

The Voice of the Past in the Present

On Dialogue and Testimony

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Abstract

A dialogue is not only concerned with speaking *with* other people *about* something, but also includes a speaking *for* those who can no longer speak as well as for their opinions. In this first part of this essay, in discussion with authors such as Gadamer, Ricoeur and Derrida, I will show in which sense the dimension of speaking for . . . is part of a hermeneutic conception of dialogue and in which sense this speaking for . . . helps me in applying the model of dialogue to relation of the historian to the past. In the second part of this essay, I develop this model of dialogue to account for the historian's activity in terms of the notions of testimony and witnessing. I show how these notions determine the course of Ricoeur's later reflections on the philosophy of history and why these reflections may benefit from a reconsideration of Gadamer's conception of generosity and experience.

Keywords

dialogue – testimony – hermeneutics – Gadamer – Ricoeur – Derrida

Introduction

A dialogue is a conversation between two living people who both have the capacity to speak and to argue for their opinions about the subject matter under discussion. This model of dialogue occupies a central place in philosophical hermeneutics. As a true heir to Plato, this school argues that a dialogue deserves the predicate “philosophical” if and only if it has truth as its aim, that is, when the speakers truly and solely aim at a better understanding of

the subject matter.¹ In this essay, I will explore part of the question of whether this model of dialogue can be used to characterize the work of the historian: Can we meaningfully say that the historian is engaged in a dialogue with the past? To show in which sense this question can be answered affirmatively, let me first offer two reasons why the above, narrow determination of philosophical dialogue suggests that the historian's engagement with the past is *not* a dialogue.

First, the past does not actually speak. In fact, we only have mute traces of the past, as Ricoeur emphasizes when describing history in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. He writes: "How, indeed, could one ignore the simple fact that in history one is concerned with practically nothing but the dead of other times?" and he continues: "History will then be this 'discourse' organized around a 'missing present.'" ² History deals with the absence of living voices, as Ricoeur writes quoting Certeau: "[...] what happened will never return and the voice is lost forever and it is death that imposes muteness on the trace."³ Secondly and consequently, understanding the past does not only concern an engagement with different statements *about* the past, but presupposes the historian's configurative work, as Ricoeur understands it: the historian gathers the traces in the past into a narrative that revives the past. Among other things, this means that the historian *speaks for the past*, in the precise sense that the historian makes the past speak in narrative because neither the past itself nor its traces speak for themselves.

Against the background of these two arguments, we may argue the following: If one proposes to understand the historian's work as a dialogue with the past, one has to explain how, in this model of dialogue, a living voice of the past and its people is not simply presupposed, but is first given back to the past and to past people. That is, one has to account for a structure of *speaking for* . . . in the historian's dialogue with the past – speaking for the past as well as speaking for the voiceless. *At first sight*, as noted above, this structure does not seem to be part of a proper dialogue. Therefore, I will discuss the above question – can we meaningfully say that the historian is engaged in a dialogue with the past? – from the perspective of speaking for . . . and how,

1 Cf. e.g., Plato, *Theaetetus* 167d–168a.

2 P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Points Essais (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 475. Translated by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer as *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 364. Hereafter, references will be made as #1/#2, where #1 refers to the page number in the French edition and #2 to the English translation.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 476–477/366.

despite the above arguments to the contrary discussed above, it is nevertheless part of (1) a dialogue *in general* and of (2) the historian's dialogue with the past in particular.

To this end, the first section is devoted to an analysis of how the issue of speaking for . . . imposes itself along three lines on the philosophical hermeneutic reflections on the concept of dialogue. Here, I will engage mainly with Gadamer and Ricoeur as representatives of philosophical hermeneutics and will bring Derrida into play to discuss the limits and implications of the philosophical hermeneutic determination of dialogue. The exploration of these three lines will also allow me to discuss how speaking for . . . is indeed a proper dimension of dialogue in addition to the two more obvious dimensions of dialogical speaking, namely speaking about . . . and speaking with . . . In the second section, I will apply the first general determination of speaking for . . . in dialogue to the specific dialogue in which the historian is engaged: the historian's dialogue with the past is first and foremost a dialogue with witnesses and testimonies, as Ricoeur suggests in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. After a conceptual analysis of bearing witness, I will show how this dialogue between historians and witnesses or testimonies is also concerned with the question of who speaks for the past and for the voiceless of the past.

1 Dialogue and Speaking For . . . in Philosophical Hermeneutics

The question of speaking for . . . imposes itself in a reflection on the philosophical hermeneutic conception of dialogue for at least three reasons: (1) because of the *ethos* of dialogue, (2) because of the central role awarded to textuality (*Schriftlichkeit*) in philosophical hermeneutics, and (3) because of the way in which the past and the dead are (made) present in dialogue.

