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# Testimony: Between the Inside and the Outside of Language.

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## Testimony: Between the Inside and the Outside of Language<sup>1</sup>

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### 1.

The issue I would like to explore here is the linguistic status of testimony as formulated by Giorgio Agamben. I will not analyze testimony as a separate sort of discursive practice, neither will I explore the question of the performative character of similar forms of expression or delve into the pragmatic consequences of the act of testimony (extensively examined by the likes of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub). The paper will also disregard the issue of belief, written or spoken accounts, predicates and referencing these forms of expression. Agamben's deliberations are of particular interest to me given their focus on abandoning the widespread conviction that testimony weighed after the Holocaust refers to unnamable and intangible realities outside the realm of language, while the act of bearing witness of the Shoah would be an extreme case of the act of speech. Agamben treats the notion of impossibility of speaking advanced by psychoanalytical discourse seriously, thus linking it with the empirical

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1 The paper is an extended version of the lecture given at the 34<sup>th</sup> Theory of Literature Conference *Literary Representations of Experience*, held in September of 2006 in Gdańsk-Sobieszewo.

fact of testimonies coming into being, their linguistic existence. The realized embodiment of the impossible is, in Agamben's perspective, more worthy of attention than the recurring thesis positing the inexpressibility of liminal experiences. Testimonies exist, they were given, and language was used to convey what once was thought impossible to recount. As a result, we cannot explore the issues revolving around the concept of testimony without reexamining the problem of language/speech and without investigating how the realization of such impossible expressions affects the issue of language. From the linguistic perspective, language reveals its aporetic character, hidden in its quotidian usage. We will not grasp "what" testimony speaks about until we come to understand what it means in their case to, as Celan put it, "just speak." Agamben writes:

In this language, a language that survives the subjects who spoke it coincides with a speaker who remains beyond it. ... so the speech of the witness bears witness to a time in which human beings did not yet speak; and so the testimony of human beings attests to a time in which they were not yet human.<sup>2</sup> (162)

Agamben's thesis, whose shape I will be following herein, would, at least in my opinion, argue the following: if the structure of testimony is based on realizing the radical impossibility of expression experienced by someone who is "capable of speaking," as well as on the relationship between the human and the inhuman, then the crack at its heart will not be the limit, but rather a hidden principle of the existence of language.

In 1964, during an interview aired by the German TV channel ZDF, Günter Gaus asked Hannah Arendt whether something has remained in her innermost personal experience of pre-Nazi Europe: "What remains? The mother tongue remains (*Was bleibt? Es bleibt die Muttersprache.*)" Not memories of events or even fully-formed personalities but language, both medium and message, is what remains after the identity of its speaker perishes. What, then, is that language-remnant – asks Giorgio Agamben in reference to Arendt's reply – what does it mean to speak a language that's almost entirely a relic, and how can a language survive its speakers? In his desire to reexamine the issue of bearing witness, the articulation of experience, and the linguistic structure of testimony, the author of the *Homo Sacer* triptych sketches, in its final installment, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz? (Remnants of Auschwitz)*, an image of language as a field where anomie clashes with norm, innovation clashes with conservative tendencies inherent in the grammatical system, in which the point where tensions intersect

2 G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Unless stated otherwise, from here onwards the locations of all the quotes from this book will be placed in the main body of the article.

determines, as structural *locus*, the position of the speaking subject, i.e. the place of those who, as Agamben puts it, decide what can and cannot be said, therefore decide not only the semantics of their own speech, but also, if taken to an extreme, adjudicate as to what is expressible in language and what is not.

