

Grounds for Memory as Cultural Contentization - Testimonial Literature

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Abstract

This study would like to present memory as a new cultural content through the definition of testimonial literature. In particular, by composing the already established catalogue of testimonial literature, this discussion presents the new concept that memory can serve as new content. This study also pursues an in-depth study on “testimony in literature” that has not been covered in Korean literary circles until now. Actually, “testimonial literature”, unfamiliar to Korean academic circles, is not a subject that is briskly addressed by French social sciences as well as by scholars in other countries. A theme of “testimony and literature” just recently appeared in some global websites of social sciences like “H-net”. Accordingly, we have a great ambition to lead a new trend of social sciences in the world through the project.

Keywords: *memory, testimonial literature, historical context, poems*

1. Introduction: Memory as Cultural Content based on Historical Context

History has continuously provided contents to literature since a beginning that can't even be fathomed. The transformation of history as literary content has been made possible through testimonials based on memory. The narration of legends, which are the collection of memories of ancient peoples, has become the root of Eastern and Western literature. From this root sprouted the great cultural developments of literature and culture today. That is, history, which is overall what is most often syntactically narrated, is largely based on memory. 20th century history in particular has been interspersed with incidents that need to be remembered. The first and second world wars and the times before and after both wars dominated the human memory with genocide and massive destruction, and inevitably led to desires of direct and/or indirect testimonials. This desire for testimonials continues even today and has expressed itself in the form of historical records as well as in the form of literature. There are even literatures based on this testimonial desires that have come to establish itself as a proposition within the field. For example, France's 'participatory poems' started as literature that opposes German Nazism and Fascism before and during World War II. Similarly, Korea's 'oppositional poems' are examples of testimonial literature becoming a valid proposition within the field. That is, poets such as Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, Yuksa Yi, Yongun Han, and Dongju Yun and their historical context of content are unanimously accepted as poetry trends within literature. These poets actively and dutifully responded to the injustices of their social structures and represented the voices of justice of the time. Nevertheless, these testimonials remain as indirect testimonials from those observers of the specific time period. These indirect testimonial pieces that produced an individually respected

literary piece have been the topic of numerous researches. However, the direct testimonials of individuals who actually underwent the experiences of the times have not been as actively or carefully studied in comparison to the literary works. This may be because the latter's works are far less in number than the former's works. Still, the main reason is because the latter group of testimonials did not adopt a literary approach to recording their testimonials.

Let's discuss literature that has been produced directly from the perspective of those that directly experienced a certain historical incident in order to define the literature created from testimonials of direct observers as an independent category. So, how must one categorize the testimonials of Primo Levi and Robert Antelme who testify Shoah (Jewish holocaust), or those of Varlam Chalamov and Anna Akhmatova who testify Soviet Stalin's concentration camps and social suppression, or those of Jean Hatzfeld who testify Rwanda's genocide? Within our own frontier, how must one categorize those literary pieces that have been created to testify the true images of the Korean War? Or how must one interpret the poems of poets who were imprisoned for political purposes? Can these all simply be grouped as 'historical literature,' or 'war literature,' or even 'participatory poems'?

These questions are relevant to the fates of all members of the 20th century modern history. Yet, there are too many that are outside the communal circle of 'the tumultuous modern history of the 20th century.' For this reason, there is a need to convert the memory of one that should not be forgotten and forever imprint it into a form that can be shared by all. This means that there is a need to transform a memory based on 'context' into 'content.' This then is testimonial literature. Therefore, this research attempts to classify all creative literature (novels, poems, essays, journals) that is based on an individual experiencing a specific historical incident as testimonial literature. Hence, testimonial literature believes that a specific historical incident is shared by the act of perceiving a particular memory based on 'context' as 'content.' This is because testimonials are completely dependent on memory alone. This study would like to present memory as a new cultural content through the definition of testimonial literature. In particular, by composing the already established catalogue of testimonial literature, this discussion aims to contemplate the values that memory may have as a cultural content.

