

Narrating the Self in a Contemporary World: Bridging Autobiography and Testimony

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Abstract: The paper investigates new textual forms of autobiographical writing in the contemporary world, and in particular the striking growth of traumatic memories from recent and less recent conflicts. The category of *testimony* is suggested in order to better describe what appears to be a pervasive phenomenon; from a semiotic point of view one of the main features of testimony literature is its effect of *hybridisation* across the boundaries of different textual genres.

The paper investigates a transversal feature of contemporary testimony, i. e. the use of a multimodal language composed of both linguistic and visual material, in particular photographs, and analyses contrastively the meaning effects of such use in traditional autobiographical texts and in new hybrid forms of testimony.

My paper aims to investigate the emergence of new textual forms of “writing the self” in the contemporary world. Today we are witnessing an impressive growth of texts which deal with personal memories, most often traumatic memories from a recent and less recent past, starting with the Holocaust and extending to the endless series of conflicts that have marked our recent past and our difficult present. The massive presence of such traumatic memories has deeply affected the genre of autobiographic writing, producing a pervasive effect of *hybridisation* across different textual genres, from fictional novels to historical essays, oral interviews and life stories. ①

Folkenflik (1993) uses the expression “witness literature” to define this diverse and heterogeneous textual world; I shall suggest the use of the category of “testimony”, which seems more appropriate to capture the strong will to testify about tragic and dramatic events that characterize these texts. Indeed, the two terms, witness and testimony, both allude to what appear to be the two main

① For an analysis of an archive of life stories see Violi 2007.

features of this textual production: the subjective, personal engagement in testifying something regarding “reality”, and its profound links to both individual and collective memories. It is obviously not by chance that these features emerge in situations that are deeply affected by traumatic experiences, from the Holocaust to the war and ethnic cleansing of the Balkans, from apartheid in South Africa to genocide in Ruanda, and constitute, in some ways, an answer to these traumas, an attempt to come to terms with, and elaborate, them.

Testimony is not a genre, or perhaps not yet a genre, but rather a heterogeneous hybrid category, of which I shall not try to give a definition, since it appears to be an umbrella term covering different kinds of texts that belong to different traditional genres. Indeed, from the point of view of a traditional definition of literary genres, testimony is a transversal genre, which includes novels, autobiographies, pseudo-autobiographies, collections of testimonies and life stories, historical essays in fictional format, fiction in historical format, and so on. The collapse of traditional *genre* categorisations has given rise, recently, to a number of attempts to map in alternative ways this highly variegated terrain, and different terms have been suggested, from Hubier’s “autofiction”, to Derrida’s “otobiographie”, to Porter Abbott’s “autography”, to Radstone’s distinction between “confession” and “remembrance”.

What makes it possible to think of testimony in terms of a category—if not a formally fully defined literary *genre*—are some communalities at the level of their isotopic semantic organization. All these texts address some crucial, interrelated issues that lie at the very core of the controversial intertwining of memory, history, identity, and, at the very end of the list, ethics and truth.

In this respect, testimony exhibits both commonalities with, and differences with regard to, the “classical” *genre* of autobiography. Autobiography is generally taken as being an individual form of narration, mainly concerned with the individual memory of the life of some “important” person, who considers his or her life story significant enough to be narrated, and interesting enough to be read. If in the 18th and 19th centuries in western society it is mainly writers who consider their life worthwhile enough to be narrated, nowadays this position seems to be occupied by actresses, politicians, and, why not too, architects. In any case, the classical form of autobiography foresees one self—one *actor* in semiotic terms—who recounts his or her life, focusing on personal lived experience.

In the case of testimony we find individual narratives as well, but they are always inscribed within a larger background of collective memories, and, what is even more relevant, these collective memories are almost always highly traumatic memories. If the narrator is still a single narrating voice, the narrated events often refer to a whole community, as in the case of the many Holocaust memories. Semiotically, the community of reference can be taken as a collective Actant.

