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Fiction as Testimony

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Abstract

This article explores the fraught relationship between the terms ‘fiction’, ‘creativity’, ‘literature’ and ‘testimony’ in Holocaust and trauma studies. It argues that the main challenge in reading witness literature is to read testimony as both factual and potentially fictional at the same time when no metatextual corroboration is available. This anxiety of testimony originates in some key texts in Holocaust and trauma studies: I analyse for the first time the repercussions of fictional passages in Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* (1947), *The Truce* (1963) and Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After* (1985). These sections in no way attenuate the veracity of the overall narratives of survival. Rather than presenting the fictional as fact in bad faith, these books demonstrate the importance of creativity in responding to historical events, particularly when there are no existing historical narratives to present an alternative view. They also emphasise the current critical dichotomy in Holocaust and trauma studies between what Sara Guyer terms the ‘non-representational character’ of literature from ‘the representational character of testimony’. If we attempt to think beyond this binary between fictional literature and books about witnessing, it is possible to reflect on how fiction itself can operate as a form of testimony.

Keywords

Testimony, witness literature, fiction, holocaust studies, trauma studies

What is important for a memoirist is not the factual accuracy of the account but its symmetry (Orhan Pamuk)¹

The truth kills the possibility of fiction (Claude Lanzmann)²

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The dissonance between Orhan Pamuk's adherence to formal concerns rather than 'factual accuracy' and Claude Lanzmann's dismissal of fiction emphasises the tension between conceptions of historical veracity and alternative artistic 'truths'. The publication of James Young's *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (1988) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony* (1991) resulted in studies into the literariness of testimony in relation to the Holocaust, but that critical trajectory did not lead to an extended investigation into the relationship between artistic 'symmetry' and fiction that Pamuk discusses in relation to his 2005 memoir.³ In part, this critical absence is due to the artistic taboo surrounding fictionalisations of the Holocaust. In an article published in 2008, Sara Guyer emphasised that the categorical tensions between literature, fiction and testimony were still stymied by a critical opposition that distinguishes the supposedly 'non-representational character' of literature from 'the representational character of testimony'.⁴ In *Poetry as Testimony* (2014), I outlined how poems about the First World War, the Holocaust, 9/11 and working-class experience are neither purely 'non-representational' nor slavishly referential; indeed, such texts often slide between the two categories. Testimonial poetry requires a different form of reading to traditional ways of approaching poems due to this dialectical shuttling between the fictional and 'representational'. In this article, I wish to extend this argument further to reflect on whether it is possible for fiction *itself* – rather than the categories of poetry or literature – to function as testimony. Many readers and critics might struggle to respond affirmatively to this conundrum if they understand testimony within conventional truth claims such as this ostensible demarcation between the fantastical and referential. We might discuss, for example, Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995) as false testimony: this book was notoriously offered to his publishers as a 'true' narrative about his survival of the Holocaust. Or we might ruminate on the fictionality of Margaret B. Jones's account of gangland life in *Love and Consequences* (2008) that masqueraded as a memoir. In these two examples, the authors' intentions, publishers' categorisations and the critical reception of the books are based on apparently clear distinctions between fiction and testimony that the authors notoriously violated.

How, however, should we respond to the fictionalities interwoven into verifiable Holocaust testimony? By analysing fictional passages, I do not categorise the following books, unlike Wilkomirski's, as *false* testimony. I focus initially on the invented moments (openly or not) in three 'classic' Holocaust testimonies: Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (1946), *The Truce* (1963) and Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* (1985). Any engagement with the relationship between fiction and testimony can be misunderstood as a discussion centred on entirely fabricated memoirs: Sue Vice explores these issues in her definitive *Textual Deceptions: False Memoirs and Literary Hoaxes in the Contemporary Era* (2014). In contrast, I investigate the verifiable witness's account of their experiences through fictional techniques: this is not a critical account of a totalised fictional experience, as, for example in the case of Wilkomirski's memoir, that was notoriously exposed as a fake in

1999. What does it mean when there is not an ‘extreme disjunction’ between the text and the author that Vice outlines in *Textual Deceptions*; when a text grates against but does not fall outside ‘the genre in which it should properly exist’?⁵ *If This is a Man*, *The Truce* and *Auschwitz and After* contain fictional passages that in no way detract from the veracity of the historical account as a whole. This article explores the tensions and overlaps between fiction and testimony that have mostly gone unremarked by critics (apart from Vice) in the field of Holocaust and trauma studies. What is the actual relationship between fiction and testimony? What does any overlap mean for a critical understanding of ‘classic’ Holocaust testimony? Following Vice’s argument, we might controversially refer to the books listed above as embellished testimony. However, ‘embellished’ obviously contains an *a priori* value judgement: the phrase suggests that the historical truth of an overall account is compared to the unnecessary fictionality of other passages, as in Vice’s account of Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love That Survived* (2009). Vice registers her incredulity that Rosenblat’s incarceration in Buchenwald should warrant, in addition, the creation of a fictional lover who beckons to him across the camp’s perimeter fence. Yet for Levi and Delbo, such fiction is central to their conception of literary testimony in *Auschwitz and After*, *This is a Man* and *The Truce*. How can this be so, when Wilkomirski and Rosenblat’s texts have been justly reprimanded for their egregious fictionalities?

