having sought to find him around a trope or an ellipsis that we pretend to organize, and for [pour] years I have been going round in circles, trying to take as witness not to [pour] see myself but to [pour] re-member myself around a single event" (ibid., 59).


2. [In the section that follows, Derrida discusses the Latin etymology of témoignage, témoins, etc., an etymology that will soon be contrasted with the German family of Zeugen, Zeugnis, etc. with the English witness, to bear witness, as well as with the Greek marturion, etc. In order to maintain Derrida's intention of highlighting the Latin roots of the vocabulary at stake, témoins—i.e., witness—is in the following passages translated as "the one who testifies"—Ed.]


4. [Benveniste uses the term institution in the broadest possible sense, referring to all aspects of social organization. As he explains in the Preface, "The expression 'institution' is here understood in a wider sense: it includes not only the institutions proper, such as justice, government, religion, but also less obvious ones which are found in various techniques, ways of life, social relationships and the processes of speech and thought. The subject is truly boundless, the aim of our study being precisely to throw light on the genesis of the vocabulary which relates to it. Our starting point is usually one or the other of the Indo-European languages and the examples chosen come from the terms of pregnant value. Round the chosen datum, by an examination of its peculiarities of form and sense, its connexions and oppositions and, following this, by comparison with related forms, we reconstruct the context in which it became specialized, often at the cost of profound transformations. In this way we endeavour to restore a unity dissolved by processes of evolution, bringing buried structures to light and harmonizing the divergencies of technical usages. In so doing we shall also demonstrate how languages reorganize their systems of distinctions and renew their semantic apparatus" (Indo-European Language and Society, p. 11) —Ed.]

5. On occasion, Benveniste himself uses the word témoins to characterize a word or a text insofar as it attests to a use or an institution. See, e.g., the chapter on hospitality, where Benveniste writes, "Témoins ce texte."


8. "We," meaning a traditional community—I would not, in fact, say an institutional one in Benveniste's sense. This community must have been constituted out of a heritage in which language, linguistic feeling, is neither dominant nor just one element among others, and in which the history of Greek, Roman, Germanic, and Saxon systems of meaning is inseparable from philosophy, Roman law, or the two Testaments (in fact, from all the testaments out of which this tradition of bearing witness is made).


11. [Etymologically, the French term for oath, serment, derives from the Latin sacramentum —Ed.]


13. [Trans. modified —Ed.]

14. On this being-witness or, rather, on this becoming-witness of the judge or the arbiter and, conversely, on this being- or becoming-arbiter of the witness, which will lead to so many problems, obscurities, and tragic confusions, we should again appeal to Benveniste (Indo-European Language and Society, bk. 5, chap. 3, "law and the Oath in Rome").

15. In 1990-91, in "Circumfession," thus some years before this text's publication in 2000, the syntaxes and the meanings of the term pour, "for," found themselves at play or at work, from one end of the 59 periods to the other. For example: "and which piercing the night replies to my question: 'I have a pain in my mother,' as though she were speaking for me, both in my direction and in my place" (Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," trans. Geoffrey Bennington, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, Jacques Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 23). Also: "over the admission I owe the reader, in truth that I owe my mother herself for [car] the reader will have understood that I am writing for my mother, perhaps even for a dead woman ... for [car] if I were here writing for my mother, it would be for a living mother who does not recognize her son, and I am paraphrasing here for whomever no longer recognizes me, unless it be so that one should no longer recognize me, another way of saying, another version, so that people think they finally recognize me, but what credulity" (ibid., 25-26). Again, right at the question of witnessing, with which this text ends (cf. ibid., 314): "the witness I am seeking, for [pour], yes, for, without yet knowing what this vocable, for, means in so many languages, for already having found him, and you, no, according to you, for
from proof), this "as such" takes place as poem, as this poem, irre-PLACEably, in it, where nothing or no one can reply in its place, where it is silent, where it keeps its secret, all the while telling us that there is a secret, revealing the secret it is keeping as a secret, not revealing it, as it continues to bear witness that one cannot bear witness for the witness, who in the end remains alone and without witness. In The Step Not Beyond Blanchot speaks of a "word still to be spoken beyond the living and the dead, attesting for the absence of attestation." 