I shall now investigate what appears to be an interesting and transversal feature of contemporary testimony: the use of a multimodal language, composed of both text and visual material, in particular photographs. Quite often, in testimony texts, different semiotic systems interplay with one another, producing what could be defined as a hybridization process at the expressive level as well, which parallels the one we already mentioned at the level of textual *genres*. This is particularly interesting, because also in more traditional autobiographies photographs are often used. Their function, in this case, is mainly to show the reader the actual people described in the text; it will thus be very revealing to see how the same semiotic device can produce very different sense-effects in these two cases. The comparison between the use made of photographs in classical autobiography and in contemporary testimony will help us to understand better some of the peculiar features of contemporary narratives of the self.

The first text I will consider is Martin Amis' autobiography, *Experience*, published in Great Britain in 2000, which can be considered a perfect instance of a "classical" autobiography.

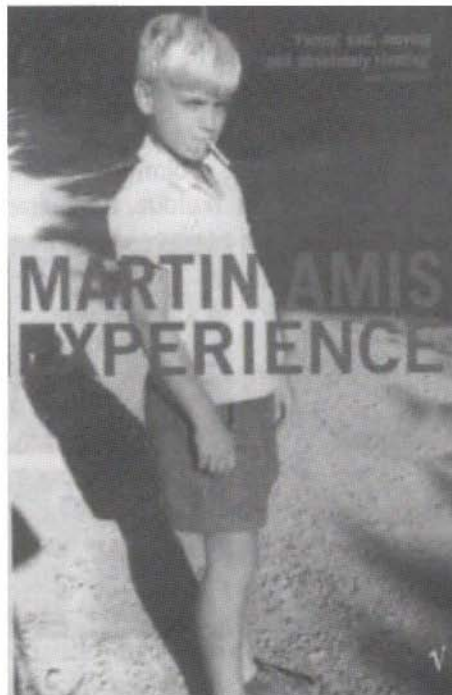


Figure 1 The cover

Amis's book uses a large photographic apparatus, starting with its cover, which represents the author as a child (Figure 1). In the book, the photographs have a specific collocation in the middle of the volume, in an own section separated from the text itself and printed on glossy paper, different from the matt paper of the text; in this way even the Expression substance of the photographs is different from that of printed words.



Figure 2



Figure 3

The photographs are all snapshots of the childhood and adult life of the author, very well defined and clearly readable, with a high level of pictorial definition. They have one main function in relation to the verbal text, which is to allow the reader to identify the characters mentioned in the text, endowing them, so to speak, with a visual content. In this way, the possibility for the reader to “imagine” the features and physical looks of all the people mentioned in the book is prevented by the “actual” exhibition of their authentic appearance, guaranteed by what is commonly considered the most realistic of all forms of representations: photography. Photographs, being signs that mainly function as indices in Peirce’s sense, are endowed with a strong reality effect: they are traces of the presence of the people they represent (Barthes 1980). In the context of a text such as *Experience*, they function as powerful ways of increasing the veridicity and authenticity of the autobiographic discourse, showing the characters as they “really” are, and how they look. In this way images do not only visualize the textual content of the book, but also function as a guide for the reader, as clues and hints to constructing a hierarchy of relevance regarding who were, and are, among the many people the reader encounters in the text, the most important persons in Amis’ life story.

What is at work here is a double *anchorage*, to use Barthes (1982) words, between images and verbal text. On the one hand, the verbal text gives the frame of reference that situates the photographs, on the other hand, photographs function as pointers, so to say, that signal the relevance status of the different characters. Crucial in this semiotic system are the subtitles below each photograph; they constitute a subtext parallel to the other two systems, the verbal and the visual: a third semiotic system that mediates between these, operating as an *interpretant* or “translator” between text and image. In relation to photographs, subtitles represent an anchorage to the verbal text in that they anchor images to specific elements of biographic and “referential” *répérage* such as proper names, dates and places where the photographs were taken, and sometimes even the name of the person who took the photograph—its empirical author, to use Eco’s term (Eco 1984). In relation to the verbal text, the subtitles, together with the pictures they refer to, index some entities (both people and places) as *topical* for the text, as endowed with a particular relevance precisely because they are made visible.

To summarize: in Amis’ text the three semiotic systems of verbal text, photographs and subtitles, are strictly interconnected; a strong co-referential link ties them together through a multilayered system of mutual citation. The result is a very strong “authenticity effect”, which reinforces the truthfulness of the autobiographic narration: the reality of the life story is there, and I can even see the real protagonists in the photographs.