Although critics have not drawn attention to this issue, *If This is a Man*, *The Truce* and *Auschwitz and After* also contain ‘embellishments’, although clearly not on the scale of Rosenblat’s memoir: the initial publication of *Angel at the Fence* was cancelled after the falsehood of the book’s central events was discovered. In contrast, the veracity of the narrative in Levi and Delbo’s books is beyond question. Yet Ian Thomson’s *Primo Levi* (2002) revealed that this Auschwitz survivor invents an encounter with a German woman in *The Truce* who purportedly wrote a letter to Hitler admonishing his foreign policy. Surprisingly, this revelation did not elicit a critical response, yet it encapsulates the central problem of the relationship between fiction and testimony that generations of scholars, according to Guyer, have failed to conceptualise clearly without retreating into the simplistic binary of referential and non-referential literature. What does it mean when Primo Levi, ‘the [European] model for any survivor-witness’ happily includes fictional sections in his testimony?⁶ What does it indicate about Levi’s conception of the genres of testimony and memoir and artistic symmetry? After a discussion of *If This is a Man*, *The Truce* and *Auschwitz and After* in the context of these questions, this article outlines how later works such as Daniel Mendelsohn’s *The Lost* (2007) and Otto Dov Kulka’s *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death* (2013) have engaged further with the troubling issue of the relationship between fiction and testimony. I then return to the work of Primo Levi to ask how we might conceptualise the reader’s informed or unknowing acceptance of moments of fictionality within such literature. Finally, I propose an alternative way of reading testimony in which readerly anxieties are of paramount importance. I argue that when the reader encounters testimony without any meta-textual corroboration, they must perform testimony paradoxically in the event of reading as factual and potentially fictional at the same time.

Fiction as Testimony in *If This is a Man*, *The Truce* and *Auschwitz and After*

When Delbo recounts an incident in *Auschwitz and After* in which she washes by a stream in Birkenau, the passage ends with an open admission that it is fictional (153). For some critics, such celebrated moments of formal bravura distinguish Delbo's literary engagements with her experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau from the more scientific prose of Primo Levi. Since Levi originally conceived *If This is a Man* as a kind of factory report about his traumatic experiences in Buna, perhaps it is not surprising that Delbo's literary flourishes should have resulted in such fictitious passages influenced by the poet Louis Aragon and director Louis Jovet. Yet such a demarcation between Levi and Delbo's work still draws on Guyer's opposition between the 'non-representational character' of literature (*Auschwitz and After*) and 'the representational character of testimony' (*If This is a Man*). Both books are 'referential' examples of testimony, even if the forms these authors deploy in order to inscribe their experiences are markedly different. *Auschwitz and After* and *If This is a Man* are also 'literary' in the sense that they encompass fictional passages within an overall attempt to remain faithful to the authors' trauma. But as I shall now outline, Levi and Delbo, for different reasons, would staunchly defend their use of fiction as testimony.

In an ironic version of the conventional disclaimer, Levi states in his author's preface to *If This is a Man* that 'It seems to me unnecessary to add that none of the facts are invented'.⁷ Yet in his subsequent book *The Truce*, some aspects of the narrative *are* invented in that Levi inserts a fictional episode in which he meets a German shopkeeper in Katowice who recounts how she wrote to 'Mr Adolf Hitler', advising him that he could not triumph in a world war and that 'too many people would be killed' (280). Members of the Gestapo subsequently treat her with merely 'loutish contempt' and she is expelled from Berlin; at the end of the passage, she laments 'how much better the world would be if the rulers of this earth had followed her advice' (281). As Thomson reveals in *Primo Levi*, some reviewers of *The Truce*

suspected a heavy tincture of fantasy, and they were right. Levi had inserted a story that he had heard on a recent SIVA business trip. In an old people's home in Frankfurt lived a woman who in 1938 had sent Hitler a letter in which she implored him to stop his war-mongering. The story seemed such a marvellous paradigm of courage that Levi incorporated it in *The Truce*. He had not so much subtracted from the truth as added to it.⁸

In one sense, Thomson's conclusion that Levi had 'added' to the truth is curious in that there is no verification of the woman's story within the biography. One response to this probing of the relationship between fiction and testimony would be that this establishment of the facts simply does not matter: Levi 'adds' a fictional episode to a book that is overwhelmingly 'true' to spice an overarching theme of historical valour. Yet over the thirty years during which I have taught seminars on *If This is a Man* and *The Truce*, reactions to this passage have responded primarily to the lack of historical veracity. Some English literature students have been reduced to tears whereas others

reacted angrily by declaring that they now distrusted the ‘truth’ of the entire testimony. History students have retorted that their discipline had trained them to be suspicious of such writing, to the extent that they inherently treat all testimony as fiction, unless certifiable metatexts can prove otherwise. These historians had all been well-trained.

In *The Politics of Memory* (1996), Raul Hilberg declares: ‘Among the practices that give me discomfort is the creation of a story in which historical facts are altered deliberately for the sake of plot and adventure’.⁹ In this selected passage from *The Truce*, Levi certainly injects ‘plot and adventure’ into the epic narrative of his return from Auschwitz. Critics should remain sensitive to the disciplinary concerns outlined above and understand the ways in which we read and establish assumptions through genre: after all, *The Truce* is marketed as ‘autobiography’. Yet these diverse reactions to the passage still do not respond adequately to the demand that Levi’s fictional intervention makes on the reader of testimony. A more extended critical engagement with the relationship between fiction and testimony is necessary to account for Levi’s intertwining of seemingly antagonistic genres.