I would have liked to speak of this essential solitude of the witness. It is not just any solitude—or just any secret. It is solitude itself and the secret itself. They speak. As Celan says elsewhere, it speaks, the poem does, secretly, of the secret, through the secret, and thus, in a certain way, in it beyond it: "Aber das Gedicht spricht ja! Es bleibt seiner Daten eingedenk, aber—es spricht [But the poem does speak! It remains mindful of its dates, but—it speaks]." It speaks to the other by keeping quiet, keeping something quiet from him. In keeping quiet, in keeping silent, it still addresses. This internal limit to all witnessing is also what the poem says. It bears witness to it even in saying "no one bears witness for the witness." Revealing its mask as a mask, but without showing itself, without presenting itself, perhaps presenting its non-presentation as such, representing it, it thus speaks about bearing witness in general, but above all about the poem that it is, about itself in its singularity, and about the bearing witness to which every poem bears witness.

Left here to itself, in its essential solitude, in its performance or in its event, the poetic act of the work perhaps no longer derives from self-presentation as such.

2. Poetics and Politics of Witnessing

NOTE: This text was first published in English translation by Rachel Bowlby as ""A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text: Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in Revenge of the Aesthetics: The Place of Literature in Theory Today, ed. Michael Clark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 180-207. It was subsequently published in an expanded French version in Derrida, Cahiers
meaning "honored at the crossroads"). Hecate protects roads and is polygonymous, endowed with many names. We are selecting only the features that matter most to us here. An account of Hecate could be prolonged ad infinitum. For this goddess of the Dreiweg also has a privileged relationship with fire, with brightness, with burning—and so with consuming by fire, with ashes, as much as with glory. Her mouth exhales fire, she is pyro pneus ("breath of fire") (Atem, that word dear to the author of Atemwende, the title of the collection that includes Aeschenglorie, Atem, which we come across here again in Atem veil). Her hands brandish torches. The Chaldaean Oracles associate her with implacable thunderbolts and call her "flower of fire." Transporting fire from on high (think of the verticality and böher als oben in Celan), she is life-giving and fertile. But another chain of associations inverts these meanings and turns Hecate toward the moon and death. Her signs and her triadic nature then couple her with Mene or Selene, the moon, the goddess of the moon—which we see appearing in Celan’s poem. Some prayers to the moon invoke Hecate and Selene as one and the same goddess (three heads, crossroads, etc.): "This is why you are called Hecate of many names, Mene, you who split the air like Artemis the arrow-darter. . . . [II]t is from you that all proceeds and in you, who are eternal, that all comes to an end." Elsewhere, she becomes Aphrodite, universal procreator and mother of Eros, at the same time low and high "in the Underworld, the abyss and the aión (the forever, being in all times, the eternal)." Goddess of light but also of night, she keeps her festival in the night and the dawn. Hence she is also a goddess of death and the subterranean underworld, a goddess of Hades. This is the guise in which Hecate appears in Macbeth. Apart from the general knowledge that one might have of this, we know that Celan also translated Shakespeare. In the apparition of Hecate (Act 3, Scene 5), the three surfaces again in the form of the three witches who meet Hecate and speak with her ("Why, how now, Hecate! you look angrily!"). Hecate’s reply is about nothing other than death ("How did you dare, /To trade and traffic with Macbeth /In riddles and affairs of death"), glory ("or show the glory of our art"), the "pit of Acheron," the moon ("Upon the corner of the moon"), and so on.

With Acheron, or the Styx, we could return to Celan’s poem, to Pontisches Einmalts, the only time we cross the waves of the Black Sea. Because we cross them only once, the "Pontic once-upon" perhaps designating the passage of death. That is also where Odysseus is allowed to pass through only one single time to go and see the dead, when he goes to consult Tiresias. At the moment of death—and to reassure themselves about their fate after death, even if they were cremated—the Greeks needed a witness. They had to go by way of a trivium, where the path and the place of their destination would be decided.

There would be much to say here as well about Odysseus, or Elpenor, about his drunkenness and his oar, to which there is perhaps a reference, could we ever know, in the words ertrunkenen Ruderblatt, the blade of a drowned or drunken oar. There would be much to say as well on the subject of the vertical cord, the breath-robe (Atemwende), which perhaps, perhaps, alludes to the death of Tsvetaeva. We know what she represented for Celan. Tsvetaeva hanged herself in 1941 unwitnessed. She lived in the Tartar republic. Thus the Tartar moon (Tatarenmond) may condense at least two encrypted allusions, thereby—as is most often the case—foiling the unity of reference, and thus of reading, and thus of bearing witness, without, however, effacing the singularity of each event, of each date thereby re-lated, re-marked.

