidence that is needed for a court ruling, the nexus of imagination and memory underlying a narrative identity, and, last but not least, the fragile historical embodiment of an absolute truth, to which we can add, as a mark of our present, the remark—which has the force of an implicit warning—of an extraordinary proliferation of various forms of archiving, which goes hand in hand with an unprecedented development of easy-to-use recording means.

Faced with such a spectrum of events and experiences whose multiple meanings have not yet acquired a definitive configuration, phenomenology could not have remained indifferent. Testimony cannot be placed in the panoply of the classical themes of phenomenology, alongside consciousness, intentionality, intersubjectivity, temporality, embodiment, or affectivity. However, it is not completely absent: the question of testimony has a subtle presence in this field of research, as it permeates phenomena that are related to the existential foundation of knowledge, to the relationship between selfhood and otherness, and to the understanding of the past. Among the phenomena capturing the meanings of testimony we count especially truth and attestation, event and history, communication and language, identity and subjectivity, absolute and infinity, event and experience, evil and justice.

Nonetheless, phenomenological research did not limit itself to an indirect approach of the path “from witnessing to testimony”. In fact, there has been in recent decades a clear interest in exploring and understanding the experience of testimony, its role, its distinctive structures, and its significance. Some studies approach this topic in response to the atrocities of the twentieth century, which pushed the experience of war-related testimony to the limits of the representable. Other analyses are concerned either with the irreplaceable singularity of testimony, or with the role that testimony in general, understood as a structure of transition between memory and history, can play in the construction of historical facts. A number of phenomenologists examined the experience of testimony in light of the questions regarding the self and the ability to be oneself. In this context, testimony is understood as a mode of inner truth and attestation of oneself. The significance of testimony has also been investigated from a theological perspective and in particular has been conceived of as a saturated phenomenon or as having a paradoxically revealing nature. Some phenomenologists argue that the experience of testimony is essentially paradoxical or even inherently impossible, for reasons other than theological, being related for example to the poetic experience of language.

Given this complexity, the underlying premise of the present issue of *Studia Phenomenologica* is that only a hermeneutically inflected phenomenology,

in dialogue with human sciences, is able to capture thoroughly the fundamental structures of the experience of testimony. This also accounts for the new dimension of subjectivity that this experience reveals, a dimension whose manifestations range from self-institution to absolute self-dispossession. Thus, a phenomenological approach—aiming to describe the structures and sequences that are constitutive for the experience of testimony according to the guiding concepts of intersubjectivity and embodiment—would be incomplete if it did not take into account both the historical inscription of this experience and its potential to make histories. Moreover, the experience of testimony, through its modalisations which go from body and speech to writing and back, reveals a new articulation of the I. It is about the subject capable of giving testimony, of attesting for others through his or her own being the truth of a past event—a subject whose condition is determined by the interplay between memory and history, by an existential fragility and by a fallible knowledge.

The first article convincingly acts as an overture for our dossier as it introduces the themes, threads, and questions taken up under different registers by the rest of the studies, while announcing the lineaments of a more encompassing, hermeneutic-phenomenologically oriented understanding of testimony. The amplitude of **Gert-Jan van der Heiden**'s analysis is all the more expected if his paper is read in the light of his recent book, *The Voice of Misery. A Continental Philosophy of Testimony*, a leading contribution to this field. The starting point of his article is the observation of a teeming plurivocity of meanings, forms, and practices that the experience of witnessing manifests. Faced with this, the author responds with a precise analytical approach aimed at identifying the particular commonalities shared by various understandings of witnessing. In doing so, the author follows in part the example of Ricoeur, who, noting the same diversity, believes in discovering an invariable core, a kind of semantic centre in the phenomenon of engagement, which he links exclusively to the attitude of the witness. This idea is deepened by van der Heiden at the end of an original two-step process. First, the notion of engagement, whose meanings revolve around promise and pledging, is put in relation with that of *Bezogenheit*, which refers, according to the etymological thread, to the fact of being drawn into. Second, in light of this semantic alliance, he extends the field of analysis beyond the attitude of the witness, as discussed by Ricoeur, by including other elements of testimony, notably the subject matter, the witness, the act of testifying, and the addressee. The experience of witnessing is thus unfolded into all its structures, constitutive elements, and dynamics. Throughout this analysis, other aspects of this experience are brought into the discussion—such as the phenomenological poverty of the subject matter, the event of experiencing the subject matter, primordial trust, confidence, and the call of testimony—as the author emphasizes a certain dimension (e.g., the socio-historical) or attitude (e.g., the critical or interpretative). Finally, all these elements set the framework for a conception alternative to the epistemological

approach to testimony, wherein each of its phases shows how limited, incomplete, and insufficient is the account of testimony as a report, a mere transmission of information.