(1) *The Ethos of Dialogue*

For philosophical hermeneutics, a dialogue is not only speaking *with* others *about* a specific topic. As mentioned above, it includes a particular *ethos*: namely striving for the truth of what is said. In particular, this *ethos* demands that none of the speakers use their rhetorical skills merely to let their opinions prevail and win the discussion. Rather, it is the task of every participant to truly listen to the opinions of the others. Gadamer famously invokes this version of the *ethos* of dialogue since, for him, it defines the very nature of philosophical hermeneutics; as Grondin cites in his biography: "‘By hermeneutics,’ [...] ‘I understand the ability to listen to the other in the belief that he could be

right.’”⁴ This characteristic openness to the other’s opinions and arguments is as old as philosophy itself, as Gadamer notes in reference to Plato’s notion of *eumeneis elenchoi* – an examination in good will – to capture the participants’ ethos in dialogue.⁵ In particular, this ethos may be explicated as follows, as Gadamer does in his discussion with Derrida on the good will:

One does not go about identifying the weaknesses of what another person says in order to prove that one is always right, but one seeks instead to strengthen the other’s viewpoints so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating.⁶

A normal dialogue is never a dialogue between two perfectly equal speakers. Therefore, one may come across forms of incapacities or (too) weak capacities of speaking and reasoning on the part of some of the speakers. Even two speakers who are well matched are not simply equal; during their dialogue, they will alternately display a stronger and a weaker capacity for reasoning than the other one. To call them equal in an everyday sense simply means that their mutual weaknesses and strengths level out in the dialogue as a whole. Due to this inevitable inequality, the ethos of dialogue requires that all speakers take care of all expressed opinions. In particular, the stronger one should compensate for the lack of the capacity of speaking (well) of the weaker one and thus not only speak for his or her opinions but also for the opinions of the others. Even if in the case of an “equal” dialogue, the inevitable difference between the speakers implies that it is everybody’s task to speak not only for one’s own opinions but for the others’ opinions as well when they are not defended well. Thus, in dialogue, speaking *with* the other involves speaking *for* the other’s opinions.

Plato’s dialogue *Theaetetus* offers a beautiful example of this imperative, which I quote here because the figure of the orphan it presents will return in the account of textuality below. When discussing with the young and inexperienced Theaetetus, Socrates easily refutes an opinion (attributed to Protagoras) that Theaetetus is supposed to defend. Yet, rather than claiming his victory

4 J. Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. J. Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 250.

5 Plato, *Seventh Letter* 344b; translation taken from J.M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), p. 1661.

6 Cf. D.P. Michelfelder and R. Palmer (eds.), *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 55.

over Theaetetus, Socrates argues that someone else now needs to defend this opinion since it is treated like poorly:

As things are, [the opinion Theaetetus was defending] is an orphan we are trampling in the mud. Not even the people Protagoras appointed as its guardians are prepared to come to its rescue; for instance, Theodorus here. In the interests of justice, it seems that we shall have to come to the rescue ourselves.⁷

Immediately after this quote, Socrates indeed starts speaking for this orphan. Here, the ethos of philosophical dialogue demands that all of the speakers are responsible for the opinions that are not well defended.

(2) *Textuality*

Speaking for . . . also imposes itself on philosophical hermeneutics in relation to the important theme of textuality. For Gadamer, the ideal model of dialogue is neither the everyday conversation nor the conversation between living philosophers, but rather the “hermeneutic dialogue” (*hermeneutisches Gespräch*) with a text. This latter dialogue approaches the ideal better than “normal” conversations do since in it, the interaction with a text is “completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication,” such as the rhetorical effects of speech and the wish to win the debate.⁸

This preference for the text over the living person implies one additional task on the part of the interpreter. Written signs do not simply speak since “writing is a kind of alienated speech,” as Gadamer claims, and therefore writing needs to be “transformed back into speech and meaning [*Rede und Sinn*].”⁹ This is the task of the interpreter: besides interpreting and explicating the meaning of what is written, he or she first has to voice the text as speech and meaning. Thus, the text becomes a partner in conversation *thanks to* the preceding work of the other partner in conversation, that *lets* and *makes* the text speak anew. Referring back to Ricoeur’s quote cited in the introduction of this paper, one might perhaps say that the text itself is a mute trace of speech; this trace needs to be brought back to speech. In this sense, the interpreter does

7 Plato, *Theaetetus* 164e. Cooper, *Plato*, p. 183. Cf. G.J. van der Heiden, “Speaking on Behalf of the Other: Death and Dialogue in Plato, Gadamer, and Derrida”, *The Heythrop Journal*, 52 (2012), 264–277, especially at 266–271.

8 H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), p. 396. Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall as *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 394.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 397/394.

not only speak *with* the text *about* its subject matter but also *for* the text: the interpreter is the voice of the text.