Whatever their probability or improbability, the "perhaps" of these singular references, which all appeal to dated testimony (e.g., we have to know who Tsvetaeva was and who she was for Celan, and how, where, and when she killed herself, she too, like him, etc.), we can say a priori that this poem speaks of death (for which there is no witnessing), perhaps of suicide, and that the "grub ich mich in dich und in dich" mean not only "I burrow, I bury" but also "I inter, I encrypt myself into you inside you": gruben, grub. Grab is the tomb: you are my tomb, my own tomb, you to whom I address myself, whom I take as witness, if only to say (to you) "no one bears witness for the witness."

Beyond or before everything that could be thought, read, or said of this poem, according to the "perhaps," the probability and the act of faith that a poetic experience is, beyond or before all the possible translations, a mark remains and is here re-marked: it is a certain limit to interpretation. In the end, it is in all certainty impossible to put a stop to the meaning or the reference of this poem, the meaning or the reference to which it bears witness or responds. Whatever one might say about it, and this can be drawn out ad infinitum, there is a line. It is not only marked by the poem. It is the poem, poetics, and the poetics of the poem—which conceals itself by exhibiting its concealment as such. But it is this "as such" that turns out to be doomed to the "perhaps." Probable and improbable (possible but removed
There, too, one does not know whether the glory is of ashes or the ashes are glorious, ashes of glory. This explains du Bouchet’s French translation, which reads “Cendres-la gloire [Ashes-glory]” rather than “Gloire de cendres [Glory of ashes].” “Ashes” is always in the plural here, of course: ashes never gather together their dissemination, and that is exactly what they consist in. They consist in not consisting, in losing all consistence. They have no more existence; they are deprived of any substance that gathers together and is identical to itself, deprived of any self-relation, any power, any ipseity.

That is confirmed (perhaps) via the association of the Dreiweg with the Pontische, with the petrifaction of the oath in its crypt, especially with the Tartar moon (Tatarenmond). There are at least two proper names (Pontische and Tatarenmond) whose referent seems unavoidable. Namely, perhaps, the goddess Hecate. Here is the stanza we have not yet read:

(Auf dem senkrecht·n
Atemseil, damals,
hoher als oben.
zwischen zwei Schmerzknoten, während
der blanke
Tatarenmond zu uns heraufkomm, 
grub ich mich in dich und in dich.)

The published translations say:

(Perpendiculaire, alors,
sur cette corde le souffle,
plus haut que le faite,
entre deux noeuds de douleur, cependant
que la blanche
lune tatare jusqu’à nous se hisse,
je m’enfouis en toi et toi. )
  (du Bouchet)

(Sur la corde de souffle
verticale, autrefois,
plus haute qu’en haut,
entre deux noeuds de souffrance, tandis que,
blanche,
la Lune des Tatares grimpait vers nous,
je me suis creusé en toi et en toi.)
  (Lefebvre)

(On the perpendicular
breath-rope, at that time,
higher than above,
between two pain-knots, while
the shiny
Tartar moon climbed up to us,
I burrowed into you and into you.)
  (Neugroschel)

It could also be translated:

(Sur la corde verticale
du souffle [corde vocale?] autrefois [damals, responding to Einstmals; il était une fois],
plus haut qu’en haut,
entre deux noeuds de douleur, pendant que
La nue [luisante, lisse, blanche] lune tatare se haussait [s’élévait] vers
nous
je m’enfouissais [je m’enterrais, je m’encyryptais, je m’inhumais] en toi et en toi.)