During his drafting of *The Truce*, Levi introduced a fictional ‘good German’ to redress the unequivocal negativity towards Germans in *If This is a Man*. Germans – rather than Nazis specifically – are essentialised in the latter book as a race of fighters, commanders, organisers and killers. ‘What else could they do?’, Levi asks at one point in mock exasperation, ‘They are Germans’ (147). Hence *The Truce* marks a departure from the satirical account of the ‘millennial anger’ of ‘barking Germans’ and murderous *Ordnungsliebe* in *If This is a Man* (25): Levi began to revise his essentialist opinion after his SIVA business trips to Germany began in 1953. In the subsequent *Moments of Reprieve* (1981), that I return to later in this chapter, Levi recounts a story about Frau Meyer, who gave Levi a boiled egg and four lumps of sugar in exchange for fixing a punctured bicycle: as with the fictional event in *The Truce*, Levi is, in his own words, ‘not trying to make excuses for Nazi Germany. One human German does not whitewash the innumerable inhuman or indifferent ones, but it does have the merit of breaking a stereotype’.¹⁰ In addition, the passage from *The Truce* forms an allegory of testimony in which Levi addresses an extended European readership for *If This is a Man* after its acceptance by a larger publishing house in Italy. Rather than the ‘Olympian serenity’ that Gillian Rose famously detects in *If This is a Man*, the book often betrays a barely concealed anger: after the publication of *The Truce* in 1963, Levi was aware that his testimony would now encompass a German readership, so *The Truce* often suppresses the bitter tones of Levi’s previous book, in which ‘the historical necessity of killing the children of the Jews was self-demonstrative to the Germans’ (26).¹¹ Instead, the fictional passage from *The Truce* offers the counterpoint of the non-compliant German citizen as a synecdoche for all those who resisted perpetrators, collaboration or complicity.

Structurally, this fictional episode in *The Truce* also allows for a momentary generic release into comedy as Levi recounts how the German woman in Katowice would not believe they were from Italy. ‘Italians had black hair and passionate eyes’, she opines, ‘while we possessed neither. At the most, she would concede that we were Croats’ (280). In this allegory of testimony, Levi also offers a riposte to his nightmare in the Buna camp that his testimony will not be listened to or apprehended. The German woman forms an example of Felman’s receptive listener: when the former realises that

Cesare and Levi are Jews from Auschwitz, 'her lines seemed to soften', and she 'took us into the back room, made us sit down, [and] offered us two glasses of real beer' (280).¹² The fictional testimony embodies an experience that the former prisoners would most like to encounter: Cesare and Levi revel in her compassionate attention, compounded by a tale of dangerous resistance. In addition, the fiction is symptomatic of Levi's developing confidence in himself as a writer after the delayed success of *If This is a Man*, and his increasing novelistic interest in character. In the chapter entitled 'The Dreamers' from *The Truce*, the long, hypotactic sentences describing 'the Moor' are symptomatic of an evolving fluidity and dexterity to Levi's prose which responds to the intense 'capacity for joy and self-expression' that he detects amongst his Russian companions. In turn, this stylistic capaciousness chimes with his own need in *The Truce* to leave Auschwitz behind and 'take possession of [his] body again' (263).

This fiction in *The Truce* might induce readers to be more hesitant about categorising *If This is a Man*, not in terms of rejecting its veracity outright as a sop to revisionists or Holocaust deniers, but in considering whether the book should be discussed as 'true' if potentially embellished testimony. As Pamuk openly admits in his memoir *Istanbul*, is *If This is a Man* occasionally beholden to fictional symmetry rather than factual accuracy?¹³ As with the section in *Auschwitz and After*, in which Delbo worries that her narrative 'is turning into a story', however, Levi expresses his concern in *If This is a Man* that, overall, his testimony may be perceived as fiction.¹⁴ When he takes the salvation of the 'chemical examination', Levi interrupts his narrative in exactly the same way as Delbo in *Auschwitz and After* and exclaims: 'Today, at this very moment as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened' (109). Yet elsewhere in *If This is a Man*, he is less concerned about historical veracity: as Thomson notes, Levi had already 'gone some way' in this book towards the 'fictional process' in *The Truce* (298). The character named Piero Sonnino in *If This is a Man* is a fictional representation of the Roman trickster Lello Perugia, who then becomes Cesare in *The Truce*. 'Sonnino' crops up in the 'Ka-Be' chapter set in April 1944, 'two months before Perugia had even been deported to Auschwitz' (298). Thomson also claims that the Steinlauf character, based on Eugenio Gluecksmann, has more in common with Otto Frank, with whom Levi was acquainted after the war, than the original Hungarian ex-army sergeant (p. 276). Whilst Thomson's claims about Otto Frank are necessarily speculative, the section on Sonnino in *If This is a Man* is certainly fictional in terms of its achronological deployment. So why does Levi include this *storia* in his testimony? The answer concerns the narrative 'symmetry' of the 'Ka-Be' chapter: after the description of the SS selection (59), the fictional insertion of Sonnino allows for the unexpected relief of a darkly comic moment, as with the story of the German shopkeeper in *The Truce*. Suffering from enteritis (an inflamed intestine), Sonnino mixes with dysentery patients, paying for their pots of diarrhoea to remain in the hospital for as long as possible (60). After a brief, dramatic pause for a new paragraph, Levi then departs from the comic episode to emphasise that 'Ka-Be is not [like] this' ('*Ma la vita del Ka-Be non è questa*').¹⁵

