

---

## Life, Writing, and Problems of Genre in Elie Wiesel and Imre Kertész

---

MICHAEL BACHMANN  
UNIVERSITY OF MAINZ

In December 2001, the Nobel Foundation arranged for a series of events celebrating the centennial of its famous award.<sup>1</sup> Fittingly called “jubilee” or “centennial symposia,” these events focused on what were perceived as major issues in the respective fields of the Nobel Prize. Thus, for instance, Göteborg University organized a symposium about “Coherence and Phase Transitions in Condensed Systems” (Physics), whereas the committee for the Nobel Peace Prize held a conference on “The Conflicts of the 20th Century and the Solutions for the 21st Century.”<sup>2</sup>

In the literary field, the “centennial symposium” evolved around the concept of “Witness Literature,” as if to acknowledge Elie Wiesel’s sentiment, first formulated in the 1970s, that this literature is *the* formative genre of the 20th century. Arguing against *The Holocaust as Literary Imagination* (1977), Wiesel, in a lecture at Northwestern University, said that “[if] the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony” (9). Not surprisingly perhaps, the literary critic Horace Engdahl, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, evokes this statement in his opening lecture at the “centennial symposium.” While slightly critical of Wiesel’s argument—claiming that “he exaggerates the novelty of the thing” (Engdahl 6)<sup>3</sup>—Engdahl himself understands the turn to testimony as a literary genre to be “the most profound change in literature since the breakthrough of modernism” (6), a change primarily initiated by the necessity to remember the traumatic events of the 20th century.

This remembrance is at stake for at least two reasons, both mentioned in Engdahl’s lecture: first, there is a danger of forgetting, either deliberate, as in revisionist attempts to negate the reality of Auschwitz, or unintentional. Second, the “distinguishing quality of [traumatic] experience ... is a certain kind of unreality” (Engdahl 6): i.e., that which has happened cannot be easily represented, imagined, or even perceived. As Imre Kertész puts it, “[the] concentration camp is

---

imaginable only and exclusively as literature, never as reality. (Not even—and even less so—when we are directly experiencing it)” (*Galeerentagebuch* 253).<sup>4</sup>

Imre Kertész is a Jewish-Hungarian author who survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald. In 2002, one year after the “centennial symposium” on literature and testimony, he won the Nobel prize in literature. The rather well known entry from Kertész’ “diary-novel,” *Galley Boat Log* (*Galeerentagebuch*, 1991), that I have quoted above, speaks of the paradoxical relations between literature, imagination, and witnessing. According to Kertész, it is impossible for a Holocaust witness—the one who has been “directly experiencing it”—to claim this experience without resorting to something which appears to be its opposite: imagination. The survivor who talks or writes about the Shoah is thus a stranger to him or herself, testifying on behalf of the “true witness”—the one who would *know* the experience directly—but is buried inside the survivor as an absence.

This bifurcation, that I would extrapolate from Kertész’ argument, relates to Primo Levi’s oft-quoted distinction between *i sommersi e i salvati*, the Drowned and the Saved. “I must repeat,” Levi writes,

we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses.... We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it, or have returned mute, but they are the “Muslims, [*Muselmänner*]” the submerged, the complete witnesses [*testimoni integrali*], the ones whose deposition would have general significance. (63-64)

Still, the drowned—*i sommersi*—could never have given such a statement, just as no one returns to bear witness to one’s own death, especially since the death of the true witnesses “had begun before that of their body” (Levi 64). According to Levi, “even if they had paper and pen, the submerged would not have testified” (64). His understanding of testimony thus relies on a testimonial paradox which conceives the true or complete witness—whom Levi terms the *testimone integrale*—as an essentially *absent* witness; while only the submerged could have given a “complete” deposition, they were unable to testify. If the survivors want their testimony to have general significance, they are forced to speak for these true yet absent witnesses as well. *Parliamo noi in loro vece*, Levi writes, *per delega*: “we speak in their stead, by proxy” (64). Thus, survivors report on something, they have not—or rather not fully—experienced themselves.