Dorothee Legrand explores the articulation of witnessing and testimony as a three-layered discursive phenomenon. In addition to the speaking of the witness and the listening of the one hearing the testimony, there is a third and decisive element—the primordial inscriptions of speech (*parole*) in language (*langage*). On the one hand, the speaking of the witness is singular by the fact it testifies not only to an event that happened in the past (“I was there”) and the designation of its own addressee (“I am talking to you”), but also—and more fundamentally—to its originary insertion in a shared space, namely the language, understood as the symbolic order which gathers together the speaking and the listening. On the other hand, the singularity of a hearer listening to a witness constitutes a kind of testimony as well, namely a testimony to its inscription in language. The hearer bears witness to the fact that “there is language” and bears this testimony to the witness. Through the circularity between the witness and the hearer, testimony is a way of experiencing language, in its originary, as an all-encompassing phenomenon. Therefore, it can be expressed through the expression “there is language.” By interpreting critical fragments from the testimonies of survivors who endured the experience of living in a concentration camp—Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, and Jean Améry—Legrand shows that testimony is often confronted with its own impossibility, with the violence of the silence that is imposed on itself, when the speech is condemned to remain unspeakable or inaudible, or with the indifferent deafness of the others who exclude the witness from language. The obstinacy, insistence, and necessity of testimony is therefore related to the fact it responds to the ever-present threat of the des-inscription of speech outside of language, its possible destruction as speech, and its possible reduction to silence. Thus, testimony can be equally necessary and impossible, at the precise moment it absorbs the witness into the unbearable and unspeakable to which they must testify.

Michele Averchi focuses on Husserlian phenomenology, emphasizing its integration with current epistemological discussions around testimony. One of the substantial theoretical disputes within the epistemology of testimony, which is thriving in the context of analytic tradition, is the dispute between the “reductionist” and “non-reductionist” view. A reductionist view states, in the footsteps of David Hume, that it is possible to reduce the meaning of testimony-based knowledge to inference, induction, memory, or perception. The non-reductionist or anti-reductionist view supports Thomas Reid’s thesis that testimony is not a type of inference but instead an independent and valid source of knowledge, distinct and irreducible to other sources. This debate, shows Averchi, can benefit significantly from a thorough consideration of Husserl’s previously neglected phenomenology of communication,

which leans toward the anti-reductionist account of testimony. For Husserl, testimony cannot be reduced to inference since it is non-evidential. In other words, while testimony does not work through reliable evidence, it does institute a specific intersubjective connection between the one who speaks and the one who hears. As an intersubjective process of constituting a shared world through empathy, testimony is personal, social, and community-building. The presentification of the speaker's judgment motivates the co-performance of the same judgment in the hearer, while the hearer recognizes the speaker's communicative intentions. Testimony is a social act, not only because it is an intentional act addressed to someone but also because the addressee understands it as such. Thus, this shared experience of testimony is related to the shared intentional activity of the speaker and the hearer, and this process of communalization creates a long-lasting intentional bond between them.

Yasuhiko Sugimura's article places witnessing and testimony in an ontological setting, namely in relation to the question of Being and to the idea of the end of philosophy. The idea of "being witness to Being," in a post-metaphysical and post-philosophical context, is developed starting from the correlation—persistent in Heideggerian thought—between death, attestation (*Bezeugung*), and testimony (*Zeugnis*). In *Being and Time*, the attestation is understood, in relation to *Dasein's* death, as the ontological condition for authenticity and subsequently for the originarity of the question of Being as such. In Heidegger's later works, death is determined as the highest and utmost "testimony of Being." Yet, precisely one's own death is radically concealed in the post-metaphysical realm of the world-dominating technology, becoming an impossibility. Hence, the article addresses two central questions: What is "witnessing after the end of philosophy"? How to elaborate a structural conception of testimony without attestation and appropriation? Sugimura uncovers the multi-layered answers by first focusing on Agamben's idea of "witnessing to the impossibility of witnessing," that is of an "impossible witness" towards one's own death: he does so by engaging the works of Levinas, Ricoeur and Derrida—three thinkers of testimony—who are challenging in different ways the Heideggerian idea of one's own death as appropriation. To develop a radical hermeneutics of testimony, Sugimura builds then on the three structural moments taken from Ricoeur's analysis of the fact of testifying and witness self-designation: "I was there," "Believe me," and "If you do not believe me, ask someone else"—and explores how this tripartite analysis can integrate Levinas and Derrida's hyperbolic and excessive reflections on testimony.