Levi characterises such episodes as stories ('*storie*') (59). In the chapter entitled 'The Work', inmates' testimonies from 'Norway, Italy, Algeria, the Ukraine' are 'simple and

incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?' (73). Since Levi was not a literalist interpreter, the fictional or semi-fictional narratives of the Bible vie uncomfortably here with the historical 'truths' behind the imagined oral testimonies recounted by Buna inmates. The clue to Levi's deployment of '*storie*' lies in its simultaneous denotation, as in English, of fiction or truth, history or tale, as opposed to the specificity of '*il racconto*' in Italian, meaning 'story' in the specific sense of a fictional tale or yarn. Derived in English from the Latin *figere*, to 'fashion or form', one of fiction's primary meanings according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is an 'action of fashioning or imitating' rather than the creation of fiction in *il racconto*.¹⁶ Lord Shaftesbury deployed the term in this fashion in 1713 when he referred to 'imitative art' as 'Fiction'. However, the first recorded example of the fictional as a form of counterfeiting originates even earlier (1483), in which 'invention is opposed to fact'. In *The Revelation to the Monk of Evesham* (1869), Edward Arber goes so far as to assert that there is a natural collusion between fiction and form: 'The confusion in [a work's] construction [...] tends to prove the fictional character of the work'.¹⁶ This illusion of the fictional essentially embedding and then revealing itself in the form of the work is illustrative of the divergent etymology of the fictional that can mean both truthful imitation and scurrilous deviation. If the fictional can apply to both realist narratives in the eighteenth century and fantasy scenarios in the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, then fiction itself must operate like Levi's testimony as a capacious cross-generic genre. The intertwining of fiction and historical narrative is thus embedded within the double meaning of '*storie*' and 'stories' in relation to *If This is a Man*. Perhaps due to his later vocation as a novelist, Levi is less concerned than Delbo by the transformation of referents into what Sara Kofman termed the 'idyllic clarity of narrative'.¹⁷

Unlike Levi's concern with novelistic symmetry, for Delbo the truth of fiction has to fill in the gaps in her memory. Delbo is unable to recount some of her experiences in Birkenau and Ravensbrück due to traumatic dissociation: as she puts it at the end of the passage about bathing in *Useless Knowledge*, the event must have happened the way she describes, even though she has 'no memory of it' (153). She thus deploys fiction to represent an experience that she cannot remember, as opposed to Levi's concern with Pamukian symmetry. In his introduction to *Auschwitz and After*, Lawrence Langer proposes the concepts of 'deep' and 'common' memory to understand Delbo's testimony: drawn partly from Delbo's work, they contrast involuntary remembrance with someone who lives 'alongside' history, holding traumatic memories at bay (xii–xiii). Yet these concepts founder against the obliteration of the foundations of 'deep' memory in this passage about bathing. As the failed equivalent of Proust's *petites madeleines* in involuntary remembrance, the narrator cannot recall her smell whilst washing in the stream because the inmates' 'sense of smell was quickly obliterated' (152). Hence this section begins with the limitations of testimony: Delbo 'must have' been in the same work party as her friends, but she cannot remember; she has 'no idea' where they marched or what they did when they arrived (147). As I noted in *Poetry as Testimony*, Delbo gives the reader the impossible but necessary task of 'seeing' what happened through her poetic prose, yet she admits that she cannot 'see' what occurred at certain chronological points in *Auschwitz and After*.¹⁸ The section entitled 'The Stream' is no exception: she is 'certain' that the kapo shouted, but she

does 'not see the woman with whom I walked in the direction of the stream' and 'doesn't see the others, not even Viva, who always helped me walk' (149). Delbo then struggles through the vicissitudes of memory into fictional assertions that must approximate to but cannot replicate what happened. By the end of the passage, she 'recounts' the specific details of toenails glueing her stockings; past imperfect verbs become more assertive as she insists, for example, that 'My skin was getting lighter, redder. Yes, it really looked lighter' (153). In the last two paragraphs, the unqualified active verbs begin to propel the narrative forward: the sentences increase in pace as the urgency of imaginative remembering intensifies.

Nevertheless, as with the meta-testimonial moment in *None of Us Will Return* in which she figures herself writing in a café and worries that the narrative is 'turning into a story' (26), Delbo still shifts at the end of this passage between affirmation ('I must have thought of the last shower') and disavowal ('Actually, I thought of nothing except the stream' (152)). As with Levi's 'storie', there is a play here on 'récit' in the original French that can refer to an empirical record or narrative as well as fiction. Curiously, this 'story' encompasses the specific 'remembered' detail of the perfume Delbo is wearing when she enters Birkenau, Orgueil by Lelong: 'an aldehydic fruity floral chypre fragrance with soft floral and spicy oriental undertones'.¹⁹ However, Orgueil ('Pride') was actually launched after the war in 1946: Jean Carles created this brand to mark the liberation of France. In the context of this deliberate or unconscious anachronism, Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory does not only appertain to secondary witnesses. Delbo constructs her own prosthetic memories through fictional ruminations that are nevertheless 'truthful', according to her epigraph to *None of Us Will Return* (1), in the sense of providing as close an approximation to the truth as possible, given the fallibility of testimony. When she remembers being alone next to the stream, Delbo asserts that this memory must be 'absolutely wrong' because '[n]o one was there alone' (148), so she requires approximated fiction to account for aporias within her Birkenau narrative. Counterintuitively for a conventional approach to testimony, fiction and truth are inseparable for Delbo to create lost but also 'true' memories.

