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QUAND LE BOURREAU PREND LA PAROLE TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF PERPETRATOR TESTIMONY?

ANNELEEN SPIESSENS

BOOK

The conflicts of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have given rise to a desire – and perhaps even a necessity – to gather the stories of perpetrators in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of violent historical events. But what platform should perpetrators be given from which to speak? Should they be accorded the same status of “witness” as survivors? How should we listen to, represent and respond to their voices? In short, how can we ethically engage with the testimonies of perpetrators? Anneleen Spiessens’ *Quand le bourreau prend la parole* seeks precisely to tackle these troubling questions. Spiessens proposes an in-depth study of a selection of texts – ranging from testimonial to the purely literary – written in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Through her individual case studies, Spiessens questions the status of the “testimony” of the perpetrator and how its function is determined through a range of editorial and translation strategies. Spiessens has made the deliberate decision to lay trauma theory – which is often used as a lens through which to examine survivor testimonies – to one side, choosing instead to analyse the language of testimony and the complex position of the writer-mediator. She rightly points out that perpetrator testimonies invariably take place in the presence of a “tiers”, and her focus on the

positioning of a range of mediators – writers, editors, translators – is original and productive, highlighting “les possibilités d’un discours qui laisse entendre la voix du bourreau tout en proposant une résistance éthique” (p. 30). Without denying the risks associated with allowing perpetrator testimonies to circulate in the public sphere, Spiessens demonstrates how these testimonial and literary texts are an integral part of the “travail de mémoire” following a catastrophic historical event, insofar as they force us to imagine the *human possibility* of genocide, confronting us with the conception and execution of mass murder as a *human* enterprise.

Following a short introduction (Part 1) establishing the discursive setting of the *parole du bourreau*, the book is divided evenly between two separate sections on the Shoah (Part 2) and Rwanda (Part 3). Part 2 opens with a substantial chapter on Rudolf Höss’s memoirs, *Kommandant in Auschwitz* (1958), written during his imprisonment in Poland before his execution in April 1947. In this opening chapter, Spiessens uses discourse analysis to determine how Höss presents himself as a credible historic witness, through a deliberate “mise en scène de soi” (p. 43) and the creation of an *ethos* that would be acceptable for the public receiving his testimony. A detailed examination of two key passages highlights Höss’ technocratic tone and objective style, which ultimately reveal his

moral ignorance. The reader is somewhat frustrated that these two passages, taken from the German text, are analysed here without providing any French translation, but these same passages are re-examined later in the chapter, when Spiessens compares the ways the passages have been translated into French, Dutch, and both British and American English. Indeed, the originality of Spiessens’ discussion lies in her critical treatment of both the editing and translation(s) of Höss’ text. Spiessens examines the ways in which a range of “mediators” – editors, *préfaciers* and translators – have interpreted and framed the text. Asserting that “le témoignage n’acquiert un sens que dans le jeu dialogique entre narrateur, médiateur et lecteur” (p. 59), Spiessens traces how the paratextual framing strongly influences the reception of the text in different countries and time periods. At issue in this chapter is the positioning of the various mediators and translators as they utilise “strategies of resistance” which control the presentation and interpretation of the text, strategies which resist presenting Höss’ voice “à l’état nu”, enabling them to take a position *against* Höss, and thus reinforcing the image of him as a criminal rather than the sensitive and hard-working family man that he presents himself to be. In such cases, Spiessens argues, the paratext functions as a *contre-discours*, and the editing and translation are themselves forms of critical discourse and ethical resistance to the words of the perpetrator.

In the second chapter in this section of the book, Spiessens moves away from direct testimony to examine how Höss’ story has been taken up and fictionalised in Robert Merle’s 1952 novel *La Mort est mon métier*. Written at a time when survivor testimonies were receiving very little attention, this novel is presented as going against the current, according to Spiessens, and anticipating the “era of the perpetrator” that emerges in the 21st century. In this chapter, Spiessens begins to interrogate the link between fiction and History, questioning the importance of fidelity to reality and the ways in which literature can intervene in our understanding and reconstruction of the past. Through her critical analysis of Merle’s fictionalisation of Höss’ character, Spiessens questions whether Merle’s text succeeds in its heuristic project; Merle’s portrayal of his protagonist’s psychological development creates a character that is not, in fact, an “exemplary” German man of the 1940s but an intransigent and asocial figure (p. 149), which does not help us to understand

how thousands of men participated in the crimes of the Nazi State. Merle becomes emblematic of Lanzmann’s notion of the “obscenity of understanding”, seeking to find clues in the individual’s childhood that will enable us to understand their adult crimes. Spiessens argues that this “obscenity of understanding” should nevertheless not prevent us from considering the *possibility* of the Holocaust nor from confronting the words of the perpetrators (p. 150).