The addition of speaking for... to dialogue introduces a new problem, which already plays a role in a dialogue between living speakers but which shows itself more clearly in the context of textuality. In fact, this problem runs parallel to the problem of the weakness and the vulnerability of writing that Plato's *Phaedrus* already addresses, and that is extensively discussed by authors such as Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Derrida. The situation of the interpreter's conversation with a text allows us to determine this problem: the interpreter is not only a partner in conversation trying to establish the truth and meaning of the text, but he or she also speaks for the text. On the one hand, this speaking for the text is the only *chance* the text has to speak anew; the interpreter *lets* the text speak again. On the other hand, this speaking for... implies a clear *risk*, namely that the text becomes the mouthpiece of the interpreter, saying what the interpreter *makes* it say. This ambiguity between chance and risk and between letting and making the text speak is characteristic of all speaking for..., especially when the one for whom we speak cannot speak back. In a normal conversation, when distorting the other's words and *making* the other say something, one will (hopefully) hear the other's objections. Yet, does a text have the same capacity to speak (up) for itself against the interpreter if it depends for its speaking and meaning on this very interpreter? The discussion of Plato's account of the weakness of writing between Gadamer, Ricoeur and Derrida may be interpreted in light of exactly this question.

Despite his comments on the necessity of transforming writing back into speech and meaning, Gadamer himself does not explore the risk in the interpreter's speaking for a text any further. In fact, immediately after his comments, he simply denies this risk with the following telling words: "But there is also such a thing as writing that, as it were, reads itself [*das sich sozusagen von selber liest*]."¹⁰ One may reflect long on this strange sentence: in contrast to what was argued before, it suggests a writing that does speak for itself while at the same time taking back this suggestion by the intermission of "as it were." Nevertheless, in this remark, we hear Gadamer's answer to the question raised above: writing is not as weak as Plato suggests.

Ricoeur's elaboration in the 1980s of Gadamer's concept of textuality goes one step further in order to take the sting out of the risk of speaking for...¹¹ In fact, this elaboration is concerned with one issue: Ricoeur wants to establish

10 Ibid., p. 397/395.

11 Cf. P. Ricoeur, "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation" in Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique*, vol. 2 (Paris: Seuil, 1986), pp. 113–131. Cf. also G.J. van

that a text is not to be understood as a trace of speech, a past author or a past world but is liberated from these historical conditions. To this end, he introduces the concept of “the world of the text” to which all readers are equally exposed.¹² As soon as one embraces such a world of the text, one may safely remove the “*sozusagen*” from Gadamer’s quote, and the risk of imposing one’s own prejudices on the text is overcome by the independent world that the text *always* exhibits.¹³

Derrida offers a third position in this debate. He questions the existence of an independent world as well as a transcendent meaning of the text. Rather than following Gadamer and Ricoeur in their tendency to ignore the vulnerability of writing, Derrida famously takes this weakness as his point of departure in his reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and in his analysis of the metaphysical rejection of writing (*l’écriture*).¹⁴ With Gadamer and Ricoeur, Derrida embraces the primacy of textuality, but in opposition to them, he also embraces the incapacity of writing to determine or defend what it says because there is no such thing as a “transcendental signified”, be it the meaning of the text or the world of the text.¹⁵ Rather, as he claims, writing leads to dissemination.

What each of these three authors tends to overlook in this discussion on the weakness of writing is the specific part that speaking for . . . plays in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.¹⁶ Rather than sharing Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s tendency to downplay the vulnerability of writing and, as a consequence, set the problem of the interpreter’s speaking for the text aside, and rather than subscribing to Derrida’s reinterpretation of this vulnerability in terms of the metaphysical hierarchy between speech and writing, one may offer another account of it. The figure of the orphan that Plato uses in the *Phaedrus* to capture the nature of writing and that we already encountered in the passage from the *Theaetetus* quoted above, does not necessarily refer back to an original speech and all its metaphysical presuppositions, as Derrida claims. Although I do agree with Derrida that Plato depicts writing as a trace of speech, I doubt whether he suggests that we can or should return to an *original* speech. Rather than bringing the metaphysical problematic of the origin into play here – as if this origin would

der Heiden, *The Truth (and Untruth) of Language: Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Derrida on Disclosure and Displacement* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), pp. 72–89.

12 Ricoeur, “La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation”, pp. 125–129.

13 Ibid., pp. 129–131.

14 J. Derrida, “La pharmacie de Platon”, in Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 69–197.

15 Cf. e.g., ibid. and J. Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 427–428.

16 Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d–e.

still be accessible to us – we should simply say, in a more or less Gadamerian fashion, that writing should indeed be returned to speech. This means that the issue of speech is brought into play not as a metaphysical origin but in relation to the *incapacity* of a written text to speak for itself: therefore the speech and the voice of the interpreter are necessary to speak for it. Whereas the *Phaedrus* clearly emphasizes the *risk* intrinsic to this speaking for . . . when it states that a text cannot defend itself against distorting interpretations that *make* it speak, the *Theaetetus* shows in its explication of the same figure of the orphan how speaking for . . . is also the *chance* of the text to speak anew: it speaks when the living speakers take care of it and *let* it speak. In fact, we may even read the *Phaedrus* to announce this task: “And when [writing] is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.”¹⁷ For Derrida, the reference to the father is a reference to the origin: because the original speech is lost, writing cannot defend itself. Although I would agree with this equation of father and original speech, I would not read this line in the framework of the metaphysical hierarchy between speech and writing, as Derrida proposes. Rather, I would read this line as follows: if the one whose speech has been written down is dead and thus can no longer defend what he wrote, who else but the living speakers, present at the time of dialogue, can take it upon themselves to speak for the viewpoints that are written down and defend it as a foster father, so that the dialogue may continue? This is exactly what Socrates does in the *Theaetetus* with the viewpoints of Protagoras who, at the time of dialogue, can no longer account for his own viewpoints since he is dead.¹⁸