(On the vertical cord
of breath [vocal chord?], long ago [damals, which responds to Einstmals, from above; once upon a time],
higher than on high,
between two knots of pain, while
the bare [shiny, smooth, white] Tartar moon was raising itself [rising] toward us
I buried myself [I interred myself, I encrypted myself, I inhumed myself] into you and into you)

The name of the goddess Hecate is not pronounced. It remains, it will perhaps remain ineffaceable, beneath the surface of this poem, because of the association of the moon, the Pontic, and the three of the Dreiweg. However little one knows about the goddess Hecate, the first thing one remembers is that her most important trait is the three—and the tripleness of the way or road. She is trimorphic; she has three forms and three faces (tritropé). She is also the goddess of the crossroads, in other words, as the name at once indicates and does not indicate (quadrifurcatum), of a road branching off in four rather than three directions. Of course, but apart from all the Oedipal associations that multiply with every crossroads, we know that a crossroads can be made by the crossing of two, three, or four roads, hence in three ways. Now Hecate, goddess of crossroads, is called triothis (a word that comes from triothis, three ways; it is an epithet
this way, their judgment. The judge, the arbiter, the historian also remains a witness, a witness of a witness, when he receives, evaluates, criticizes, interprets the testimony of a survivor, for instance, a survivor of Auschwitz. Whether he accepts or contests this testimony, he remains a witness of the witness. He remains a witness even if he contests the first testimony by alleging that, since he has survived, the survivor cannot be a certain and reliable witness to what happened, namely, a witness to the existence of gas chambers or crematoria being put to this purpose, to put people to death—and that therefore he cannot bear witness for the only true witnesses, those who have died, and who by definition can no longer bear witness, confirm or refute the testimony of another. In this context, *Aschenglorie* also lets one hear, between the words, rising from the light of the ashes, something like a desperate sigh: no witness for the witness in this perverse situation, which will permit all judges, arbiters, all historians to hold the revisionist thesis to be fundamentally indestructible or incontestable.

Although he cannot be a witness "at the stand," the judge-arbiter-historian must also and still bear witness, if only to what he has heard attested. He must bear witness to the experience in the course of which, having been present, put in the presence of the testimony, he has been able to hear it, understand it, and can still reproduce the essence of it, etc. There would be here a third and testimony to testimony, witness for the witness. 14

"Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen": für is thus at the same time the most decisive and the most undecidable word in the poem. 15 Nothing prohibits any of these three readings. They are different, but not necessarily incompatible. On the contrary, they accumulate their potential energy deep in the crypt of the poem, thereby giving it its force of appeal and inducing our compulsion to cite-recite it without knowledge, beyond knowledge. In these three readings of für, which intensify the three with which we have not finished, even the verb of the stanza vacillates. Its tense vacillates; it makes its mood and the negation that affects it (Niemand zeugt) vacillate with it. The present indicative can signify a fact to be noted: no one bears witness. But, as is often the case (in French, too, especially when it is a question of law), "no one bears witness" implies: "no one *can* bear witness," "no one can, has been able, and will ever be able to bear witness for the witness" (with the three possible senses of "for" that we have just recalled). And as a result, this *being able*, this "not being able," is displaced and translates easily into a "must not" or an "ought not to": no one *can*, which is to say, no one *must*, no one *ought* to bear witness for the witness, replace the witness, defend the witness, bear witness in front of the witness, and so forth. One *cannot* and (in addition or moreover or above all) one *must* not bear witness *for* the witness. In all the senses of "for." One cannot and must not (claim to) replace the witness of his own death, for instance, someone who perished in the hell of Auschwitz (but that does not mean that this poem is a poem about Auschwitz—and for the very reason that I am in the process of pointing out again, namely, that no one bears witness for the witness). One cannot and must not replace (thus bear witness *for*) the witness of his or her own death, or the witness of others' deaths, the one who was present and survived, for instance, at the hell of Auschwitz.

And yet, in its own way, the poem bears witness to this impossibility. It attests to this prohibition imposed on bearing witness, in the very place where one has to go on appealing to it. This impossibility and this prohibition manifest themselves as such. Non-manifestation manifests itself *perhaps* as non-manifestation. Is this possible? How? How is one to understand this "perhaps"? Its possibility or its necessity?

It is a matter of death, if death is what one cannot witness for the other, and above all because one cannot witness it *for oneself* The surviving of surviving, as place of testimony and as testament, would here find at once its possibility and its impossibility, its chance and its threat. It would find them in this structure and in this event.