The end of this dialectic of the expression and the expressed, the expressible and the inexpressible, anomie and the norm would mean the death of language brought about by abrogation of the prospects for the emergence of the subject of speech. Language dies when the relationship between “norm” (Dante’s *grammatica* – scholastic Latin) and anomie (the void of unnamed experience) breaks down in the subject, thus transforming *langue* into a “whole that is closed and lacking all exteriority” into a *corpus* of realized, fulfilled statements. “We thus say of a dead language that it is no longer spoken, that is, that in it it is impossible to assign the position of a subject.” (160) For the author speaking a dead language, assigning himself such a position would signify a moment in which, as Agamben writes, this “curious *auctor*, who authorizes an absolute impossibility of speaking and summons it to speech,” thus paradoxically giving “his voice and blood to the shadow of a dead language, so that it may return – as such – to speech.” (161) This isolated act, typical for the literary praxis of Latin poets, makes it possible for language to survive the death of its subjects; its transmission, however, takes place via the *corpus* of what has been said or is evoked by the archive’s records, which still does not make it a living language. In this particular case, the “archive” is neither the dust of the libraries nor the collections contained within, but rather an assortment of rules that define the event of discourse – its emergence. According to Foucault, from whom Agamben borrowed the term, it situates itself in the sphere of casual determinants, in the historical reality between pure *langue* understood as a system of constructing possible sentences and the *corpus* collecting what has already been said. The archive, the “mass of the non-semantic inscribed in every meaningful discourse as a function of its enunciation” is only the “margin encircling and limiting every concrete act of speech,” while being “the unsaid or sayable inscribed in everything said by virtue of being enunciated” (143-444). Foucault calls this record of the unsaid “historical *a priori*,” that is a place from which the archeology of discourse can question the already said at the level of its factual existence instead of pure linguistic potentiality.<sup>3</sup> The only true miracle of linguistic resurrection, as Agamben suggests, took place in the case of modern Hebrew, where a linguistic community, after experiencing a historical trauma, placed itself temporarily in the position of a subject within a *langue* that was heretofore dead, that is it survived only as an archive and the *corpus* of traditional texts. The community

3 cf. M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 126.

emerged in place of the subject as a new collective identity, a collective “we” delivered from muteness (Hebrew became a living language only after its speakers experienced the Holocaust, which deprived them of their own other-language *locus*, their prior linguistic identity).

This pattern of argumentation, reconstructed here very perfunctorily, precedes Agamben’s final attempt at defining testimony. Undeterred in his efforts to reinterpret the notion, Agamben writes:

To bear witness is to place oneself in one’s own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living – in any case, outside both the archive and the *corpus* of what has already been said. (161)

Note that each of the formulations used by the writer indicates aporia inscribed into the very structure of testimony (which is not equivalent, however, with its negation), which moulds it into an articulation taking place not only from a position of inability but also a logical impossibility. The impossibility seems to primarily constitute the act of testimony by situating the witness in the role of the subject of speech “in” language, in a system of rules and grammatical norms, by establishing a relation between his/her act of speech and the unsaid (anomie). Testimony as the “possibility of bearing witness” about the unsaid places itself outside the historical accumulation of discourse layers and mutable circumstances, initially embodying a certain possibility of language, that is the existence of a purely potential *locus* of the subject of speech in the face of empirically confirmed impossibility of assuming said position by any survivor. On the other hand, the existence of that potential *locus* within language would legitimize the act of bearing witness for those deprived of their language (Muslims, victims of the gas chambers), and thus allow the positioning of oneself within language “in their place” – voiding, as I understand it, the charge of fictionalization (leveled by the more radical students of Lacan, like Claude Lanzmann) and legitimizing the testimonial role of literature and, to put it more broadly, art. The linguistic structure of “bearing witness for” does not contain and neither can it guarantee a positive reference to the “substance” of unsaid experience – given that we are dealing here with the same aporia that Jean-François Lyotard accurately diagnosed in his ironic paraphrases of arguments employed by Auschwitz negationists that he included in *Le Différend*:

You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it. Most of them disappeared then, and the survivors rarely speak about it. When

they do speak about it, their testimony bears only upon a minute part of this situation. How can you know that the situation itself existed? That it is not the fruit of your informant's imagination? Either the situation did not exist as such. Or else it did exist, in which case your informant's testimony is false, either because he or she should have disappeared, or else because he or she should remain silent ... To have "really seen with his own eyes" a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber.<sup>4</sup>

If the structure of testimony implicitly contains something like the impossibility of bearing witness, then, as Agamben claims, it is not due to the impossibility of assuming a specific existential and cognitive attitude (of being inside the experience of death and returning therefrom) but rather due to the strictly linguistic nature of testimony. For Agamben, testimony situates itself from the very beginning within a very disturbing turning point – incongruence – between the possibility of speech and the act of speaking, between *langue* and archive, being the reverse of a situation that any subject of speech can find himself in, one that deprives him of his ability to speak, to express something, despite him being "in the right" to do so as a subject of speech situated within language. The situation demonstrates that assuming the subjective position in a language is always implicitly related to the potential divesting of language, to being alienated "within it," to the recession of one's own speech, and thanks to this structure (which allows the speaker to locate himself in the *locus* of "speaking" from inside of a dead language) the speech of the witness may bear "witness to a time in which human beings did not yet speak [...] attest to a time in which they were not yet human." (162) Bearing witness, as placing oneself in language in the position of those who have lost it results in the unearthing of the relationship between the *langue* and the contingency, the incidental character of individual existence (the real possibility of him or her not existing at all), which makes their emergence in place of the subject of speech an absolutely singular event, one that takes place outside any sort of archive or *corpus* of enunciations. Contingency as the occurrence of language in a subject, writes Agamben, "is different from actual discourse's utterance or non-utterance, its speaking or not speaking, its production or non-production as a statement. It concerns the subject's capacity