Ricoeur's considerations of the question of testimony, situated at the intersection of philosophy, theology, and ethics, have not been delivered in the form of a systematic theory. However, his reflections on this theme, revisited throughout various studies, have inspired more elaborate philosophical constructions, such as the poetics of testimony. This is indeed the case of

Jean-Philippe Pierron, who, after having proposed in 2006 the book *Le Passage de témoin. Une philosophie du témoignage*, takes up again this theme, focusing this time on the practical necessity of testimony. To answer this, the author deploys an extensive research by subjecting the phenomenon of testimony to a subtle play of mirrors between literature and ethics. The testimonial literature—of which the writings of Svetlana Alexievich, Jorge Semprún, and Philippe Lançon are most analyzed by the author—provides the extremely important material of intuitions, gestures, and paradoxes, which stir and inspire philosophical reflection. This is centred on the experience of evil, either undergone or committed, that can and must be confronted by the witness's mobilization of the dimension of feeling. It is around this idea, inspired from a conference on evil given by Ricoeur, that Pierron sets, by means of intertwined reflections, the first elements of a “po-ethics” of testimony. He does so by first illuminating the current context of the production and reception of testimony, where secularization is offset by the prevalence accorded to authenticity. In this context, testimony reaffirms the importance of moral exemplarity as an attestation of the universal within a historical figure. As such, testimony reveals itself to be a paradigmatic expression of a shattered and wounded cogito, which, confronted with the opacity of evil, reactivates the capacity to affirm the irreplaceable singularity of an appalling situation by mixing attestation and protestation.

Rodolphe Olcèse investigates the relationship between the witness and the testimony by means of a close reading of Søren Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Louis Chrétien's writings. The author aims to show that while it is not the witness who is the condition of possibility for testimony, the testimony institutes the witness as such. The witness, far from being able to produce the testimony, is essentially the one who receives it. Thus, the phenomenon of testimony brings to light the experience of an excess, where what is to be said surpasses the means we have for saying it. If testimony is to be understood as an index of truth or as a mode of carrying out the truth, truth leaves the order of knowledge and enters the order of action. By emphasizing the opposition between subjective and logical truth, the author shows that for Kierkegaard testimony is the only way in which it becomes possible to communicate the truth manifested in the subjective interiority. But the testimony goes beyond the acts and intentions of the witness since its power is that it plays out despite the witness. Testimony is always in excess of the witness who transmitted it. Olcèse then shows that, for Levinas, the testimony unfolds as an affectivity, a radical passivity, becoming an openness to the subject and exposure to the other: the testimony itself is not an act that the witness decides to make one's own, but it is a situation where the self emerges to oneself by becoming a witness before any intention to testify. In this way, the subject's testimony is the very expression of the affection of the finite by the infinite. The testimony towards the infinite is finally expressed poetically, with Jean-Louis

Chrétien, in relation to the chant or poem, understood as a farewell address to the world, as a meditation on existence that brings the world to its own clearing: since the witness becomes a monstrosity of truth, testimony might be assumed as existential.

Francesca Peruzzotti's article aims to analyze the functions and figures of the witness in the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion. Starting from the redefinition of phenomenality as givenness and of the subject as the gifted (*l'adonné*), the author explores the radical differences Marion traces between the "common witness" and the "religious witness," focusing on the witness' discursive engagement in the event. The starting point for this problem is the passage from the function of constitutive ego to that of the gifted, understood as a witness who has renounced any constitutive dimension. Then, the analysis shifts to the intersubjective situation, showing how Marion aims to overcome its traditional dual articulation in favour of a ternary relationship involving the figure of the third: only the witness (the third) can keep the difference among those who are still in the relationship, by guaranteeing the uniqueness of each of the related subjects. In this context, the analysis addresses erotic phenomenon, aiming to surmount its reciprocal and dualistic interpretation, showing that here, as well, the third as witness is essential: the figure of the son, understood as witness, is the guarantor of the oath of the lovers who begot him. Finally, the figure of the religious witnesses is approached in relation to their total engagement in the event of Revelation. The witness finds its foundation is the expropriation of the self, due to its involvement in an event over which they have no control. The author argues that a witness can be considered a prophetic voice, since their speech is able, based on an understanding of the past, to envision a transformed present, which, finally, opens a singular future. In this context, the author raises the question of the historicity of the witness, understood as the one who transmits an inheritance, whose dynamics shows that the testimony is rooted in a historical and eventful temporality.