2. Discussion: Concepts and Contemplation on Testimonial Literature

This study will only refer to those pieces that contain a personal discussion resulting from memory from a direct experience with a certain historical incident. That is those literatures that testify to the experiences from a concentration camp, war, genocide, and imprisonment. Specifically, examples of the literature examined for this study would be Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine*, which recounted his time in concentration camp in 1944, as well as Marguerite Duras' *La Douleur*, which records her experience of enduring abysmal pain as she tried to save her husband from the concentration camp, or Primo Levi's testimonial journals *Si C'est Un Homme*, and finally the poetry anthology, *La Trêve*. All these pieces are essential in identifying the characteristics and discussion of testimonial literature. Although Primo Levi is not a French author, he is somewhat of a symbol of those that testify or are authors of testimonial pieces recounting Shoah, and is therefore an individual that must be studied when discussing the topic of testimonial literature. Furthermore, *Requiem*, *Poème Sans Héros*, et *Autres Poems* by Akhmatova and *Récits de la Kolyma* by Chalamov, where both pieces opposed Soviet Stalin suppression, as well as *Dans le nu de la vie* and *Une saison de machettes* both works by the reporter Jean Hatzfeld who testified for the Rwanda genocide are also representative works of testimonial literature. Moreover, research into the testimonial pieces from the Korea War should also receive much attention. In particular, there is a need to

justify the view of Korean testimonial literature through works by poets that testify to the incidents and perspectives of the time. As such, it can be said that much of the last century was a long journey where an individual's memory was fused with that of the collective history and culture. This therefore entails that testimonial literature is what validates memory as content. Hence, it is necessary to establish a definition of testimonial literature and specify the development of the discussion. Therefore, the primary goal will be to define the identity of 'testimonial literature,' which is the resultant of the action of making memory into a cultural content. This initial step will allow 'testimonials' to be discussed from the perspective of literary discussions. Also, it will become the basis upon which memory can be reproduced as cultural content.

2.1. Establishment of the Concepts of Testimonial Literature

World War I, World War II, Holocaust, Soviet Union's concentration camps, Japanese massacre of the Chinese, Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs and other political and social catastrophic historical incidents dominate the memory of the 20th century human history. These memories have been recounted in both the creative and the falsified fields of literature. Furthermore, just as memory served as the foundation of Lanzmann's documentary, *Shoah*, it has become a crucial mainstream element within the field since the birth of visual media. There were no precedence to the complete destruction (of particular groups of peoples) and dramatic human action as seen in the 20th century modern history and for this reason the shock that humanity responded to this violent history was indescribable. The recounting of the incidents has prevailed over long periods of time and those testimonials still continue today. From literary pieces that testify to the 'current' circumstances of these historical incidents, to those literary pieces that testify to the 'current' of what remains in the memory of the narrator have been diligently presented as testimonial literature. Now then, the critical interpretation of the past testimonial literature productions remain as the responsibility of the 'current' days. That is, the unification of 'testimonial' and 'literature' is a topic that the past 20th century has thrown upon us and is the content that the 21st century must now learn to insert into its literature. That is, memory should be gathered and organized as content and the testimonials themselves should be reproduced within the realms of culture.

The first testimonial literature, which is the meeting of the periodical reality with literature, first occurred in France following World War I and the emergence of various war novels. Soon after the popularity of the war novels were the 'voices' that opposed suppression. These voices were related not only to France but to Korea and eventually to the whole world. The voices of poets and other authors testified to the periodical reality of the inter-war period as well as World War II and came to represent the sentiments of the peoples of the time. The periodical reality in France was Fascism (a general meaning of Fascism) and the participatory poems that emerged as voices against this social structure. On the other hand, the periodical reality in Korea was the Japanese invasion and the voices against this suppression through the oppositional poems. Both forms of poetry are inseparable to the historical (periodical) circumstances and therefore are globally classified as testimonial literature. The first testimonial literary poems that denounced the periodical reality of French society during the 1930s were mainly produced by Eluard and Aragon. Both poets act as the testifiers to the historical period of the time after World War II until both propose a new form of participatory poem that encourages Communism. Of course these two poets were not the only individuals who testified to the social circumstances of the time. Rene Char and Robert Desnos and numerous other poets also testified to the social orders and the historical realities of the period. This type of poems however were attributed a more specific and direct proposition as participatory poems before they were classified as testimonial literature. Also, participatory