Quite different is the case of the second text I shall now discuss, written by Daniel Mendelsohn: *The Lost: A search for Six of Six Million*, published in the United States in 2006. Also *The Lost* is an autobiographic text, and the authenticity of the facts narrated is often openly guaranteed, for example in the final afterword where it is explicitly written that “all the events narrated in this book are authentic”. The cover of the book reinforces this kind of “truth effect” with the use of photographs of the relatives of Daniel who died in the Holocaust.

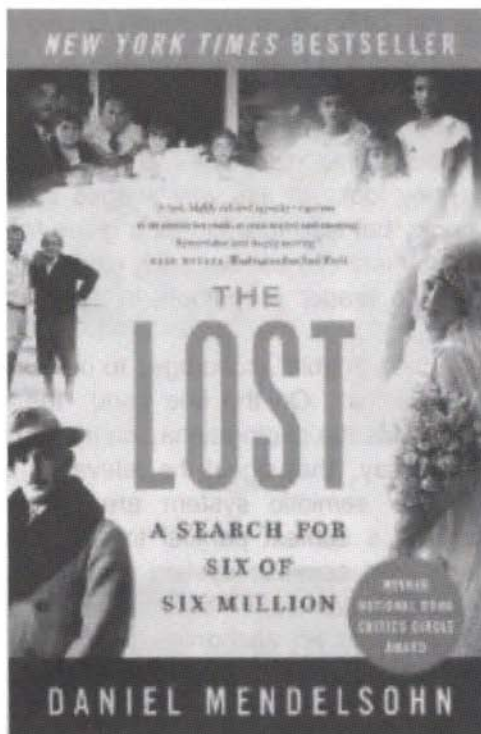


Figure 4

However, this is not an autobiography in any classical sense, and does not tell the life story of a famous person, as was the case with Amis' autobiography. *The Lost* can be defined as a peculiar type of testimony text: it tells the story of a search, in time and space, for the family of Shmiel, the brother of the grandfather of Daniel, the narrator and main character. Shmiel was killed, together with his wife and four beautiful daughters, by the Nazis in the village of Bolechow, Poland, while his brother, who had safely emigrated to the States, had not managed, or tried hard enough, to help them. Fifty years after their

tragic death Daniel, Shmiel's grand-nephew, obsessed by the family story, starts a long journey through several different continents to search for traces of his lost relatives' lives and deaths. During his travels throughout the world, Daniel is accompanied by his brother Matt, a photographer who is the author of the photographs in the novel.

Given these premises, one might expect that in this text photographs would play a referential role similar to that which we saw in Amis, producing a realistic anchorage to the story. However, this is not the case. All the photographs are black and white, of a small scale within the page, all are blurred and of low definition, often miniature in format and poorly delineated, and sometimes quite difficult to see. Figures 5 and 6 show two examples:



Figure 5

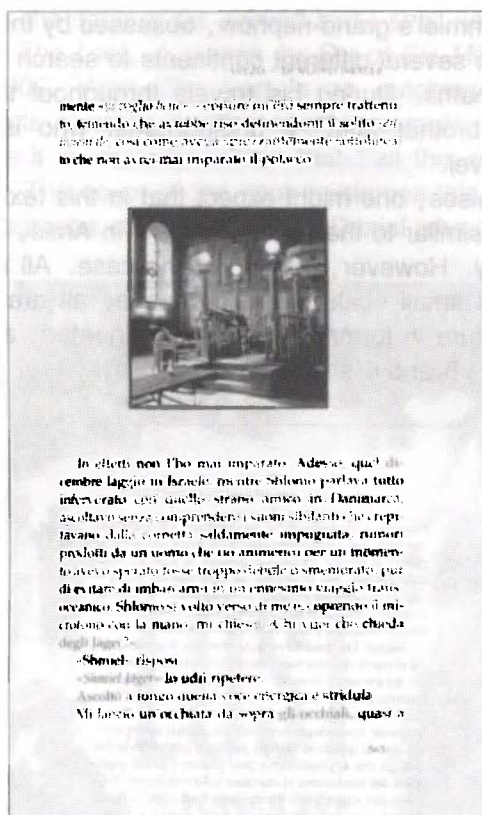


Figure 6

Two reasons contribute in making these photographs difficult to read: the first is the formal features of the images I already mentioned, which produce an effect of fuzziness, the second is the absence of any subtitles to help contextualize and locate within the text the people and places shown in the photographs. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to decide who the people represented are: although the photographs are inserted into single pages and not in a special section of the book, there are no explicit links, or no links at all, between what is mentioned and what is shown. Quite the opposite: most of the time photographs appear many pages after, or even before, a represented character is mentioned in the book, always making identification uncertain. Certainly Barthes' notion of anchorage cannot be applied here, where we are rather in the presence of an indeterminacy of anchorage that in its turn produces referential indeterminacy.