That this is a poem on the subject of death, a poem of death, a poem that speaks death as such, can be affirmed at no great risk. It can be affirmed where one cannot separate questions of the secret, the crypt, and testimony from questions of surviving and death. It can also be affirmed by taking as testimony the naming of ashes, of course. There are ashes there, *but* they are of glory. Or again, there is glory, light, fire, *but* already in ashes. Double possibility of the "but"—ash, certainly, and death, *but* glorious: glory, certainly, *but* of ash and death without memory. The double possibility of this implied "but" is, indeed, implied in the hyphen, which *is now effaced* at the end of the line to articulate and disarticulate the relationship between ashes and glory

Aschenglorie

(double word: we don't know which is the subject and which the predicate), and *is now effaced*, in a single, simple word, as in the incipit
to *this* poetic bearing witness, as to that which in *all* bearing witness must always appear as "poetic" (a singular act, concerning a singular event and engaging a unique, and thus inventive, relationship to language), that "extravagant proposal" of Murray Krieger: "the poem, in the very act of becoming successfully poetic—that is, in constituting itself poetry—implicitly constitutes its own poetic"?

Moreover, *taken by itself alone*, the last stanza

*Niemand

zeugt für den*  
*Zeugen.*

may vacillate or pivot; it seems to turn-re-turn around the axis of its own syntax. To the point of vertigo. The "for" (für) — what does it mean? We can offer at least three hypotheses.  

1. Is it about bearing witness *on behalf of* someone (I bear witness for you, I bear witness on your behalf, I am a witness for the defense, etc.)? *Zeugen für jenen* does in fact generally mean to bear witness *on behalf of* someone, as opposed to *zeugen gegen jenen*, to bear witness against someone.

2. Is it rather about "bearing witness for" the other in the sense of "in the place of" the other? And here refuting this possibility, this ability, this right, by recalling that no one can bear witness *in the place* of another, no more than anyone can die *in the place* of another? In this impossibility of substitution, we are put to the test of an alliance between death and the secret. The secret always remains the very experience of bearing witness, the privilege of a witness for whom no one can be substituted, because he is, in essence, the only one to know what he has seen, lived, felt; he must thus be *believed*, taken at his word, at the very moment when he is making public a secret that nonetheless remains secret. A secret as secret. Now even if we cannot say anything definite about it, *Auschenglorie* clearly remains a poem of death and the secret. The poem survives by bearing witness, through this alliance, to the surviving of the testi as superstiti.

If no one can replace anyone as witness, if no one can bear witness *for* the other as witness, if one cannot bear witness for a bearing witness without taking from it its worth as bearing witness (which must always be done in the first person), isn't it difficult to identify the witness with a third? We readily represent the third as anyone, as a replaceable first person: the third is a singular "I" in general. Now, nothing is both more and less substitutable than an "I." The question being announced on the horizon is indeed that of what one calls a first person, a discourse in the first person (singular or plural, I or we). Who is the "I" of the poem? This question displaces itself: it gets divided or multiplied, like the question of the signature, between the "I" of which the poem speaks, or to which the poem refers, reflexively (which can also sometimes be a *mentioned* or even a *cited* "I," if we want), the "I" who writes it or "signs" it in all the possible ways, and the "I" who reads it. How then is this self-referentiality determined, this autodeictic quality that is always posited or alleged by whoever says "I," thereby demonstrating, even if he is masked, that the speaker is showing himself and referring to himself? The form of this self-referential self-presentation is not only grammatical; it can be simply *implied* by discourses that are not conjugated in the first person present tense. As soon as I say "you," "your," and so on, I say or imply "I."

3. But there is still a third possibility: to bear witness "for" someone not in the sense of "on behalf of" or "in the place of" but "for" someone in the sense of "in front of" someone. One would then witness for someone who becomes the *addressee* of the testimony, someone to whose ears or eyes one is bearing witness. Then the phrase "no one bears witness for a witness" would mean that no one, no witness, delivers his or her testimony in front of someone who is also another witness. A witness, as such, is never in a position to receive the testimony of another; he is never entitled to do so. The judge or the tribunal, the representatives of the law, presupposed to be neutral and objective, can certainly receive a testimony, but another witness cannot, since he is as singular and as involved as the first witness. The judge or the tribunal, the arbiters, those who judge and decide, those who conclude, are not mere witnesses; they must not, should not, be only witnesses, in other words, subjects who find themselves in a singular fashion in the situation of being present at or participating in that for which testimony is given. They would be suspected, as any witness is suspect, of being interested parties, partial subjectivities, themselves involved, situated in the space described by the testimony. The judge, the arbiter, or the addressee of the testimony is thus not a witness: he cannot and must not be. And yet, in the final analysis, the judge, the arbiter, and the addressee *also* have to be witnesses; they have to be able to bear witness. In their turn, before their consciences or before others, to what they have attended, to what they have been present at, to what they have been in the presence of: the testimony of the witness at the witness stand. Only on the basis of this testimony will they be able to justify, in just
an oath. That is perhaps not unrelated to "Händen am Dreieck," or "Dreieck- Händen," which recurs on two occasions in Celan's poem. They are, first, tied to the tie, the knot (knoten, verknoteten). One might imagine that these "knots" are not related to the ties of the oath, for instance, the oath of stone the poem mentions: "im versteinerten Schwur." Second, they are tied to the knots of the hands ("er­schütterten verknoteten Händen") and of pain ("Schmerzknoten").