poems that testify to the realities of the time period are not testimonial literature that is comprised of the witness-author that existed as the subject of ordeal. And it is here that one can distinguish the global and regional interpretation of the definition of testimonial literature. The definition put forth by this study is the regional definition of testimonial literature where the recounting is produced by the witness-author where the witness-author directly experiences the event. The emergence of this witness-author was after World War II, that is, after the ordeal has ended. Hence, Robert Antelme who was a French poet and resistance member and his recounting of his time in the concentration camp through *L'espèce humaine*, which was published in 1947 therefore can be said to be the first witness-author piece. Furthermore, the most prominent Western witness-author Primo Levi also produced his *Si C'est Un Homme* that recounts his experience in Auschwitz concentration camp in 1947. As such pieces that are written by those that directly experience a particular historical incident are only produced mid-20th century. Still, this period was a time where the productions were limited to those people such as Antelme and Levi who had already been producing poems and other writings. And in actuality, the general witnesses started to reproduce their experiences into written form only after a long period of silence. Furthermore, for the last few decades there have been a continuation of 'events that are worthy of testifying' and just like the reporter Jean Hatzfeld, there have been various testimonials that are both real and fictional from reporters, authors, and the general public. As a result, the emergence of the concept of testimonial literature in France, as well as the treatment of testimonial literature as a research topic has been fairly recent. In particular, it was only through the efforts of a very few such as Claude Mouchard and Catherine Coquio, that testimonial literature has come to establish itself as a valid and academic research topic in France. The study of testimonial literature does not treat historical literature from a perspective of historical criticism. Rather, it treats it from a perspective of 'testimonial discussion.' So, the field of testimonial literature studies the new topics that today's literary researchers should examine.

As such, because of modernism's dramatic historical upheavals, the modern literatures of various countries are closely linked to respective histories. In particular, Korean modern literature can be a representative case. Specifically, the resistance poetry during the Japanese occupation, war novels that testify to the events of the Korean War, and the participatory poetry that emerged in retaliation to the military dictatorship during the 60's and 70's are a few such examples. Although such literature is widely recognized, they have not received due respect since they were classified within the realms of 'testimony' and 'memory.' More importantly, the overall concept of testimonial literature has failed to be established. Researchers on war have looked to testimonial references simply as historical materials and cultural researchers simply discuss war-related references simply as war fiction or war poetry.

2.2. Contemplation of Testimonial Literature, Historical Context

'Testimonial' and 'Memory,' which are both ideas that represent the interconnectivity of history and literature, only recently appeared within the field of liberal arts. As a result, there aren't many past research works on the topic of 'testimonial literature.' Furthermore, most of the past studies on testimonial pieces tend to be true to the historical aspect of the pieces. This means that most of the foreign references are related to the socio- and/or politico-philosophical perspectives of the testimonial records. In particular, the research precedents on Korean culture and history are mainly concentrated on the historical perspective or the nationalistic perspective and therefore are often unable to overcome the conceptual conflict within the work of study. Thus, the general tendency of studying these testimonial pieces has been to understand the specific intentions of the writings as a result of focusing on the historical context of these writings. For example, in the *Responsorial Between the Korean*

War and the Korean Poem, Jaehong Kim does not analyze the perspective of the 'testimonials' provided by those that participated in the war. Instead, Kim intercepts the literary articles produced by the participants of the war with Korea's political theories and in doing so tries to define the identity of Korean poems that have been regenerated through the historical hardship. On the other hand, through the *Korean War and the Correspondent Author*, Youngduk Shin does weakly establish the position of the witness-author. Still, Shin's analysis continues to be bound by the discussion of theoretical conflict and fails to move beyond this contemplation. The 'group of correspondent authors' that are emphasized in Shin's discussion was a group with a specific goal of encouraging the fighting spirit during the wartime. As a result, it can be somewhat expected and natural for Shin's analysis to be insular in regards to examining this 'group.' Regardless, Shin's book still simply organizes the recountings that have specific intentions from the writer. In other words, although correspondent authors depict a specific intention through their writing, there are still a few pieces that testify to the harsh realities of the war and a direct experience of specific incidents and for this reason, there is a need to study and contemplate on the perspective of the 'testimonial.' For this reason, it is imperative to consider testimonial literature from a new frame of view that recognizes memory as cultural content.