It would be possible to show how, not only in Levi’s writings but in the texts of many Holocaust survivors, the *Muselmann* figures the traumatic real: i.e., that which the survivor—due to his or her own trauma—could not perceive whilst it was happening, as in the quote by Kertész. According to the famous

---

definition given by Lacan during his *Séminaire XI* (1964), the real is “that which always returns to the same place” (59), to that place where it is not met by the thinking subject. In the testimonial concept that I have just outlined, the relation between the drowned and the saved always takes the form of such a “missed encounter [*rencontrée manquée*]” (Lacan 65). Because the drowned did not testify, everything the survivor says about them—when speaking *in their stead, by proxy*—necessarily contains a certain degree of fictionalization. If the “absent witness” is understood (not exclusively but also) as the traumatic memory to which the survivor has no access, the same holds true for the survivor’s relation to his or her direct experience of the concentration camp. It becomes “imaginable only and exclusively as literature,” even when it is being experienced (Kertész, *Galeerentagebuch* 253).<sup>5</sup>

This paradox seems to be inscribed into the term “witness literature,” as it is used for the “centennial symposium” of the Nobel foundation. Horace Engdahl, in the lecture from which I’ve already quoted, speaks of the “clear objection to coupling testimony with literature” (6). “What we normally require of true evidence,” he says,

is the opposite at every point of what we usually allow in a literary work, since literature enjoys the privilege of talking about reality as it is not, without being accused of lying. (6)

However, the contradiction that Engdahl describes can be understood as being inherent to testimony itself. As Jacques Derrida has argued in *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot*, no testimony can ever actually *prove* its statement. According to the French philosopher, it subscribes to a “régime de la croyance ... sans preuve” (60): a system of belief without proof. This is partly due to the temporal gap between witnessing an event and bearing witness to it. When narrating an event, the witness testifies to something that is always already absent. Therefore, testimony depends on a technique—for example language—that enables the witness to reproduce the witnessed moment. Thus, the singular moment gets separated from itself, might be repeated by someone who did not experience it, and is, as a result, haunted by the possibility of fiction.

Engdahl acknowledges this possibility: “It is ... evident,” he says, “that testimony can be mimicked as can every other way of using language” (6). Still, the literary critic clings to a notion of “true evidence” (6) that a testimony haunted by fiction cannot account for. However, testimony is able to confirm the truth, the existence, and the veracity of the event it refers to. This authentication does not rely on a structural relation between “true evidence” and bearing witness, but on the performative dimension of the latter. Testimonial authentication is based on

---

authorizing strategies that establish the authority of the witness. In Western legal discourse such strategies are, for instance, the oath to speak “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” The crucial point here, is that witnesses never simply narrate events; they perform or “make” truth, according to an expression Derrida borrows from St. Augustine:

When he asks in truth of God and already of his readers why he confesses to God when God knows everything ... Augustine speaks of “making truth” (*veritatem facere*), which does not mean revealing, unveiling, or informing in line with cognitive reason. Maybe it means testifying [*témoigner*]. (*Sauf*22-24)

By employing testimonial strategies of authorization, witnesses take responsibility for what they say: “I swear to speak the truth....” However, texts might have testimonial effects even if their authors—in paratextual remarks or through the narrative structure itself—insist on the fictionality of their writing. In other words, the authorization of a text does not have to be as straightforward as suggested by Western legal discourse.

Engdahl cites an example from what he calls “witness literature” in which this other kind of authorization becomes quite clear. “It is hard,” he says about Kertész’ best known work *Fatelessness* (*Sorstalanság*, 1975),

to read [this] novel without believing one is reading a truthful account of the writer’s experience of German concentration camps. But Kertész, who really was interned in Auschwitz, denies that this book is autobiographical. (6)

The literary critic then quotes an entry from the *Galley Boat Log* which paratextually comments on *Fatelessness* in a paradoxical move that at the same time reinforces and attacks the “pacte autobiographique” (Lejeune) of this work: “The most autobiographical thing in my biography,” Kertész writes, “is that in ‘Fatelessness’ there is nothing autobiographical” (*Galeerentagebuch* 185). Engdahl tries to solve the paradox posed by this sentence by suggesting that Kertész “perhaps ... simply implies that *he acts like a writer*, that is to say, he reconstructs an experience without necessarily explaining its link to his specific case” (6, emphasis mine).