The inextricability of fiction and testimony in the sections from Levi and Delbo's work that I have analysed so far is still evident in Holocaust testimony published almost fifty years after Delbo's *None of Us Will Return*. In Otto Dov Kulka's *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death* (2013), Saul Friedländer's search for the 'atmospheric' truth of testimonial experience is evident in Kulka's first example of a disjuncture between history and memory.²⁰ Kulka argues that as a professional historian, he is 'Skirting' around the Birkenau corpses that he encountered as a child.²¹ On a return visit to Birkenau, he recognises sites from his forced march from the camp but only 'in some sort of dream way. Maybe I didn't recognise them and only imagined that I did, *but that is of no significance*' (6). As Kulka states in his introduction to *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death*, fiction and imagination are as important as recollection to his book: after all, friends and family haunt his memory in images that, paradoxically, he '*did not see with [his] own eyes but which he continually re-experience[s]*' (31, my italics). By the second page of his testimony, Kulka has departed from his professional guise as a historian and begins to construct the fictional mythology of the 'Metropolis of Death' that diverges from his historical

narratives about the family camp in Birkenau, yet is viscerally encountered in ‘recurrent dreams’ (11) and in the four poems that interrupt his testimony. Again, this mythology is fictional in that the child invents it to try to understand his unfathomable experiences, compared with the adult historian’s ruminations on the ‘*Jews as a society*’ in his historical account of the family camp that ends the book (108). Yet the ‘Metropolis’ is also *not* fictional in the sense that it forms an integral part of Kulka’s ‘private mythology’ of his experience of the camp (24). Kulka’s tenacious point is that he lived his life in the camp *as a kind of fiction*: the historical fact that Kulka ‘survived’ does not take account of the fact that he felt part of a mythopoeic ‘Metropolis of Death’ in Birkenau that he could not and still does not think he can survive (47). Synecdoches of night, lights, barbed wire and columns, for example, are ‘engraved’ in Kulka’s memory (16), but he then ‘develop[s] them and builds them in [his] imagination, either in dreams’ or in moments of Langer’s ‘deep memory’ when he ‘plunge[s] back into that time’ (16). Kulka’s ‘trauma’ (33) appears akin to that of the survivor in Felman and Laub’s *Testimony* who famously miscounts the number of blown-up chimneys during the Birkenau uprising, were it not for the fact that Kulka is aware that these experiences are deliberately fictionalised.

‘Writing About Matters of Fact’: Testimony and Fiction

My discussion so far of the inseparability of fiction and testimony in passages from Levi, Delbo and Kulka’s work connects with wider disciplinary debates around historical truth and narrative. In *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture* (2016), Hayden White returns to his previous work on the discourse of history in books such as *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory* (2010). Saul Friedländer responds to White’s chapter with the familiar critique that it conflates literature and history: the literariness that White detects in Friedländer’s *The Years of Extermination* (2007) merely comprises, for this historian, ‘stylistic accessories’ (73, 75). In fact, White does not conflate the two disciplines but emphasises instead the ‘reality effect’ in historical discourse (63) that can never divest itself entirely from literariness: the attacks on White often display a slippage between the terms ‘literary’ and ‘fiction’. To argue that an event is narrativised is not necessarily to conceive it as fictional. White states that he wishes to ‘caution against a tendency to confuse all literary writing with fictional writing’ (63). Conversely, he wants to counter the category error, noted by Guyer, that assumes that all ‘poetic utterance’ consists of ‘fictionalisation’:

I want to caution against a tendency to confuse all literary writing with fictional writing or to identify poetic utterance with fictionalisation. Factual writing (writing about matters of fact) can be just as literary as fictional writing (writing about imaginary things) without being necessarily fictionalising. I would point out that the fiction–nonfiction distinction is based on the nature of the referent of a discourse, while the literary–nonliterary distinction has to do with the formal features of an utterance (63).

Given the careful categorisations that White outlines here, it would be tempting to read this quotation as the perfect retort to Friedländer’s response to White’s chapter in *Probing the*

Ethics of Holocaust Culture. Yet a further analysis of testimony complicates the apparent simplicity of distinguishing between factual and fictional writing, as I shall now demonstrate in relation to the passages from Levi and Delbo's work and Mendelsohn's *The Lost*.

According to White's categories above, the section from Levi's *The Truce* discussed earlier would be categorised as fiction since Levi writes about an imaginary event with a German shopkeeper. In contrast, Delbo's passage in *Auschwitz and After* would be interpreted as 'factual' writing: the event is based on a putative referent, something that Delbo is certain that happened. Yet both Levi and Delbo's passages are fictional. Delbo has to imagine what *might* have happened when she washed in the stream precisely because there is no access to the referent: she (and we) cannot simply retrieve White's 'matters of fact' (63) because the witness cannot remember the episode. Nevertheless, Delbo and Levi's fictionalities in these passages are rooted in the referents appertaining to the wider testimony of *The Truce* and *Useless Knowledge* that belie any easy distinctions into White's factual and fictional writing. In this context, it is ironic that in the passage about a woman dying in the Birkenau snow Delbo interrupts the narrative to worry that the events are 'turning into a story' (26), whereas she does not seem concerned about inserting the fictional episode about bathing that endeavours to recount a lost experience.