The result is not an integrated co-referential system made by subtexts linked

together co-referentially, as it was the case in Amis' *Experience*, but two quite different registers that are independent of one another, as far as individuation of textual referents is concerned. At the content level, this particular use of photographs produces a symbolic and allusive sense effect, which is certainly very far from any form of reality or authenticity effect. Here photographs "prove" very little. Their evidence is not of a documentary order, nor are they testimonies of "real" factual truths. Even in a text that is presented as an autobiographic narration, disseminated with precise hints with regard to events and facts, these photographs do not seem to be endowed with the verificational force we usually attribute to them. Rather than "verifying" the existence of what is represented, they tend to produce what we could define as a *memory effect*. In other words, what is at stake here is their power to construct a sense of memory, rather than to document an already existing relation of resemblance, which is not at all self-evident from the pictures themselves.

It is worth remembering that Mendelshon did not invent this use of photographs. In the first pages of the book he refers explicitly to a famous German writer who can be easily identified as W. G. Sebald, whose books are all characterized by a very original use of photographs. Let's see some examples taken from what is probably the most famous of his books, *Austerlitz*, published in 2001.



Figure 7



Figure 8

quant'altre ancora, quasi smarrite nella polvere scintillante, disseminata ovunque, delle miriadi di stelle senza nome. Fu nell'autunno del 1965, proseguì Austerlitz dopo essere rimasto per qualche tempo sprofondato nei suoi ricordi, che Gerald incominciò a elaborare le sue tesi pionieristiche – come noi oggi sappiamo – sulla cosiddetta nebulosa dell'Aquila nella costellazione del Serpente. Parlava di immense distese di gas interstellare, che si concentrerebbero in ammassi simili a nubi temporalesche, tali da estendersi nell'universo per numerosi anni luce, e all'interno delle quali, in un processo di compressione reso sempre più intenso dall'influsso della forza di gravità, si formerebbero nuove stelle. Ricordo un'osservazione di Gerald, secondo cui esisterebbero lassù vere e proprie incubatrici stellari, osservazione che ho trovato confermata di recente in un commento giornalistico a una delle sen-



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Figure 9

gazioni botaniche e zoologiche del prozio Alphonso. Solo alcuni giorni fa sono tornato a cercare in Darwin il passo da lui indicatomi una volta dove viene descritto uno sciame di farfalle che avanza per parecchie ore senza interruzione a dieci miglia dalla costa sudamericana, sciame nel quale perfino con il cannocchiale è impossibile distinguere una qualche zona d'aria libera tra gli insetti svolazzanti. Ma ciò che in particolare non ho mai dimenticato è quanto mi raccontò allora Alphonso sulla vita e la morte delle tignole, nei confronti delle quali io nutro ancor oggi il massimo rispetto fra tutte le creature. Nei mesi più caldi non è raro che uno o l'altro di questi insetti notturni si smarrisca e mi capiti in casa per sbaglio, provenendo dal giardinetto sul retro. Se l'indomani mi alzo di buon'ora, li vedo posati, immobili, in un qualche punto della parete. Sanno, credo, disse Austerlitz, di essersi smarriti perché, se non vengono fatti di nuovo uscire usando tutta la delicatezza possibile, rimangono lì fermi finché non esalano l'ultimo respiro, anzi, con i minuscoli artigli irrigiditi nello spasmo dell'agonia, restano aggrap-



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Figure 10

Here, as was the case in *The Lost*, photographs play a role very different from the one we saw in Amis: they are not illustrations, in the classical sense, in that they do not “illustrate” something described elsewhere by the verbal text; they do not add “factual information” to the text; they do not increase the “reality effect” of the text.