In comparing the notion of the “writer” to the figure of the “witness,” as it is conceptualized in Elie Wiesel’s lecture against the *Holocaust as Literary Imagination*, I want to rethink the relations between witnessing and writing, fiction and testimony, as they are suggested—in completely different ways—by Wiesel and Kertész. Both authors take the somewhat hybrid form of “witness literature” as their starting point when Wiesel speaks of the “literature of testimony” and Kertész talks about the necessity of imagination even for a survivor who writes Holocaust literature. Both authors seem to embrace this generic hybridity—the one more

---

than the other—and be reluctant about it at the same time, as is clear in Kertész' latest work, *K. Dosszié* (*Dossier K.*, 2006).

Both Wiesel and Kertész are Hungarian Jews, born around the same time. They are child survivors of the Holocaust who have both published a myriad of texts on the subject, and as a result of their publications they have both won the Nobel Prize: Wiesel in 1986, Kertész in 2002. However, the awards were in two distinct categories. While Kertész won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Wiesel has received the Peace Prize for being, in the words of the committee, “a witness for truth and justice” who has “climbed from utter humiliation to become one of our most important spiritual leaders and guides” (Aarvick 164). This difference in awards is striking, I think, and can fruitfully be related to the distinct authorizing strategies and testimonial concepts of the two authors.

Although Wiesel's coinage, the “literature of testimony,” seems to be a fluid genre moving between imagination and experience, it is safely embedded in a context which makes clear that testimony in a narrow sense is the more important of the two terms. After having stated that “a novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka” (7), Wiesel goes on to explain in *The Holocaust as Literary Imagination*,

One cannot write about the Holocaust. Not if you are a writer.... The great novelists of our time ... chose to stay away from it. It was their way of showing respect toward the dead and the survivors as well. Also it was their way of admitting their inability to cope with themes where imagination weighed less than experience. (9)

Although Wiesel does not completely dismiss “imagination”—after all, he speaks about the *literature* of testimony—the author insists on the survivors' sole possession of that experience and its literature: “He or she who did not live through the event will never know it. And he or she who did live through the event will never reveal it. Not entirely. Not really. Between our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced” (7). Thus for Wiesel, paradoxically, one *can write* about the Holocaust against the impossibility of doing so (the “wall that cannot be pierced”), but only if one is not a writer but a witness.

For Kertész, it seems to be the other way round: in the entry from the *Galley Boat Log*—where it says that the concentration camp “is imaginable only and exclusively as literature” (253)—imagination weighs as much or even more than experience. Therefore, a witness can only take up the impossible task of writing about the Holocaust if he or she actually becomes a writer. The generic markers of Kertész' own work seem to strengthen this argumentation. Although his first book *Fatelessness*, published in 1975, is based on the author's experience in the concentration camps, he labels it a novel (*regény*). In the German translation,

---

which was approved by Kertész, this generic marker even becomes part of the title: *Roman eines Schicksallosen*—the novel of one without fate. The *Galley Boat Log* is called a novel as well, although its structure and paratextual claims authorize it as a diary. In his latest work, Kertész rejects such hybrid classifications (like “diary-novel”), or so we are led to believe. In the 2006 book *Dossier K. (K. Dosszié)* which seems to be a comprehensive interview with the author, he states that “such a genre does not exist. Either it is an autobiography or a novel” (12).

For the author in *Dossier K.*, the difference between autobiography and novel is a difference between adhering to fiction or to memory. “When writing an autobiography,” he says,

it is of utmost importance that you describe everything just like it happened, i.e., that you don't add anything to the facts.... In a novel, however, not the facts are decisive but only that which you add to them. (12)

The interviewer is far from pleased with this answer. He insists on knowing for a fact that everything that Kertész writes in his novels is “fully authentic, and that each and every element of the story relies on documents” (12). In his reply, the author admits that “reality fragments are of course important even in fiction” (13). Still, he insists on a categorical distinction between the novel (which the author now calls *fiction*) and the autobiography. While the latter simply remembers, the world of fiction is

an autonomous world which is born in the mind of the author and follows the laws of art, of literature.... In a fiction all details are invented by the author, every moment.... (13)

Protesting, the interviewer interrupts this answer: “But you wouldn't want to say that you have invented Auschwitz?” (13). “And yet, in a certain sense,” the author answers, “it is precisely like that. In the novel.” He is, at the same time, talking about *Fatelessness* and *Fiasco (A Kudarc, 1988)*: “I had to re-invent Auschwitz for myself, and to bring it to life” (13).