(3) *The Past and the Dead in Dialogue*

The latter remark on the dead Protagoras also introduces the third reason why speaking for . . . imposes itself on philosophical hermeneutics. When Socrates says that the living speakers should take it upon themselves to defend an orphan, this orphan concerns the viewpoints of the *dead* Protagoras. In the *Theaetetus*, speaking for the dead is enacted in the very dialogue itself: each of the interlocutors in the *Theaetetus* speaks at least once on behalf of the dead

17 Ibid., 275e; Cooper, *Plato*, p. 552.

18 To a certain extent, this is not too far from Ricoeur’s interpretation of Plato’s *pharmakon* in relation to history-writing: although the writings of the historian may distort the past and can never replace the living memory, they are also the only chance for the past of being heard, understood, and remembered, especially after the death of those who can have a living memory, cf. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, pp. 175–180/141–145.

Protagoras and his orphan.¹⁹ Speaking for . . . thus extends dialogues to speakers who once spoke, but can no longer speak.

This mode of speaking for . . . brings us closer to the actual work of the historian since, as Ricoeur writes, history concerned with “the living of the past who are no longer but who once were.”²⁰ Moreover, the object of history is not just “the past” or “time,” but it is “men in time,” as he says with Marc Bloch.²¹ In particular, this gives a specific orientation to the historian: rather than defending the opinions of those who are no longer among us, the historians speak for the past in yet another way; although they can never resuscitate the living of the past, the story they tell is standing for (*représentance*) them.²²

Also at this point, Plato’s dialogues are exemplary. These dialogues are written after the death of Socrates to commemorate him and to bring his voice back to life again.²³ All of Plato’s dialogues that stage Socrates are thus engaged in a speaking for the dead Socrates. They do not simply defend his opinions, but they resuscitate the dead Socrates, give him back a voice and his story, as for instance Arendt strikingly notes:

Thus, although we know much less of Socrates, who did not write a single line and left no work behind, than of Plato or Aristotle, we know much better and more intimately who he was, because we know his story, than we know who Aristotle was, about whose opinions we are so much better informed.²⁴

Hence, Plato’s dialogues, by telling the story of Socrates and by standing for his voice, are a *testimony* of Socrates’ life. Therefore, they are interesting for the historian who wants to understand the life and the time of Socrates. Also this

19 Cf. Van der Heiden, “Speaking on Behalf of the Other”, 266–271.

20 Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, p. 501/384.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 214/169–170.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 320/248.

23 Derrida, *La dissémination*, p. 170. Remarkably enough, Derrida accuses here Plato of not seeing that his dialogues are in the same situation as writing, namely in the absence of the living father, *i.e.* Socrates. Therefore he claims that a tension exists between Plato’s accusation of writing in the *Phaedrus* and his own writing praxis. However, if we follow the above reading we may say that for Plato both the dead Socrates and the mute written speech invite the living to speak for . . . Thus, no tension exists between Plato’s writing praxis and his claims about writing.

24 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 186. I would like to thank Sanem Yazicioğlu for pointing out this reference to me and for her comments to an earlier version of this paper.

mode of speaking for Socrates includes a chance as well as a risk: only because Plato stages Socrates in his dialogues we have the chance of getting to know him, but the picture Plato paints of Socrates may very well be an improved, altered version, as is acknowledged in Plato's *Second Letter* in which the dialogues are characterized as follows: "those that are now called so come from an idealized and youthful Socrates."²⁵