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4 J.F. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 3.

to have or not to have language” (145). It is not, therefore, simply another logical modality, alongside possibility, impossibility, and necessity; it is the “actual giving of a possibility, the way in which a potentiality exists as such.” (pp. 145-146). Since “testimony” – the name given to the placement of the subject in a certain linguistic chasm, a rift in which the possibility of speech is realized as such – is the relationship between the possibility of speech and the act of speech (enunciation) – and not just the relationship between what has remained and that which went unsaid (the dimension defined by the archive) – then the insignificant human existence becomes the reason that ultimately decides, time and time again, whether or not a language will prevail.

## 2.

In light of the above, it should not come as a surprise that Agamben decided to associate the gesture of bearing witness with true poetic gestures, and language of the poet with the remainder, with what remains (as “scatheless is the song”) after the test of possibility and impossibility of speech is through and that’s why it can bear witness for us. Although the author of *Homo Sacer* quotes a sentence from Hölderlin to support his ideas of the deep identity of speech in testimony and poetry (“Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter” – “What remains is what the poets found”), I would rather suggest to a speech by Paul Celan delivered at the German city of Bremen in 1958, a speech touching, albeit from a different angle, upon the issue of language as the “remnant” that survived the inferno:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, ‘enriched’ by it all.<sup>5</sup>

The secret of the poet’s language lies in the state of regression, the loss of elocution, and the ease of expression. Language “enriched” with recurring periods of muteness is the language of the “stutterer,” language that’s constantly regressing in aphasia – therefore this is its kenosis. To put it differently, it is the salvaged (remaining, residual) impossibility of speech within language and the transition of the unsayable into the act of speech that it

5 P. Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen” in P. Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. R. Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), 34.

incurs. Language can testify to the impossibility of speech, because language itself bears witness to/bears the stamp of powerlessness (muteness), which is not “a rich, difficult germination,” but the fringe, “a distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions,” the shift of the interior of the language in relation to its exterior.<sup>6</sup>

The traces of anomie withing language, as diagnosed by Celan, allow the return of the issue of subject invalidated in *The Archeology of Knowledge* and approach it again via “the event of discourse,” starting from the aporia of the possibility/impossibility of speech, which is also referenced, albeit in another way, as Agamben remarks, by Foucault’s famous question: “Many other forms of statement are to be found in the discourse of nineteenth-century doctors. What is it that links them together? What necessity binds them together? Why these and not others?”<sup>7</sup>

In the relation between what is said and its taking place, it was possible to bracket the subject of enunciation, since speech had already taken place. But the relation between language and its existence, between *langue* and the archive, demands subjectivity as that which, in its very possibility of speech, bears witness to an impossibility of speech. This is why subjectivity appears as *witness*; this is why it can speak for those who cannot speak. Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech; it is, moreover, an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking. These two movements cannot be identified either with a subject or with a consciousness; yet they cannot be divided into two incommunicable substances. Their inseparable intimacy is testimony (Agamben 145-6).

As the subject of speech and the paradoxical “subject of language,” the poet – an author *par excellence* – does not emerge as a result of the expression of the idiom of experience, but appears as, may I risk the expression, the inner locus of the linguistic exterior, salvaging *langue* in the impossibility of speech and salvaging the impossibility of speech (anomie) in the area of language. “Can we perhaps now locate the strangeness, the place where the person was able to set himself free as an – estranged – I?”<sup>8</sup> Poetic testimony is a polar opposite of the expression of the “interior of the subject,” therefore Celan considers bearing witness as structure (as “speaking for others,” *fremder*) to be tantamount to abandoning humanity, desubjectification, or to put it more precisely,

6 M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 119.

7 *ibid.*, 50.