The relationship between testimony and history as a discipline has always been complicated and difficult, especially during the last century. History had for a long time mainly relied on oral or written testimonies, but this situation changed radically toward the end of the nineteenth century when historians attempted to provide only fact-based accounts of the past. This had at least a double effect: an epistemological rupture between memory (henceforth envisaged as a fallible human capacity) and history; and, based on this rupture, a crisis of testimony concerning both its reliability and truthfulness. The situation becomes even more complicated, if we consider, as **Rafael Pérez Baquero** does, the case of testimonies given by witnesses of the Holocaust and the Spanish Civil War, due to the traumatic nature of the events they experienced. To grasp the tensions between the deep memory of a witness and the writing of history and to enhance the contradictions between their specific

temporalities, he proposes an interdisciplinary approach that bridges a fruitful dialogue between phenomenology, historiography, and psychoanalysis. In this context, he reconsiders the scope of phenomenological truth provided by survivors. Here, the focus should shift away from the accuracy of the accounts to the subject's position, with its inherent glimpses, lapses, and silences in the face of a traumatic event. These expressions of the vulnerability of the witness, sometimes unable to draw a clear difference between past and present, have double relevance. First, they show a temporality underlying the memory of a traumatic event, different from that specific to a coherent and linear historical narrative. These vulnerabilities, which occur during the transition from the act of bearing witness to the act of giving testimony and are doubled by the need to understand them better, encourage the author to propose to historians a necessary opening to psychological techniques and methodologies. Thus prepared, the historian can extend such an enriched analysis from the context of Holocaust testimonies to those of the Spanish Civil War, where the inner exile of the victims and the politics of forgetting, adopted immediately after the end of the Francoist repression, raise new challenges.

The question of historical truth in its relation to the testimonies provided by survivors of the Holocaust has been widely debated in recent decades. One of the things that has aroused interest is the case of written testimonies where the witnesses' ethical commitment to the truth is explicitly mixed with fiction. Semprún's famous book *Literature or Life* is an example of a novelized autobiography, where fiction is used to give more verisimilitude to a monstrous reality. If this subject has generally been well analyzed, research concerning Gulag literature is in its early stages. One of the merits of **Lovisa Andén's** article is that it gives a significant impulse to this by exposing the breadth of this field of research on Gulag literature which includes both memories and fictionalized accounts. She does so by setting several conceptual landmarks essential for exploiting the question of the vulnerability of testifying. The stake of this question is indicated by the polarity of two types of impossibility. One is the impossibility of bearing witness to an annihilating experience. According to Agamben, as this is an impossibility, a difference is drawn between the authentic witness, who has disappeared, and the pseudo-witness, who bears witness to a missing testimony. The other is the impossibility of bearing witness in the other's stead, because the witness's experience is, according to Derrida, an unsubstitutable singularity. On this theoretical scaffolding—reinforced by Arendt's considerations of totalitarianism, Lyotard's discussion of the vulnerability of the witness in the absence of proof, and Ginzburg's views on the singularity of the witness—Andén develops a wide-ranging questioning of what bearing witness is for Gulag survivors. Several elements extend the particularity of this historical experience, which took place both inside and outside the oppressive system of the Soviet Union over decades. To name only a few: facing mistrust and repudiation from the Western public, which, lacking

information about Soviet repression, long refused to believe the first Gulag memoirs; using fictionalized accounts just to give more credibility to a reality otherwise impossible to verify; and writing from within a system of repression by denouncing its crimes, which forces the writer to navigate between censorship and self-censorship. Therefore, if fictionalization normally points to the vulnerability of testifying, in the particular case of Gulag literature, written inside a totalitarian system, it is a strategy of telling the truth through necessary half-silences and dissimulation.

The question of fiction and its uses in testimonial writing and literature is continued in an inspired way by **Cassandra Falke** in an article that concludes our dossier. Here, she gives this question a particular twist, where the focus is on the experience of bearing witness to historical atrocities through reading contemporary historical novels. To answer this, the author develops a new phenomenology of reading more adapted to global concerns and global connectedness, with which contemporary literature is concerned. Indeed, contemporary historical novels differ from their generic predecessors in their use of multiple focalizers, which rejects the intimacy of the one-on-one character-to-reader encounter and denies the possibility of a single story. The main intuition around which she builds her theory is considering the reader as a witness, with all the responsibility and limitations that follow from this positioning. This new direction that Falke gives to the phenomenology of reading owes its strength to the carefully integrated considerations of Derrida, Marion, and Oliver on the experience of witnessing. Reference to these three philosophers lead her to highlight the limitations under which a reader-as-witness operates. From Derrida, the concept of “the other’s decision in us” is retained for its ability to shed light on how past decisions prefigure the reader even before the reading begins. From Marion, the author lingers over his theory of the saturated phenomena, of which a privileged example is often the witness, taken as a constituted subject who does not produce the truth but only works for it. Oliver’s considerations of the subject’s position and her distinctions between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness help Falke to complete the image that the phenomenology of reading gives to the relevance of novel reading for both global and interpersonal ethics. A special emphasis is finally laid on the interpersonal and social responsibility—for preserving cultural memory of these atrocities—which falls to the reader.