Merle seems to suggest that literature can establish the link between his protagonist’s childhood and later activities at Auschwitz, which Spiessens sees as the major shortcoming of Merle’s text, a tendency that, more than 50 years later, Jonathan Littell successfully avoids in his prize-winning novel *Les Bienveillantes* (2006), the focus of Spiessens’ third and final chapter in the section on the Shoah. In this chapter, Spiessens’ analysis foregrounds the ethical complexity of the novel, further complicating the role of literature in the remembering and understanding of historical catastrophe. Spiessens identifies five *topoi* at the heart of the novel’s testimonial project, which she examines in turn: presence (the presence of the witness at the site of the events), distance (temporal, physical, ideological), memory (real and manufactured), observation and language, all of which help to establish the character of Maximilien Aue as a witness but which are simultaneously eroded or exaggerated throughout the novel. Spiessens’ perceptive analysis reveals how the novel plays with the limits of “testimony” and “witness” and pushes the boundaries of the relationship between literature and historical reality; in Littell’s novel, “le témoignage devient *simulacre* et l’histoire l’objet d’un *jeu* littéraire” (p. 199). For Spiessens, Littell’s novel reveals itself to be an “impossible book”, whose ironic literary game precisely exposes the gap between fiction and reality. Littell’s narrative highlights the inevitable failure of literature that seeks to approach historical reality in order to understand its deeper meaning.

Part 3 opens with an introduction to the genocide in Rwanda and a justification of the comparison with the Shoah, a comparison that enables us to better *think* the events of 1994. Three chapters then follow, the first of which is dedicated to five of the texts written as part of the 1998 Fest’Africa project “Rwanda: Écrire par devoir de mémoire”. This chapter may appear somewhat at odds with the subject matter of the book as, unlike the texts examined in the previ- ...

ous section, the hybrid works under discussion are not primarily concerned with the point of view of the perpetrator. Nevertheless, the African authors under discussion pose similar questions about the complex role of testimony and its relationship to literature in interpreting and understanding historical reality. Through a critical analysis of the “constellations” of testimonies presented in the different texts, Spiessens reveals how these hybrid texts interrogate the problematic relationship between language and the genocidal violence that swept through the country in 1994, as well as confronting the aesthetic and ethical questions raised by such a *literary* project. The chapter then offers an insightful examination of the Fest’Africa writers as “mediators” (*écrivains “tiers”*) whose texts, as Spiessens rightly underlines, are assigned an important role in the construction of the memory of the genocide and in the work of mourning. Spiessens reads these texts as a combination of literature and history, poetic expression and political action, underlining the importance of the “écrivain-intellectuel” in translating and presenting a violent history to a broader public.

The focus of the next chapter is French journalist Jean Hatzfeld’s edited collection of perpetrator testimonies *Une saison de machettes* (2003), published shortly after the Fest-Africa texts. Spiessens suggests that it is Hatzfeld’s collection that introduces the figure of the “bourreau” into the growing corpus of literature on the Rwanda genocide. This chapter takes up the ethico-moral questions raised in relation to Höss’ testimony: Is it justifiable to grant the perpetrator the same status of *witness* as the survivors? How far should the editor-writer-mediator push his project of understanding what happened from the point of view of the perpetrators? Hatzfeld himself justifies his work by the need to reach a wider audience and bring to light the *experience* of genocide, whilst at the same time voicing his scruples about the circulation of the perpetrators’ words in the public sphere. Spiessens again focuses on the specific language used – both by the perpetrators and by Hatzfeld in his framing of their testimonies – to shed light on this *experience*. She suggests that Hatzfeld’s text functions more as an historical *document*, particularly in terms of what we learn about the preparation of the genocide, the acts committed and the specific nature of the violence and cruelty. Spiessens’ analysis of the vocabulary and syntax used by the perpetrators shows that emphasis is placed on the “how” rather than the “why”, revealing an absence

of “traumatic memory”. Reading this volume alongside Hatzfeld’s earlier collection of survivor testimonies, Spiessens observes a crucial difference between the discourse of survivors and that of perpetrators, namely that while survivors express a “profondeur morale”, the discourse of the killers is essentially “vide” (p. 308).