8 P. Celan, “The Meridian” in P. Celan, *Collected Prose*, 46.



in the words of Celan himself: “going beyond what is human, stepping into a realm which is turned toward the human, but uncanny.” Art that is familiar with the “possibility of strangeness” and contains traces of “uncanniness” (*das Unheimliche*) remains well-rooted in that particular realm.<sup>9</sup>

In the concept of language-as-remnant, we should also look for the “potentiality of speech” and the (im)possibility of *parole*. “On the basis of the grammar and of the wealth of vocabulary available at a given period, there are, in total, relatively few things that are said,” and our fundamental questions concerning the status of testimony revolve around the particular circumstances that decide the unique character of this “non-filling of the field of possible formulations as it is opened up by the language.”<sup>10</sup> The subjective position in the field of possibility of the *langue* is a place, where we happen upon “lowly lives reduced to ashes in the few phrases that have destroyed them,”<sup>11</sup> and whose resurrection via means of linguistic analysis was, according to Agamben, Foucault’s greatest desire (which he confessed to only once, in *The Life of Infamous Men*). The non-filling of the field of possible formulations (the sayable-yet-unsaid, register of the archive) shown, as Agamben writes, to the gaze shifting from “the site of enunciation not towards the act of speech, but toward *langue* as such: that is, of articulating an inside and an outside not only in the plane of language and actual discourse, but also in the plane of language as potentiality of speech” (145) decides whether the enunciatory dimension will be revealed, one that extends outside the system of statements of a realized discourse. In this case, Agamben clearly follows the thoughts of Benveniste and Foucault, for whom the concept of formulation as enunciation is not based on the analysis of “the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to); but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it.”<sup>12</sup> The enunciative level – to use the nomenclature provided by *The Archeology of Knowledge* – is “at the limit of language,” although it is not “the enigmatic, silent remainder that it [the language – *tr.*] does not translate.” The enunciation defines only “the modality of its appearance: its periphery rather than its internal organization.”<sup>13</sup>

9 *ibid.*, 42

10 M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 119.

11 M. Foucault, “The Life of Infamous Men” in M. Foucault, *Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sydney: Feral Publications, 2006), 77.

12 M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 95.

13 *ibid.*, 112.

A remarkably similar thought can be found in the work of Paul Celan. A poem is the sort of enunciation that “holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an ‘already-no-more’ into a ‘still-here,’” the latter of which may “only mean speaking;” “not language as such, but responding and – not just verbally – ‘corresponding’ to something.” From the perspective of “only ... speaking” – the “possibilities ... immersed in the memory of individual” become a language “set free under the sign of ... the limits drawn by language,”<sup>14</sup> that is the previously discarded silent substance of experience. The poem as a singular enunciation is “one person’s language become shape,”<sup>15</sup> which transpires only when that same language, if we look out from its interior towards the “periphery of enunciation,” withdraws and recedes. For Celan, the most inner essence of the poem is its presence in the present, “unique, momentary” (being outside them archive and *corpus*, respectively), being “lonely” (which I understand as singularity, constituted by the possibility of nonexistence) and “*en route*,”<sup>16</sup> constantly in search of the *vis-à-vis*, “this other towards which it is heading”<sup>17</sup> and its need of the Other. This last characteristic, when used to describe the act of bearing witness, may translate to the “desire to speak to the Other,” which Primo Levi, in his conversation with Ferdinando Camon, illustrated in the following way:

Back then, in the concentration camp, I often had a dream: I dreamed that I’d returned, come home to my family, told them about it, and nobody listened. The person standing in front of me doesn’t stay to hear, he turns around and goes away. I told this dream to my friends in the concentration camp, and they said, “It happens to us too.”

And later I found it mentioned, in the very same way, by other survivors, who’ve written about their experiences. ... But this dream of talking about it was certainly comparable to the dream of Tantalus, which was of “eat-ing-almost,” of being able to bring food to one’s mouth but not succeeding in biting into it. It’s the dream of a primary need, the need to eat and drink. So was the need to talk about it.<sup>18</sup>

14 P. Celan, “The Meridian,” 49.

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

17 *ibid.*

18 P. Levi, F. Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi* (Marlboro: Marlboro Press, 1989), 42

Clearly, the impossibility of bearing witness may be perceived in a way that is ostensibly very different from the possibility or impossibility of having a language. When it comes to analyzing the cognitive positions in situations described by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub as “events without a witness,” such an interpretation seems to be an especially important alternative to solutions proposed by Agamben. Lest we forget, in his essay *An Event Without a Witness* Laub identified three possible positions one can assume towards the experience of the Holocaust: bear witness to oneself as a part of a liminal experience, being a witness testifying to an Other, being a witness of someone else’s testimony. The first position, which carries the greatest amount of credibility in Western culture, that is being an eyewitness of a given event, is, according to Laub, is the most susceptible to deformation:

In addition, it was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside, so as to stay entirely *outside* of the trapping toles, and the consequent identities, either of the victim or the executioner. No observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity – a wholeness and separateness – that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing.<sup>19</sup>

According to the American psychoanalyst, the gradual atrophying of the ability to bear witness concerns perpetrators and victims alike, although for different reasons:

The perpetrators, in their attempt to rationalize the unprecedented scope of the destructiveness, brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane, point of reference in the witness. ... It was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent

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19 Sh. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York—London: Routledge, 2002), 81.

frame of reference through which the event could be observed. One might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust, either from outside or from inside the event.<sup>20</sup>

To explain the concept of a witness existing inside the murderous event, an event obliterating the fundamental capability to “be towards one another,” Laub adds that the experience of the Holocaust seems to us a universe wherein imagining an Other was simply no longer possible. “The was no longer an other to which one could say ‘Thou’ in the hope of being heard, of being recognized as a subject, of being answered.”<sup>21</sup> When one cannot even address an Other with a “Thou,” then one cannot say “thou” even to oneself and therefore cannot “bear witness to oneself.”<sup>22</sup> Victims are mute because their testimony to us is an account of exclusion from the world of human beings, the internalization of the non-person status. The survivors find that their experiences aren’t communicable even to themselves, as speaking of these events is inherently linked with the loss of one’s identity or the collapse of the basic frameworks of the human condition that allow for self-knowledge, thus rendering the narrative impossible to communicate.

It is not really possible to *tell the truth*, to testify, from the outside. Neither is it possible, as we have seen, to testify from the inside. I would suggest that the impossible position and the testimonial effort of the film as a whole is to be, precisely, neither simply inside nor simply outside, but paradoxically, *both inside and outside*: to create a *connection* that did not exist during the war and does not exist today, *between the inside and the outside* – to set them both in motion and in dialogue with one another.<sup>23</sup>

The author ponders this relationship, or, in other words, this connection between the “inside” and the “outside” using the example of Jan Karski’s account of the Warsaw ghetto. Later, when trying to establish what makes the strength of the testimony in Lanzmann’s movie, Felman states that it “is not the words but the equivocal, puzzling, relation between words and voice, the interaction, that is, between words, voice, rhythm, melody, images, writing, and silence. Each testimony speaks to us beyond its words, beyond its melody,

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 82.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 232.

like the unique performance of a singing.”<sup>24</sup> Testimony is located here between language and what’s beyond it. It does not take place in the tension between the possibility and impossibility of speech, but between speech and what is displaced from it; what resurfaces not in language itself but in its pauses, inflections, intonations, in other words, as a strictly melic symptom of something mute, extralinguistic. Agamben treated this diagnosis with slight detachment, claiming it “derives an aesthetic possibility from a logical impossibility” through an illegitimate “recourse to the metaphor of song.” (36) In Felman and Laub’s interpretation testimony is conveyed, as we should strongly emphasize, by the strictly aesthetic qualities of language – rhythm, intonation, melody, dissonances, and assonances, and considering this a dangerous tendency towards the “aestheticization of testimony” should not be treated as an exaggeration. Contrary to the authors’ intentions, this aestheticization is a direct consequence of relocating the stutter, the inhuman, and the heterogeneous outside the realm of language.

Coming back to the conclusion I anticipated in the beginning of this article, I would like to say that from Agamben’s perspective, the subject of testimonial speech may communicate the impossible testimony of desubjectification, because both the subject of speech and language itself are, to some degree, constitutively fractured. In language as the area of possibility of speech, we have to – as demonstrated by the case of testimony – to learn how to distinguish impossibility as a separate part of the field. Likewise, we should have the courage to designate the indelible inhuman part in every human subject. Only then can we make some sense of the puzzling fact that “the speech of the witness bears witness to a time in which human beings did not yet speak; and so the testimony of human beings attests to a time in which they were not yet human.” (162)

*Translation: Jan Szelągiewicz*

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24 *ibid.*, 277-278.