2.3. Methods of Contentization of Memory and Testimonial

(1) Based on testimonial method classification

There are various methods in collecting memory and producing testimonial literature that is cultural content. Among these methods, there are two representative methods. The first is based on the literary methodology selected by the testimonial author. The second method is based on positional methodology selected by the testimonial author. The literary methodology that a testimonial piece can take can be divided into prose and poetry. There are also instances where some authors move between these two types, such as poet Antelme. However, the majority of testimonial authors selects a single complete plot such as Primo Levi's proses or chooses a format much like Ahkmatova's poetry. As such the literary style that a testimonial is delivered is often simple, but the position of the testimonials can be varied. Firstly, the narrators of the testimonials can take different positions on a specific testimonial. The duality between denial and acceptance, the duality between false memory and truthful memory, as well as exaggerated narrations with falsified descriptions are all examples of the varied positions of testimonials. These differences can come from the different circumstances the testimonial narrator was subjected to during the event. That is, there has to be a dichotomy between those such as Antelme and Levi who personally experienced suppression from those such as Marguerite Duras and war authors who testify as observers of the events. Unlike those that actually were subjected to suppression and forced upon the event, the latter group of people testifies as those that were invited to the event. As a result, the war authors who represented the Korean government's ideologies during that period cannot fully comprehend and express the position of those that were undergoing the suppression. "Only those that witnessed it can know / who was it that threw and caught the stone into the blazing 62nd Red Prison that is one two three four layers of chain fences from the 61st Prison at 5am March 16 Year 4284? (from "Dear Captive Friends Returning Home"). This line of poetry by Suyoung Kim is an example of the observer's voice and position that lack the perspective of the one that actually has first-hand experience of the event. The testimonials of the 'invited subject' always rely on the visual descriptions of the field experience. As such, based on the standpoint of the testimonial author, the position and format of testimonial can vary.

Therefore, the testimonial format and position has to be studied in relation to the testimonial author's status.

(2) Based on the status of the testimonial author

Based on the social conditions, the figures of Western testimonial literature and Korean testimonial literature has to be different. This difference can come from the difference in the experiences of the testimonial authors, or as discussed earlier, the difference can root from the varied intentions of the authors. So, in the comparative analysis between French testimonial literature and Korean testimonial literature, it is important to consider the difference in the statuses of the respective testimonial authors. There are largely two types of statuses that can be realized within testimonial literature. The first is the status of the suppressed like Antelme and Levi. The second is the status of the free person, who like Chihwan Yu, experienced war and massacre "with the infantry" but was not subject to the events. The figure of the testimonial piece varies based on the status of the testimonial author. Chihwan Yu was a free person as a war author and for this reason describes a massacre scene during war only through the voice of an observer. The eyes of the free person can vividly describe the event visually. "This place with groans of pain, oppression, resentment and this place that is now fuming with gun shots is the rice fields that are at the verge of full-fledged confrontation (from War Front). On the other hand, the eyes of the suppressed such as those of Robert Antelme, are subjected to such critical conditions that it can no longer simply function as a visual portal. "Especially, you can't look into the eyes of the Nazis. The humanity and the judgment that the eyes possess give the urge to kill. The eyes must be calm and devoid of life. Everyone has eyes that are their greatest vulnerability." ("Surtout il ne faut pas rencontrer le regard du SS. L'humanité de l'oeil, la faculté de juger, c'est ça qui donne envie de tuer. Il faut être lisse, terne, déjà inerte. Chacun porte ses yeux comme un danger.") The eyes of the suppressed don't have the power to vividly describe the circumstances. It can only serve as the emotional carrier of conveying the emotional and physical conditions of the subject. As such, the difference in the status of the testimonial authors greatly alters the figure of the testimonials. Therefore, it is imperative to pursue diversity in the discussion of comparing the two different literatures in examining the difference in the statuses of the testimonial authors.

(3) Based on the use of senses and emotions

The senses of the suppressed that are subjected to extreme conditions are close to the hallucinating. "For us objects are no longer inorganic. Everything speaks, and we listen to all they have to say. Everything has a certain power." ("Les choses, pour nous, ne sont plus inertes. Tout parle, et l'on entend tout, tout a un pouvoir"). The senses of the Robert Antelme, who was subjected to suppressive conditions, almost have a sense of superhuman powers. And Antelme keeps the memories of these senses and emotions. It then flowers when it is reborn as testimonial literature. What allow for the completion of the testimonial literature are the senses that the author remembers from the extreme conditions of fear, the resultant of the recollection of the fear allows for words to disappear and the emotions to remain. So the discussion of testimonial literature maximizes the utilization of senses and emotions.

Pieces that recollect on war, massacre, oppression and the experience of these extreme and undesired events aim to restructure and display those unwanted memories. In order to reconfigure this "field of unwanted memories," the testimonial author has to muster pieces of memories that remain and patch them together. Ultimately, the testimonial author has to recreate these memories into words to convey the story. The process of "talking and