In a way, this might appear a surprising claim, since we are used to thinking of photographic images as “realistic” devices, as forms of representation that reproduce “what is there”, increasing the effect of realism. Put in this way, the

idea may appear rather naive, but it is semiotically grounded in the way photographs work as signs. Indeed, the realistic aspect of images is generally ascribed to their indexical semiotic character: according to Peirce, indexes are signs that have some degree of real contiguity with their represented object. The same argument may also be found in Barthes' writings on photography. From this point of view, photographs ought to guarantee us a better grasp on reality, but as we have seen above, this is not the case for Sebald as well as for Mendelshon. In their books, photographs do not "tell the truth", in the sense of making us see reality in a more accurate and precise way, or testifying to some precise data from reality. Given their peculiar "a-realistic" if not anti-realistic dimension, they do not display reality at all, but rather evoke a different dimension of seeing, which has more to do with imagination than with vision per se. For the very same reasons, these photographs do not testify as to the authentic reality of what is being spoken about; they do not anchor narration to a verificatory dimension, nor to any real effect that can act as proof of the truth. They do not open a window onto the world of "real things", but more precisely, it is when they point to exact details of some hitherto unspecified things that they seem to create an imaginary parallel world.

I would like to claim that photographs act in these texts as *testimonies*, rather than as realistic tools for representing reality: they become powerful devices that work on the emotional and sensory planes, producing a sense effect that is *aesthetic* and *aesthesic* at one and the same time. These photographs are not there to help us, the reader, to know something more, or even just to see something, but mainly to *feel* something, to perceive with our own senses, in our own body the "work of remembering", in its long, difficult and painful journey through memory. In this way, images, rather than indexing the world and producing an effect of reality, induce a way of perceiving and feeling an alternative reality by way of sensations: through our emotional and aesthesic reactions.

It is worth noticing that the traditional distinction between fictional and non fictional narratives is not relevant here: *Austerlitz* is a fictional text, a novel, although of a very peculiar kind; *The Lost*, as I said, emphasizes its autobiographic and "authentic" character, but this difference does not seem to affect the non realistic, if not anti-realistic, sense effect that the semiotic system of photographs produces in both these texts. But, if photographs here do not testify "reality", as was the case in Amis' autobiography, what are they the testimonies of? What I would like to claim is that these images testify to the past, or rather our *memory of the past*, our painful efforts to remember the unmemorable, or unthinkable.

The sense of memory I am referring here results from the particular

configuration of formal features on the Expression plane of these photographs. In the case of *Austerlitz*, photographs are all old images, with their particular imprecision of definition and blurred borders which do not distinguish in any precise way foreground from background, leaving to the reader the work of “completing” them, of giving them a sense which transcends visible forms of recognition. In *The Lost*, although the photographs are taken very recently, they are all “old fashioned” in style, and mimic explicitly those of older photographs. In other words they are endowed with what Fontanille (2004) called *patina*, which is a sign of time and usage that at the same time testifies that these images have survived the ravages of time to arrive at our present time. In this sense, these images all “come from the past”, independently of when they were actually taken, and they allude to irremediable loss.

We are now in a position to understand better why the fictional or autobiographic nature of these texts is not relevant in this context: the memory effect of these photographs is so special because these images, be they real or fictional, are in any case pictures of people who are dead; they are traces of somebody forever lost in the dark cloud of the Holocaust. Their fictional or autobiographic character is much less relevant than the indexical power of the memory trace constructed by the image itself; the reality they testify has to be found at a different level than that of purely autobiographical documentation. Indeed, if these images do produce a pathemic and aesthetic effect at all, it is because the memory they refer to is a *traumatic* memory. And this trauma is terribly real, no matter whether it is autobiographically reported, or transfigurally represented in a fictional possible world. This is why the photographs of *Austerlitz* (a fictional novel?) produce for the reader the same kind of emotional effect as those of *The lost* (a real autobiography?). They are all “real” in the same way, they have all the same *reality status*; they are traces of people who once were living bodies and who now are dead. The reality shifts from the text to history; it is the tragic history of the past to be real, and its terrible reality is the semiotic ground that gives sense to all narratives, independently of their specific *genres*. Facing trauma, all texts can only bring, each in its own way, another voice, another story, to testify to the trauma of history: they are all testimonies of one and the same unrepresentable reality.

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