For the post-memory generation, the relationship between testimony and the fictional becomes even more intertwined as non-survivors search for the 'factual' in their own intense engagements with history. In Mendelsohn's *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2007), for example, the author's relatives are imagined walking towards the gas chamber in Belzec. Similarly to Delbo's 'The Stream', such passages resist easy categorisation. They are based on meticulous historical research, and yet they have to rely on the author's imagination to fill in the gaps beyond witness testimony. Based on necessarily imperfect knowledge – as with Delbo's passage but here from the perspective of a secondary witness – are Mendelsohn's passages examples of White's 'factual' writing, based on reality, or are they fictional in that they necessarily have to fill in the gaps of lost referents?

In *The Lost*, the author self-consciously signals these moments in his vicarious witnessing when he feels the need to fictionalise in order to understand even a small part of his relatives' experiences during the war in Bolechow. Mendelsohn's sensitivity towards fictionalisation is built into the structure of the book: in the afterword (the 'Author's Note') he feels compelled – like Levi in his preface to *If This is a Man* – to testify that '[t]he events recorded in his book are true'.²² However, he then notes that they may be 'truthful', if not faithful, in that '[s]ome but by no means most of the dialogue recorded in these pages was edited for the sake of coherence and in order to avoid repetitions; occasionally, this editing has necessitated the chronological rearrangement of some remarks'.²² Mendelsohn's language here echoes Delbo's distinction between the 'true' and 'truthful' in her epigraph to *Auschwitz and After*. As I argued in *Poetry as Testimony*, she explores the relationship between '*vrai*' and '*véridique*'; in other words, what is 'true' in the sense 'that she offers testimony that might approximate to, but not fully capture, the victim's experience, and "truthful"' in that her writing refers to specific historical events but does not 'depict' them (72). In one of the more pessimistic passages in *The Lost*, one interviewee, Ilana Adler, becomes so exasperated with the difficulty of being 'truthful'

to experience that she comments: ‘*What is memory? What is memory?* Memory is what you remember. No, you change the story, you “remember.” A story, not a fact. Where are the facts? There is the memory, there is the truth – you don’t know, *never*’ (490). Mendelsohn makes it unclear whether this passage is recounted by indirect speech or self-conscious rumination on behalf of the author himself: the final ‘you’ could refer equally to the survivor or the author.

Nevertheless, elsewhere Mendelsohn is more positive about the power of fiction to approximate the truth around moments when the professional historian must simply admit defeat. Fiction in the sense of imagined scenarios rather than untruths begins to account for the second *Aktion* in Bolechow to atone for those who are ‘lost to narrative’ (302). Fretting about fictionalising in the sense of mendacious and unseemly lying, Mendelsohn begins to imagine his relatives on the way to the Belzec gas chamber but then draws back (‘I will not try to imagine it’); and yet, in the midst of a sentence expanding to an anxious and breathless forty-four lines, he begins to speculate that they ‘hear, perhaps, the strange hiss begin’ (301). Mendelsohn begins to fictionalise what happened to his relatives (‘what would have happened to them would have been something like this’) because he is given permission, he believes, through ‘the statements of the few who survived, and from the testimony of those perpetrators who were brought to justice’. Yet thirteen lines earlier he worries that ‘evidence’ ‘can give us only the dimmest comprehension of what the event itself was like’ (297). In short, lies *per se* are fictions, but in the context of his imaginative engagement with Shmiel, Ester and Bronia’s experiences in Belzec, fiction – as in Delbo’s passage about the stream from *Auschwitz and After* – is not necessarily a lie.

As *The Lost* moves towards the end of its 652 pages of vicarious testimony, the narrator becomes more sanguine about the potentially distorting effects of the narrative. He recounts a Holocaust survivor speaking to her granddaughter who writes a thesis about her grandmother’s experiences:

On the one hand, there was the grandmother, the person to whom the *terrible things* had happened, and who could not sit three feet from a person like her granddaughter, or like me, an interested younger person, and tell her story. On the other hand, there was the granddaughter, who *because* of distance, the passage of years and the failure of memories, would inevitably have to fill in the gaps in order to make the raw data into a story. I realised that what Alena had told me that night could be read as a kind of fable about the eternal conflict between what happened and the *story* of what happened, a fable that hints at the inevitable triumph of the storyteller even as it warns of the dangers inherent in that triumph. To become a story, the details of what happened in real-time, in real history, to a real person, would have to be subordinated to the overall outline that already existed, for whatever idiosyncratic reasons of personality and preference and taste, in the mind of her granddaughter – the way that the small stones or tesserae used by ancient Greek and Roman artisans were set into grout or cement according to a design of the artist’s intention, a design without which (the artist would tell you) the tesserae themselves – which could be glittering semiprecious stones, onyx or quartz or jasper, or merely homely bits of local stone – were nothing, in the end, but attractive bits of rock (555).