If we relate this dialogue to the binary between the witness as writer (i.e., the “Wiesel type”) on the one hand, and the writer as novelist on the other, then the author takes the role of the novelist, although he has been in the concentration camps, while the interviewer—because of the author's experience—wants him to be a witness. This play, as it were, takes place in between an oral situation—the alleged interview—and writing. Through *writing*, the author wants to escape from *talking* about his experience, and thus, from the experience itself: “a novel,” he says, “is fiction” (8). Talking, we could add, is life. Working against the author, the interviewer attempts to link scenes from the novels to Kertész, thereby reinscribing

---

him into, as it were, an oral scene of witnessing. This tension is already built up on the very first page of *Dossier K*. The interviewer begins by describing a scene from *Fiasco* in which a 14-year old boy has to face a machine-gun. The interviewer wants to know why this scene is not included in *Fatelessness* where it would also fit. "From the perspective of the novel," the author replies, "it was a purely anecdotic moment; therefore it had to be left out" (7).

"But from the perspective of your life," the interviewer insists, "it could have been a decisive moment" (7). This prompts the author to ask a question himself, namely if he should now talk about everything he never wanted to talk about. "Then why did you write about it?" "Perhaps to not have to talk about it" (7). In the next two paragraphs, this distinction between writing and talking is explicitly linked to the difference between fiction and testimony. The author claims to hate the interviews with old survivors, as they are featured, for instance, in Steven Spielberg's Shoah Visual History Foundation. Supposedly, he cannot bear hearing sentences such as "They drove us into the stable.... We were forced into a yard.... They brought us to the brickworks in Budakalász, etc." (8). Interestingly enough, these sentences relate to Kertész' own experience and are featured prominently in his writings. Both *Fiasco* and *Fatelessness*, for example, describe how a 14-year-old boy, together with many other prisoners, is driven into a stable, forced into a yard, and brought to the brickworks in Budakalász (*Roman* 68-81, *Fiasco* 27). This "coincidence" leads the interviewer to ask, "Why [do you hate these sentences]? Didn't it happen that way?" (*Dossier* 8): "In the novel yes, but the novel is fiction" (8). However, when the interviewer wants to know how the author did get to the brickworks in Budakalász, the author answers that it happened "exactly like I have described it in *Fatelessness*" (8).

The paradoxical movement in this dialogue is in fact reinforced if we consider the generic status of *Dossier K*. Although it appears to be an interview with Kertész, no names are given throughout the text. The part of the interviewer is in italics, the part of the author in roman type. Furthermore, in a preface signed with the initials I.K., Kertész claims that he basically invented the interview on the basis of an actual talk with his editor, classifying the written text as "downright autobiography" and "novel" (5). Thus, he himself is both interviewer and interviewee, and at the same time, neither one of them.

Why then does Kertész put this play into motion that does not allow him to have the stable position of either a writer as novelist nor a writer as witness? Why is he opposed to the "old survivors" from the Shoah Visual History Foundation and the idea of writing an autobiography? Some of the reasons can be extracted from *Dossier K*.

---

First, the concentration camp is imaginable only as literature, not as reality. Literature, however, follows different rules from those of reality. That is why the moment from *Fiasco* that the interviewer asks about could not be integrated into the structure of *Fatelessness*. If autobiographical writing means to remember everything exactly as it was, then *Fatelessness*, due to the necessity of structural transformation, is no longer autobiographic.

Second, the author tries to escape from his experience: i.e., the traumatic memory that bears on his life. By transforming himself into the character of the novel, he himself vanishes from his story: “I could imagine the language, being and thinking of such a character in fiction, but I was no longer identical to him; by creating the character, I forgot myself” (*Dossier 77*).

Third, in a world “after Auschwitz,” autobiography is no longer possible because it presupposes a self-determined individual. Kertész, however, describes how individuality is lost in totalitarian regimes, causing people to be *fateless*: “It is a characteristic trait of dictatorships to disown man from his fate ... to depersonalize him” (*Dossier 78-79*).