Of key interest here is Spiessens’ examination of the paratextual elements in the text, demonstrating how Hatzfeld maintains his position of exteriority which enables him to judge and comment upon the words of his interlocutors. Like the editors/mediators of Höss’ testimony, Hatzfeld himself formulates a counter-discourse and maintains a position of resistance, particularly by using a deliberately poetic language that contrasts with the spoken language of the perpetrators. Spiessens also offers a fascinating discussion of the Dutch and English translations of Hatzfeld’s collection, identifying the different intermediary voices that infiltrate the text. The ways in which Hatzfeld intervenes in the text are nevertheless highly problematic, and Spiessens concludes that Hatzfeld himself does not demonstrate sufficient autoreflexivity nor acknowledgement of his position as an “implicated” author-narrator (p. 345). While Hatzfeld himself claims a certain level of objectivity, Spiessens convincingly argues that objectivity and impartiality are neither possible nor desirable when relating the words of the perpetrator.

The final chapter focuses on Rwandan author Gilbert Gatore’s *Le Passé devant soi* (2008), a text which claims its literary status as a novel and through which “la compréhension du génocide passe [...] par la *forme* et par l’*imagination* exclusivement” (p. 349). Spiessens again explores the language of the perpetrator and the role that is attributed to him in the novel. Among other things, this language sheds light on the animality of the killers and their subsequent mutism, which Spiessens compares to the narrative mode and language used by the perpetrators in Hatzfeld’s edited collection. This chapter offers an interrogation of the role of literature in helping us access the “intimate truth” of the genocide. It is here that the threads of the book really come together as we begin to see how Rwandans directly affected by the genocide are beginning to use fiction to engage with this “intimate truth”. Yet Spiessens’ analysis also reveals the ultimate *impuissance* of literature that sees itself as purely artistic when dealing with the subject of genocide, and we are left with a number of troubling questions: Is it possible to write about the

violence while refusing to take a position? Can the writer remain neutral or does the author need to be affected by their subject matter? Is it “obscene” for literature to even attempt this? Spiessens argues that Gatore “évacue complètement la dimension politique de son texte” (p. 375) which ultimately decontextualises his narrative. She concludes that “[u]ne littérature qui ne s’interroge pas de manière critique sur le rapport éthique qui la lie à la réalité violente et à la mémoire des rescapés, semble vouée à ne parler que d’elle-même” (p. 376-377).

An Anglophone reader may be surprised at the apparent lack of justification of the choice of texts analysed – some curious omissions, such as Benjamin Sehene’s *Le Feu sous la soutane* (2005), spring to mind – and the relatively little space devoted to establishing the methodology at the beginning of the book, but Spiessens’ critical approach goes straight to the heart of the subject and her textual analyses are rich, compelling and insightful. Through engaging with a range of texts that create a certain *polyphony*

of testimony, Spiessens re-interrogates the relationship between writing and reality, between language, violence and representation. Drawing on a range of theoretical bases – from sociology to linguistics – Spiessens’ *Quand le bourreau prend la parole* is a real interdisciplinary work that sheds light on a complex and challenging corpus, treating the texts as works of literature, paying particular attention to the form and style, as well as the critical power enacted by mediatory agents – writers, editors and translators. As such, the book is a timely contribution to the fields of genocide, memory and literary studies. The questions raised in the book open the path for further interrogation of the ethical dimension of working with perpetrator testimony; a different set of ethical rules are needed so as not to betray the survivors’ moral status as witnesses, and a different set of questions must be raised concerning the presentation and mediation of the perpetrator’s voice. ■

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◆ Anneleen Spiessens, *Quand le bourreau prend la parole. Témoignage et fiction*, Genève, Droz, 2016, 390 p.