I have quoted this passage at length because in the book it comes across as a revelation that is heightened by the hypotactic prose and ellipsis within an ellipsis. Yet for a Classicist steeped in the work of Euripides and Constantine Cavafy, it is curious that Mendelsohn's separation between reality and form features as an epiphany. Worries about 'fabling' are not new in Holocaust literature: Delbo's passage in *Auschwitz and After* in which she interrupts a description of a dying woman crawling in the Birkenau snow remains the most striking instance of this self-reflection. Nor are the anxieties unremarked surrounding the disjuncture recounted above between generations. The most famous text to ruminate on this dissonance is Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980): the artist considers the 'gaps' that secondary witnesses might unwittingly fill. Yet Mendelsohn's passage above is an important response to the form of the post-memory book itself and functions as 'onyx or quartz or jasper' within the overall testimonial narratives (555). As *The Lost* makes clear in other ways than its sheer bulk, it is a book that does not want to end. And when it finally does draw to a close, it does so, tellingly, with fiction. As further testimonies add to, cancel out or develop narratives that have unfolded in earlier parts of the book, *The Lost* includes a final 'Author's Note', acknowledgements, then 'P.S.' information (such as an author interview discussing reactions to the book) and, finally, the fictional 'A Different Ending for Aunt Ester', in which he imagines what would have happened if his great aunt had lived rather than disappearing 'from sight during the first few days of (almost certainly) September, 1942' ('P.S.', 16).

The Anxiety of Testimony

Judith Butler's chapter in *Probing the Limits of Holocaust Culture* appears to promise the first extended critical engagement with fictional testimony in books such as Mendelsohn's *The Lost* that forms a key text for critics throughout this volume. Akin to White's contribution, she challenges the assumption that the imaginary is innately erroneous. Critics who argue that history's use of narrative techniques implicates it in fiction presume 'that the fictional implies the false' (373). Yet Butler's chapter does not extend to a rumination on fiction itself *as* testimony or the fictional *within* her selected testimonies. Instead, she focuses on literature and literariness: her task is to discern how 'literary language' proved 'essential to the task of survival', particularly in relation to survivor guilt (374).²³ As I emphasised at the beginning of this article, literature is not coterminous with fiction; moreover, Butler takes it for granted that Levi's work forms an uncomplicatedly referential testimony, rather than containing fictionalities itself. She discusses *Moments of Reprieve* in this manner, yet Levi himself notes at the beginning of the book that the ensuing stories are only *based* on reality (11). As yet, there has been no critical discussion that engages with the recorded events in *Moments of Reprieve* – to deploy White's terms – as factual or fictional. Levi begins his book by arguing that '[o]f my two years of life outside the law [in the camp] I have not forgotten a single thing' (11), but then contradicts himself throughout the book when he repeatedly emphasises that 'every memory fades' (50). For Levi, this inevitable forgetting ushers in the literary potential of embellishment: 'It is possible that the distance in time has accentuated the tendency to round out the facts or heighten the colors [*sic*]: this tendency, or temptation, is an integral part of writing' (11).

‘[W]ithout it’, he continues, ‘one does not write stories but rather accounts’ (11). Such ‘rounding out’ is then woven into the *storie* themselves when the character Tischler tells stories about Lilith and adds: ‘I won’t guarantee that I myself didn’t add something, and perhaps all who tell them add something; and that’s how stories are born’ (42). In what ways, then, are the chapters of *Moments of Reprieve* ‘*storie*’ in which something fictional has been ‘added’, rather than straightforward ‘accounts’?

The first chapter of *Moments of Reprieve* recounts an episode in which a German Kapo, ‘Eddy’, discovers Levi writing a letter. Expecting a severe punishment, Levi is astonished when the Kapo refuses to denounce him. How is the reader of testimony meant to respond to this, as Levi admits in the book, seemingly incredible episode (32)? On the one hand, it may seem sacrilegious to suggest that the story may have been embellished. On the other hand, Levi’s conception of ‘rounded’ stories in *Moments of Reprieve* appertains to his chapter on Cesare in that memory ‘over long distances’ attenuates into ‘an erratic instrument’, especially if it is ‘spiced by the desire (again, [Cesare’s] and mine) that the story be a good one’ (144). The challenge to the reader of such testimony is to take on board Levi’s comments and read the incidents in *Moments of Reprieve* and testimony more widely, if there is no metatextual corroboration of the narrative, *as both factual and potentially fictional at the same time*. This readerly suspension of judgement differs from the more conventional approach to reading testimony, in which, as Leona Toker outlines, ‘one is challenged to treat the narratives [first] as factography but [then] analyze them through methods applicable to fiction’.²⁴ With such statements, it is easy to see why historians such as Hilberg have been so suspicious of testimony from a disciplinary perspective. Yet as Levi recognises, this testimonial ‘doubleness’ is central to reading ‘stories’ rather than mere historical accounts or reportage. In this sense, knowledge of the veracity of the metatext is not the determining factor in an assessment of testimony. Hence the reader may interpret the event with Eddy as both a factual one of extraordinary luck and a fictional counterpointing (and inversion) of Levi’s damning accounts of Kapos and wider prisoner complicities in *If This is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). It may be objected that all the reader has to do is to search harder for the corroborating metatextual evidence to support the episode’s veracity; or, at least, to assume (as Butler does) that the testimony discusses White’s ‘matters of fact’ (63) until proven otherwise. Yet the former approach does not take account of the frequent absence of such testimonial metatexts, or instances in which the reader, without such evidence, cannot recognise the status of such writing *during the event of reading*. This readerly state of anxiety and suspended judgement is central to the experience of reading testimony.