remembering” for the testimonial authors is often a very painful and straining activity. And it is very possible for the testimonial authors to lose their grasp and control on their mental and physical stability. Often, the completed testimonial pieces that have been resurfaced and pieced together convey strong senses of anger and disappointment. These trails of emotions are especially common from testimonial authors who experienced Shoah or the Rwanda massacre. However, the ultimate goal of these testimonials, as Primo Levi has articulated, is to “involve the other.” That is, the emotions expressed by the testimonial author affect the emotions of the readers. The testimonial pieces utilize senses and emotions in order to convey the author’s senses and emotions. As an example, Eliana Argandoña, a representative French participatory poet, utilizes ‘sonority’ in order to deliver his testimonial poetry and denounce the politics and society of the time. He used rhythm, assonants, alliterations through repetition and correspondence in order to maximize the senses of hearing and muster the emotional responses from the readers. Of course, hearing isn’t the only sense that can be fully utilized within testimonial literature. Another example is Pablo Neruda, a Chilean poet who testified to the historical events during Spain’s national war. His poems in “Spain in the Heart,” describe the brutality of the Francoists and in order to intensify the responses against these acts, he uses the image of the “red blood.” The reason that testimonial pieces maximize the use of senses and emotions is because the experiences of most of the testimonial authors themselves rely on the most instinctual and basic senses. These basic instincts embedded within the testimonial author’s memories materialize upon meeting with the readers’ emotions. The senses that the testimonial pieces utilize is the direct link between the readers’ emotional responses. The contents based on memory and testimonials are therefore based on the creation of psychological interaction and mediation that is rooted on the memories of physical senses.

As a result, this discussion will move beyond the study of the ‘-ism’ that biases the analysis of the testimonial writings. Instead, it will examine the witness-author’s writings from the perspective of the ‘testimonial discussion.’ Hence, this study will emphasize the restructuring of the ‘memory’ as a cultural content. Within this direction, it is expected that this research will provide a new interpretation of the relationship between history and literature from the perspective of the testimonial. Also through the comparison between various international testimonial pieces and Korean testimonial pieces, this study is expected to provide the characteristics of testimonial literatures. In this process, there is a need to study the goal of a testimonial, the methodology of a testimonial, as well as the discussion of a testimonial. This means, answering questions such as, what does the French poet who experienced the Jewish concentration camp intend to testify to?; or what do the poets who acted as the correspondent authors of the Korean War or a specific individual such as Suyoung Kim who survived the Geojedo prison camp intend to express through their testimonials? Through seeking the answers to questions such as those listed above, this discussion will be able to provide a direction towards the methodology in which to change ‘memory’ into ‘contents’ in the future.

3. Conclusion

As identified earlier, the testimonial writings by authors such as Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, Varlam Chalamov, Anna Akhmatova, and Jean Hatzfeld who all underwent the ordeals thrown upon them by history, take up a significant portion of the 20th century literary heritage. In particular, the Shoah related writings as well as the writings that oppose Stalin’s Soviet government take up most of the mid-20th century testimonial literature. This is a result of the unimaginable genocide and destruction brought out by socially structured political

theories and the misuse of technology that has never seen precedence and the countless victims that were at the mercy of such violence. This great tragedy was not only limited to a specific group of people. 'Memorable historical incidents' occurred simultaneously throughout the world and is still going on, and the recountings of such events continue to be produced. For example, the Vietnamese War and the Iraq War as well as the Rwanda genocide are the most recent historical tragedies whose testimonial products still continue. Korea also has her own collection of testimonial literature as a result of undergoing social travesties such as the Korea War and the Gwangju Revolution that are all referred to as 'massacre and destruction.' Also, the historical events that occurred in 20th century Korea can be argued to be the most tragedies that one civilization can undergo in one century. As a result, history has been a prevailing topic within modern Korean literature. The first application was of course the oppositional poems that publicized the atrocities of the Japanese invasion. This phenomenon is similar in context to French participatory poems that married modern poems with history. Strictly speaking, the participatory poems and oppositional poems are in essence an angry and emotional outcry towards destruction and suppression imposed upon humanity. As such, testimonial writings pieces have been studied over time and have been classified as 'participatory poems' or 'oppositional poems.' Yet, the discussion of these testimonial articles written by those witness-authors have never been completely isolated into a new classification and has always revolved within other literary forms. Hence this research aims to totally isolate those pieces that have been produced by authors that have personally experienced extreme violence such as through concentration camps or genocide, and provide a regional definition to testimonial literature. Furthermore, the study intends to classify these literary pieces within the category of '21st century cultural contents that remembers the past.' First of all, the process of making 'content' out of a group's memory is necessary. But with the expansion of the perception of 'content-ifying of memory,' it is possible to establish a background where an individuals' memory can be converted into 'content.' Therefore, to categorize a group's memory into content will be a very meaningful process that will aid the development of the human history.

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