Three remarks on the implications of the above example allow us to move to the second part of this paper. (a) Coming back to Ricoeur's effort in the 1980s to distinguish the text from the trace by introducing the world of the text, as discussed under (2), we see here how the historian cannot do this: when the historian wants to understand the life of Socrates and reads Plato's dialogues for it, he *does* read it as a trace of Socrates. It is therefore not surprising that Ricoeur feels himself compelled to return to Plato's *Phaedrus* and the problem of the vulnerability of writing in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, where it appears as a chorus throughout the book. (b) Moreover, referring back to Ricoeur's quote that the past leaves *mute* traces behind, we can now be more precise and distinguish between traces. Although there are mute traces the historian gathers in a narrative of the past, there are also traces that have something to say before they are integrated in the historian's narrative. Ricoeur does not always seem to make such a distinction. For instance, he writes in discussion with Michelet: "The traces, however, are mute and all that is 'still speaking' is the narrative of history."²⁶ This suggests that all traces are mute and that we only have the historian's story that is "still speaking." Yet, this does not do full justice to the work of the historian. Although historians interested in Socrates' life indeed gathers different traces from the past into the story they tell about Socrates, a hermeneutic dialogue with specific texts *precedes* and *informs* the story they tell: they will read and interpret Plato's dialogues that they bring back to speech in order to listen to what these dialogues tell about Socrates. (c) Finally, this latter dialogue of the historian with specific texts can also be described more precisely. It is not sufficient to say that the historian reads texts and reads them as traces of the past. For the historian, Plato's dialogues are not simply texts; they are rather *testimonies* of Socrates' life and of the historical situation in which he lived, and Plato is the witness of Socrates' life; Plato tells what Socrates did, how he appeared to others, what happened to him, what he thought, how he was condemned, and how he courageously drank the poison that killed him. Plato speaks for Socrates in a double sense: he revives Socrates' voice in a dialogue and he stands up for his reputation. In sum, testimony

25 Plato, *Second Letter* 314c; Cooper, *Plato*, p. 1639.

26 Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, p. 477/366.

“comes on the scene as the trace of the past in the present” to inform the narrative of the past the historian wants to tell.²⁷ Thus, the historian depends on witnesses who bear witness to what they saw and experienced. If we say that the historian speaks for the past since his or her narrative stands for the past and the human beings who lived in it, we need to add that, to this end, the historian is engaged in a dialogue with witnesses and testimonies. I will now turn to this dialogue and analyze the role of speaking for . . . in it.

2 Testimony as Speaking for the Past

In *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Ricoeur argues that human beings in time are the object of history. Therefore, testimony is of crucial importance to history since it is by testimony that we learn from the experiences and lives of past people.²⁸ Thus, the historian's dialogue with the past is a dialogue with testimonies, with statements of witnesses who were present at a certain time and who make their experiences of the past public, either by speech or writing, to those who were not present.²⁹ In this sense, a witness is an heir to Hermes bridging the gap between past and present; the witness speaks for the past in the present. Moreover, as the testimonial literature of the twentieth century indicates and to which I will return under (2), witnesses may emphatically present themselves as speaking for those who did not live to tell the story.³⁰ In this sense, the witness is the present voice of the past as well as of past people, and bearing witness is a mode of speaking for . . . that plays indispensable role in the historian's dialogue with the past.

(1) *Bearing Witness and the Question of Trust*

To characterize the dialogue between historian and witness let us first describe, following Ricoeur, what bearing witness is.³¹ Firstly, a witness asserts something about what happened somewhere in the past, but these assertions

27 Ibid., p. 214/170.

28 Ibid., p. 214/169.

29 The relation between the work of the historian and testimony is in a certain sense a return to a concern that occupied the minds of historians in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as well, cf. Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, “Inventing the Archive: Testimony and Virtue in Modern Historiography”, *History of the Human Sciences*, 26, no. 4 (2013), 8–26.

30 Cf. the work of Primo Levi, Jean Améry and many others.

31 For the references of what follows under (a), (b) and (c), cf. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, pp. 201–208/161–166.

depend on a self-declaration of the witness: a testimony is not an independent statement about the past, but includes the witness's declaration "I was there"; as Ricoeur notes, "it is the witness who first declares himself to be a witness."³² A testimony is thus a performative by which the speaker posits him or herself as the subject of testimony. This "I was there" singles out and singularizes the witness among other people: since the witness was there and the listeners to whom he or she bears witness were not, these listeners depend on the testimony of the witness to have access to what happened.³³ The experiences and the memories of the witness are indispensable to the listeners. In this particular sense, bearing witness has a *disclosive* quality and the witness is indeed a hermeneutic figure: he or she makes known what happened to those who have no access to it. If we take this as a defining moment of bearing witness, we understand why, e.g., Derrida in his essays on testimony, argues that without the singularity of the witness, no testimony would be possible: if the listeners have access to the event by their own memory or experience, the testimony of the witness loses its force, its necessity, and its disclosive character.³⁴

Secondly and consequently, witnesses are implied themselves in yet another way in the mode of speaking for . . . that is bearing witness. Since there are no other means to prove whether the witness is right or wrong – other than consulting other witnesses if they exist – witnesses only have themselves, or more precisely, their *trustworthiness* to offer as "proof" or "evidence" for their testimony: the witness is him or herself the guarantee of the testimony. As Ricoeur emphasizes, this means that witnesses always appeal to the belief and the trust of the listeners; as Derrida puts it, a witness always also (implicitly or explicitly) says: "*you have to believe me*, because I engage myself to tell you the truth."³⁵

Thirdly, as already noted in passing, there is no witness without an audience: the witness speaks to and with listeners. The latter depend on the experience, the memory, the testimony, and the trustworthiness of the witness. Hence, there is no bearing witness without a dialogue with people who lack access to the situation to which the witness attests. This marks the particular "dialogical structure" intrinsic to bearing witness, as Ricoeur notes, and which

32 Ibid., p. 204/164.

33 Cf. also J. Derrida, "Poétique et politique du témoignage", *L'Herne*, 83 (2004), 521–539, at 527. Translated by R. Bowlby and O. Pasanen as "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in *Sovereignty in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Th. Dutoit and O. Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 65–96, at p. 76.