The concept of testimonial anxiety should lead to a beneficial performance of reading that opposes the conventional process of reading testimony as ‘factography’.²⁵ Guy Sajer’s *The Forgotten Soldier* (1965) forms an example of such a testimonial encounter: despite intensive wrangling between historians and the author, it is still unclear whether the book represents Sajer’s authentic experience on the Eastern Front, embellishes his Wehrmacht escapades or is entirely fictional. In this sense, the anxious reader indirectly responds to Felman’s statement that the more we read about testimony, the more it shows us that, ‘unwittingly, we do not even know what testimony is and that, in any case, it is not simply what we thought we knew it was’.²⁶ Reacting to this quandary, it is

not a question of locating a generic pigeonhole that will help ‘solve’ or assuage readerly anxiety. As Robert Eaglestone writes in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (2004), generic readings are only trying to understand the piece of writing better in relation to similar texts, rather than attempting to pigeonhole it in a particular genre.²⁷ Hence readerly anxiety is something that we experience frequently in other forms of literature: when we encounter memoirs or life writing, we are often not sure what we are reading or how to read it. Or, at least, we suspend judgement during the process of reading. This testimonial anxiety ensues partly from generic confusions and anxieties surrounding definitions of the fiction and literature more widely that I have discussed throughout this article. Butler, Friedländer and White’s interventions in *Probing the Limits of Holocaust Culture* indicate the frequent overlaps and blurring between the uses of the terms ‘fictional’, ‘creative’ and ‘literary’. Butler switches between the terms ‘literary’ and ‘fictional’ to describe the same creative phenomena. Friedländer responds to White’s argument about his creative strategies by countering that the latter’s overinvestment in the sparse literariness of *The Extermination of the Jews* misreads mere ‘stylistic accessories’ (75). White and the editors of *Probing the Limits of Holocaust Culture* argue that some historians’ resistance to the use of the ‘literary’ to describe the stylistics of their historical narratives ensues from an underlying suspicion that literariness is coterminous with the fictional.

These anxieties surrounding the reading of testimony and explorations of the relationship between fiction and the referential have become even more pressing in a supposedly ‘post-truth’ era. There are not merely alternative ‘truths’: a confusion of postmodernism and post-structuralism has not resulted in a ‘flattening out’ of all experience, in which one person’s lie is another’s alternative blagging. Yet critics should not shirk from the difficulties and insights that ensue when truth is articulated within fiction. Robert Eaglestone argued in 2017 that Trump’s inauguration required a shift in critical foci for memory studies. In the past, Eaglestone would, he states, be more critical of a historical study of the Holocaust that roots itself in pure facts, rather than the more metaphysical question of why such atrocious events occurred, but the 2017 presidential inauguration suggested that it would be wise to concentrate on the importance of such historical narratives.²⁸ An emphasis on empirical truths can be at the expense, Eaglestone outlines, of considerations of the metaphysical: he explains the latter through the questions of what water feels like, or why so many of us respond to the colour of deep orange. Scientific descriptions of molecules and so such would not, he rightly attests, satisfactorily answer such questions. As an impassioned response to the issue of historical veracities in the ‘post-truth’ era, Eaglestone’s article cannot be faulted. Given my analysis of the testimonies in this article, I would add that, in the supposedly ‘fake news’ era, we need more fiction to tell the truth.

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Notes

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2. Deborah Jerome, 'Resurrecting Horror: The Man behind *Shoah*' (interview with Claude Lanzmann), *The Record*, 25 October 1985, quoted in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London/New York, 1991), p. 206.
3. Pamuk, *Istanbul*, p. 265.
4. Sara Guyer, 'Before *The Human Race*: Robert Antelme's Anthropomorphic Poetry', *Critical Survey*, 20: 2 (2008), 31–42, 32.
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6. Vice, *Textual Deceptions*, p. 9.
7. Primo Levi, *If This is a Man/The Truce*, trans. S. Woolf (London, 1987), p. 16.
8. Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: 2002), p. 301 (my italics).
9. Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago, 1996), p. 140.
10. Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman (London, 1987), p. 92.
11. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 50.
12. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, p. 221.
13. Pamuk, *Istanbul*, p. 265.
14. Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 26. I discuss the issues concerning Delbo's unconventional approach to testimony – including her deployment of poetics – in *Poetry as Testimony* (New York/London, 2014). As I note, her modernist poetics 'distinguish her work from testimony analysed in other chapters, such as Tadeusz Borowski's later texts, Primo Levi's work and the amateur verse in the Salamander Oasis Trust and *Voices* archives' (p. 70).
15. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo/La tregua* (Torino, 1989 [1958]), p. 48.
16. OED, 2nd ed.
17. Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. by Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, 1998), p. xv.
18. Rowland, *Poetry as Testimony*, pp. 75–8.
19. <https://lucienlelongperfumes.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/orgueil-by-lucien-lelong-c1947.html> (accessed 2 April 2024)
20. Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner and Todd Presner (eds.), *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture* (London/Cambridge, MA, 2016), p. 51.
21. Otto Dov Kulka, *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death* (London, 2013), p. 83.
22. Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (London, 2013 [2007]), p. 653.

23. Dangers surrounding this positivistic approach are illustrated a page later when Butler records incorrectly how Levi committed suicide on 'his' spiral staircase, the 'stairs of his apartment', rather than in the communal stairwell outside the flat in Turin (p. 375).
24. Leona Toker, *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intercontextual Reading* (Bloomington, 2019), p. 14.
25. Toker, *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps*, p. 14.
26. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 7.
27. Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford, 2004), p. 38.
28. Robert Eaglestone, 'Why? Explaining the Holocaust, By Peter Hayes', *Times Higher Education*, 23 February 2017 (www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-why-explaining-the-holocaust-peter-hayes-w-w-norton) (accessed 2 April 2024).