Fourth, Kertész understands the witnesses from the Shoah Visual History Foundation as adhering to a specific, dominant discourse on the Shoah which regards the Holocaust experience “as dead memory [and] remote history” (*Dossier 121*). It leaves Auschwitz explained, the author writes elsewhere, “as if it was a carefully prepared excavation site, a narrative for which we rightfully use the past tense” (*Eine Gedankenlänge Stille 46*). This point, that I see at the core of Kertész’ project, needs explanation: why should the survivors—whom we usually think about as the “living memory” of the Shoah—be part of its forgetting? According to *Dossier K*, this has to do with two tendencies: on the one hand, these witnesses (in a way similar to Elie Wiesel) “declare their sole claim to [the representation of] suffering” (121). Thus, they confine the Holocaust experience to a specific group of people, namely themselves, which, according to Kertész, is the reason why it will die with them (121). On the other hand, these witnesses have already been robbed of their individual memories:

The Survivor is taught how he *has* to think about what he has experienced, regardless of whether or to what extent this thinking is consistent with his real experiences. (Kertész, *Eine Gedankenlänge Stille 148*)

In attacking the testimonial project of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Kertész warns against the danger that survivors, by lending their body-images to the dominant discourse presented in the foundation’s films, such as the award-winning *The Last Days* (1998) by James Moll, authorize this discourse and thereby lose the rights to their memory.



---

Perhaps this is the most important reason why Kertész insists on being not a witness but a writer and why he sets into motion this paradoxical play that is *Dossier K*. “Don’t you see a contradiction here?” the interviewer asks at the end of the book. “Of course,” the author answers, “I see contradictions everywhere. But I love contradictions” (235). While Wiesel tries to move away from generic hybridity, stabilizing the writings of survivors as testimony, Kertész fears that this stability might turn the Holocaust experience into “dead memory.” Therefore, in his play of contradictions, he attempts to let memory stay, to keep it “alive” in the uncertain space between testimony and fiction. ✱

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is further developed in a chapter of my PhD on authorizing strategies in Holocaust representation. The dissertation will be published in 2009 as *Der abwesende Zeuge: Autorisierungsstrategien in Darstellungen der Shoah* (Tübingen: Francke).

<sup>2</sup> More information on the “centennial symposia” can be found on the Nobel Foundation’s official website: [www.nobelprize.org](http://www.nobelprize.org).

<sup>3</sup> In *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, James Young makes a similar point, namely that “it is surprising and even ironic ... that Elie Wiesel would then overlook what amounts to a long tradition of literary testimony,” given that Wiesel “is consciously writing from within the Jewish [testimonial] tradition” (20-21).

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. In the case of Kertész, they are based on the German editions of his work.

<sup>5</sup> On trauma and witnessing compare Shoshana Felman’s and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992).

### Works Cited

- Aarvick, Egil. “Presentation by Egil Aarvick [for Elie Wiesel].” 1986. *Nobel Lectures in Peace. Vol. 5 (1981-1990)*. Ed. Irwin Abrams. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1997. 163-168.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot*. Paris: Galilée, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sauf le nom*. Paris: Galilée, 1993.
- Engdahl, Horace. “Philomela’s Tongue: Introductory Remarks on Witness Literature.” *Witness Literature. Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium*. Ed. Horace Engdahl. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2002. 1-14.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Kertész, Imre. *Eine Gedankenlänge Stille, während das Erschießungskommando neu lädt [A gondolatnyi csend, amíg a kivégzőostag újralát]*. 1998. Trans. György Buda et al. Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999.

- 
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Dossier K. Eine Ermittlung* [*K. Dosszié*]. Trans. Kristin Schwamm. Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Fiasko* [*A Kudarc*]. 1988. Trans. György Buda and Agnes Relle. Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Galeerentagebuch* [*Gályanapló*]. 1991. Trans. Kristin Schwamm. Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Roman eines Schicksallosen* [*Sorstalanság*]. 1975. Trans. Christina Viragh. Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1998.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, 1964. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris: Ed. Du Seuil, 1990.
- Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved* [*I Sommersi e i Salvati*]. 1986. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. London: Abacus, 1988.
- Wiesel, Elie. "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration." *Dimensions of the Holocaust. Lectures at Northwestern University*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977. 5-19.
- Young, James. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.