34 Ibid., p. 527/76.

35 Ibid.

also positions the witness in this dialogue: since the witness cannot prove that he or she is trustworthy, “the witness asks to be believed.”³⁶

The listeners’ dependency on witnesses and their trustworthiness shows that also bearing witness *is a speaking for . . . that entails both a chance and a risk*, which now may be formulated in terms of trust and trustworthiness. On the one hand, an initial belief that the witness is telling the truth is the only chance the listeners have to find out what happened. On the other hand, because there is no other guarantee of this truth than the witness’s trustworthiness, the listeners can never free themselves from the possibility that the witness deceives them or – possibly involuntarily due to a poor, distorted memory – paints a wrong picture of what happened. This latter risk is inseparably given with the chance that bearing witness offers. Obviously, this inseparability of risk and chance leads to important epistemological issues for the historian, and let us first see how Ricoeur deals with them and subsequently discuss the limits and problems of Ricoeur’s solution.

(2) *The Dialectic between Testimony and Criticism*

The disclosive character of testimony is of a peculiar nature: it makes (aspects of) the past known to historians *only if* the historians trust the witness. Because of the aforementioned risk for the listener in bearing witness, historians are engaged in finding confirmation for the trustworthiness of the testimonies they consult: although they can never eliminate the uncertainty of testimony and their original dependency on trust and belief, they can develop ways to corroborate a testimony and its trustworthiness. Ricoeur gathers these forms of corroboration under the heading of *criticism* as it has been developed, before Kant’s technical use of the term, “within the historiographical sphere.”³⁷ By criticism, the historian can, for instance, establish whether a witness “can stay steadfast about this testimony over time” and whether other witnesses confirm this testimony – after all, *testis unus, testis nullus*; one witness is no witness.³⁸

The dialogue between witness and historian is thus marked by a specific dialectic between a testimony that appeals to trustworthiness and a criticism that aims to judge this trustworthiness. According to Ricoeur, this dialectic of testimony and criticism defines the epistemological scope of history: “we have nothing better than testimony and criticism of testimony to accredit the historian’s representation of the past.”³⁹

36 Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, p. 205/164.

37 Ibid., p. 216/171.

38 Ibid., pp. 206/165, 334/257.

39 Ibid., p. 364/278.

This dialectic has a remarkable implication for the role of speaking for. . . . In the first section, I argued that the ethos of dialogue implies that speaking for the other's opinions is a task for *all* speakers. The dialogue between the witness and the historian, however, is marked by a strange asymmetry: the witness was present at the past events the historian wants to represent, whereas the historian was not. *If* this dialogue is conceived as a dialectic between testimony and criticism, as Ricoeur does, the burden of speaking for past events and past people is put on the shoulders of the witnesses alone, since the historian is engaged with judging the trustworthiness of what the witness says. Let me spell this out in more detail in order to show the particular difficulties to which this dialectic leads.

Ricoeur's attention to the critical attitude of historians and their reluctance to give themselves over to a "spontaneous credulity" of the witness, stands in contrast to the emphasis on generosity in Gadamer's version of dialogue.⁴⁰ As noted before, Gadamer argues that the arguments and opinions of the other need to be made as strong as possible in order not to miss the truth contained therein. Translated in the vocabulary of trust and distrust, Gadamer's ethos requires that one trusts the other's opinions and insights, sometimes even beyond the (poor) degree of credibility with which they are initially presented. For Ricoeur, on the other hand, making arguments or testimonies stronger means nothing but corroborating them; yet, corroboration itself is a way of suspending the initial trustworthiness of the witness since, apparently, it needs further support; therefore, every appeal to trust calls forth distrust and modes of suspicion and criticism. Consequently, from Ricoeur's perspective, the application of Gadamer's generosity to the dialogue between witness and historian, is too naïve since it embraces the risk of bearing witness without any protection: Gadamer's generosity invests so much trust and credence in the other that possible deceptions and false testimonies may go unnoticed. Hence, by zooming in on trust and credence, Ricoeur mainly shows the necessity to introduce a mechanism of critique and suspicion to cope with the risk of bearing witness.

Despite the reasonableness of Ricoeur's concerns, it remains to be seen whether this ethos of generosity does not deserve to be reconsidered, and it also remains to be seen how this reconsideration affects the historians' comportment in their dialogue with witnesses. These latter questions arise as soon as one tries to understand why, despite the clear description of the dialectic

40 Ibid., p. 217/172. Obviously, the spontaneous credulity is yet another version of the first naivety on which Ricoeur already wrote in the 1960s, and criticism is the historian's variant of the praxis of suspicion.

between testimony and criticism, Ricoeur encounters a limit to and even a crisis of testimony in the historian's work. To understand where this limit and crisis come from, one should note that for Ricoeur the dialectic between testimony and criticism has one important presupposition: in order for listeners to understand a testimony, it is necessary that the witness conveys an experience that resembles experiences with which the listeners are *familiar*. As he writes: "This comprehension is built on the basis of a sense of human resemblance at the level of situations, feelings, thoughts, and actions."⁴¹ Hence, a testimony should describe situations, feelings, thoughts, and actions that resemble the ones the historian is familiar with; the experiences the witness bears witness to should resemble what the listeners already know.

If this is a condition of possibility of the dialogue between witness and historian, it is not difficult to see where this dialogue may run aground: What if the witness tries to convey experiences that are not shareable in this way? What if, as Ricoeur writes, "the experience to be transmitted is that of an inhumanity with no common measure with the experience of the average person"? Ricoeur raises this question in reference to twentieth century testimonial literature in which witnesses attest to extreme, inhuman experiences. The dialectic of testimony and criticism finds its limit in these testimonies. Although phrased in a different philosophical vocabulary, Ricoeur comes across the same difficulty Lyotard raises in *Le différend*, where he argues that the victims of Auschwitz who survived this disaster cannot phrase the injustices they suffered in the discourse of the tribunal.⁴² Translated in Ricoeur's vocabulary, these victims try to express an experience that cannot be expressed in the language of the tribunal because these experiences do not bear a resemblance with what the members of the tribunal are familiar with.

What does this limit case of bearing witness imply as well as the crisis it causes in the dialectic between historian and witness? First, it is important to note that the *possibility* of these limit experiences is inscribed in the very concept of bearing witness. In relation to the tribunal, the witness is always already singular, that is, the bearer of unique memories and experiences. Although in bearing witness, witnesses make this memories and experiences public, they cannot share this having-experienced-what-happened itself with the tribunal. This unshareability constitutes, as we have seen, a certain asymmetry between witness and tribunal. Secondly, the limit experience at stake in testimonial literature confronts us with an intensification of this unshareability

41 Ibid., p. 223/175.

42 J.-F. Lyotard, *Le différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), p. 16.

and transfers it to the experiences the witness wants to make known.⁴³ In particular, if the experiences that can be made known to a given tribunal are *in advance* confined to experiences that meet the demand of “a sense of human resemblance,” the possibility of these testimonies is obstructed from the beginning. Thus, the dialogue between historian and witness, as Ricoeur conceives of it, runs aground.

When one asks what would be needed to overcome such a crisis, we are naturally brought back to the question of speaking for. . . . In Ricoeur’s description of the dialogue between witness and historian as the dialectic between testimony and criticism, the burden of speaking for the past and for past people is placed on the shoulders of witnesses alone. Yet, witnesses can only carry this burden *if* the discourse in which they make their experiences known is capable of receiving their testimony. If the tribunal cannot hear or comprehend the testimony, there is no bearing witness since bearing witness is a dialogical occurrence. If we are indeed in the situation Lyotard and Ricoeur sketch, and if the witness cannot carry his experiences and memories over into the discourse of the tribunal and cannot make them public, another intermediate figure is necessary for bearing witness to take place – an intermediate figure who takes it upon him or herself *to speak for the witness* in the discourse and the language of the tribunal. As I would like to argue in the final section of this paper, this mode of speaking for the witness can very well be conceived from a philosophical hermeneutic perspective as part of the historian’s task *as interpreter* (rather than as critic). To this end, we need to turn away from Ricoeur’s description of the dialogue between witness and historian as the dialectic between testimony and criticism and return to a more Gadamerian inspired generosity on the part of the historian that does not begin by suspending the initial trustworthiness of the witness.

(3) *Generosity and Experience*

Interestingly enough, despite the crisis of testimony of which he speaks, Ricoeur argues that testimonial literature is in a certain *exemplary* for the historian’s work.⁴⁴ Although testimonial literature seems beyond the limits of the dialectic between testimony and criticism, as Ricoeur illustrates with his account of the discussion between White and Ginzburg on testimonial literature, it is not beyond the limits of the dialogue between witness and historian. This difference between dialogue and dialectic, which is unexpected in light

43 I follow here J. Derrida, *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), pp. 37–39.

44 Cf. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, pp. 329–339/254–261.

of what Ricoeur argued before, opens up the space to rethink the dialogue between witness and historian.

It is not too difficult to see why Ricoeur claims this exemplarity. Testimony is a trace of the past that speaks for an absent world or absent people. This other world might be so singular or different that it is beyond the realm of what resembles our expectations and our own experiences. For the historian to understand a past that is so different, it is necessary to suspend the aforementioned condition of possibility of the dialectic between testimony and criticism. This opens up the possibility to rethink Gadamer's idea of generosity in the realm of the historian's work: although Gadamer develops this idea first and foremost in relation to poetic and philosophical texts in order to be generous to their claim to truth, there is also a claim to truth in historical texts and facts since they are examined by the historian in order to understand the past world they refer to.

For Ricoeur the crisis in the dialogue between witness and historian can be understood as a crisis of "the initial trustworthiness of testimony."⁴⁵ From a systematic point of view, this does not need to surprise us: if historians are engaged first and foremost in corroborating the trustworthiness of the witness, they start their work by suspending this initial trustworthiness. Yet, also in another way, we may conceive of the crisis Ricoeur discerns a crisis of testimony's initial trustworthiness. As soon as people hear a testimony that is fundamentally unfamiliar to them, they will not meet this experience with a spontaneous belief. Quite the contrary, they will meet it with a spontaneous disbelief: "This cannot have happened!" Here the dialectic of testimony and criticism cannot even get started since there is no initial trustworthiness from which the historians can critically distance themselves: here, a testimony is encountered with initial disbelief.

Exactly at this point, where the tribunal approaches a testimony with initial disbelief, another intermediate figure is necessary who speaks for the testimony in order to grant it trustworthiness. Here, not only the witness, but also the historian should show his descent from Hermes. When understanding the past, historians are not only engaged with what is familiar to or resembles their experiences; rather, a fundamental form of generosity is required in the historical understanding. Generosity presupposes the capacity for undergoing an experience (*eine Erfahrung machen*) in Gadamer's sense of the word. As Gadamer explains, an experience worthy of the name shows that a world, an experience, an action or an event is beyond the realm of what we expect: "something is not what [we] supposed it to be," and "every experience worthy

45 Ibid., pp. 230/180.

of the name thwarts [*durchkreuzt*] an expectation."⁴⁶ Behind these remarks lies a particular conception of historical reality. Whereas the dialectic between testimony and criticism emphasizes the risk for the historian to be lied to and to arrive at a distorted picture of the past and its people, this emphasis may forget too easily that, as Arendt notes, especially good liars have a keen eye for what is plausible, whereas "reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared."⁴⁷ Thus, historians are compelled to have a sense for the unexpected to be able to understand the past.

In this sense, a testimony of past reality to which one first listens with great disbelief (and horror) can thus indeed be considered as an exemplary situation that discloses an important characteristic of history: the historian is asked to be attentive to the unexpected dimension of the past and to undergo an experience in Gadamer's sense of the word. Thus, Gadamer's generosity demands a *suspension* of the first impulse to disbelief and distrust so that historians can be informed by the *singular* experience of which the witness bears witness. Moreover, historians are not only *listening* to the past or to witnesses. They express their understanding in a narrative of the past and its people. This narrative should express the results of the historian's generous listening. In this sense, if Lyotard's depiction of the incapacity of witnesses to make themselves heard in the discourse of a tribunal is correct, it is the task of historians to speak (up) for these witnesses when their testimony cannot be said or understood in the discourse of the tribunal.⁴⁸

To a certain extent, Ricoeur's attention to the "reinforcing of attestation" points towards a similar reappraisal of generosity. There is a *primacy* of confidence for history to be possible: "Is it not to the extent that we have confidence in some testimony that we can doubt some other testimony?"⁴⁹ Ricoeur connects this primacy of confidence to a picture of the historian who lends his or her voice to the past people and lets them speak: "It thus follows that the historian is not the one who makes [*faire*] past people speak but someone who allows [*laisser*] them to speak."⁵⁰

46 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 360/349, 362/350.

47 H. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, 1972), p. 19.

48 In reference to Ginzburg's "Just One Witness," Ricoeur notes that this task of the historian may undermine the validity of the rule of *unus testis, nullus testis*. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, pp. 334/257–258.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 230/180–181.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 230 n. 62/181 n. 53.

Yet, by separating letting past people speak from making them speak, Ricoeur forgets the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of speaking for . . . , which also returns in the historian's attempt to speak *together with* the witness *for* past people. By extending the possibility of speaking for the past beyond the realm of what resembles the experiences we are familiar with and what fits with our expectations, one opens up the possibility of the *chance* of *letting* past people speak of an unheard-of experience. Yet, this possibility cannot be had without the *risk* of *making* past people speak. As noted before, the disclosive dimension of bearing witness only has trust and belief as its guarantee. This also applies to the experience historians undergo in their encounter with the past: this occurs in dialogue with witnesses and testimonies; therefore, it only has trust as its guarantee. The ghosts of possible deceit or disbelief are not expelled here: by suspending our first, initial disbelief with respect to certain incomprehensible testimonies, we open up the possibility of becoming experienced, but we do not enter the realm of certainty.⁵¹ The expression speaking for . . . captures this double-sidedness. The silenced voices and incomprehensible testimonies of the past can *only* be heard if someone speaks for them and attests to their singularity. At the same time, the voices of the absent ones are only heard mediated by the voices of the witness and the historian. Thus, speaking for . . . is the only chance to let the voiceless speak but this is a chance that cannot be cleansed from the inescapable risk of making them speak.

51 Cf. e.g., Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 41.