Stricto sensu, the inherited concept of bearing witness, determined culturally, implies, we were saying, some kind of oath, law, or sworn word. That's the reference to sacramentum, namely, to what is at issue between the parties involved in a trial, or in a dispute. The issue was entrusted, during the hearing, during the procedure known as per sacramentum, to the pontiff. "Pontiff" is not far from Pontisches, Pontisches Einstimma, about which we will have occasion to speak later.

But that does not necessarily mean that in every testimony we have to raise our hands and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It does not necessarily mean that every time we do what is called témoigner or déposer sous la foi du verment: unter Eid bezeugen, unter Eid aussagen, or to testify or to bear witness—which almost always has the value of "attesting under oath," before the law—we do it ritually. No, but even when the scene is not formalized in this way by an institutional code of positive law that would oblige us to observe this or that rite, there is in all testimony an implication of oath and of law.

This extension of the oath's implication may appear extraordinary and abusive, even extravagant, but I believe it to be legitimate, I will even say incontestable. Logically, it obliges one to take any address to another to be a testimony. Each time I speak or manifest something to another, I bear witness to the extent that, even if I neither say nor show the truth, even if, behind the "mask," I am lying, hiding, or betraying, every utterance implies "I am telling you the truth; I am telling you what I think; I bear witness in front of you to that to which I bear witness in front of me, what is present to me (singularly, irreplaceably). And I can always be lying to you. So I am in front of you as in front of a judge, before the law or the representative of the law. As soon as I bear witness, I am in front of you as before the law, but, as a result, you who are my witness, you who witness my bearing witness, you are also judge and arbiter, judge and party as much as judge and arbiter." We will come back to this essential possibility of the judge's becoming-witness or the witness's becoming-judge and becoming-arbiter.

I have already admitted: I will not attempt to interpret this poem. Not even its last lines:

Niemand
zeugt für den
Zeugen.

What then are we doing with this poem? And why are we quoting it? Why are we invoking its poetic force? Why are we borrowing its force even when and no doubt because, beyond all we might decipher of this poem, we don't finally know to what it is bearing witness? What we are calling here the force, the energy, the virtue of the poem, and above all in its language, is what makes us have to cite it, again and again, with an irresistible compulsion. For it is cited and re-cited, we tend to learn it by heart while knowing that we do not know what, in the end, it means, when we do not even know to what or for whom and for what it is bearing witness. For we do not know it, even if we can know a lot and learn a lot from it. We can "read" this poem, we can desire to read, cite, and re-cite it, while giving up on interpreting it, or at least on going over the limit beyond which interpretation encounters, at the same time, its possibility and its impossibility. What we have here is a compulsion to cite and re-cite, to repeat what we understand without completely understanding it, feeling at work in the economy of the ellipsis a power more powerful than that of meaning and perhaps even than that of truth, of the mask which would manifest itself as mask. The reciting compulsion, the "by heart" desire, stems from this limit to intelligibility or transparency of meaning.

Is not this limit that of a crypt, and thus of a certain secret? In bearing witness for bearing witness and for the witness, the poem says that there is no witness for the witness. No one bears witness for the witness. It is no doubt an indicative, a constative description, but also, implicitly, perhaps, a prohibiting prescription: no one in fact bears witness for the witness, no one can, of course, but first of all because no one should. No one can, for it must not be done. The possibility of the secret must remain sealed at the very moment when bearing witness unveils it—or claims to reveal anything at all.

The poem bears witness. We don't know about what and for what, about whom and for whom, in bearing witness for bearing witness, it bears witness. But it bears witness. As a result, what it says of the witness it also says of itself as witness or as bearing witness. As poetic bearing witness. Can we not, then, here transfer to bearing witness,
And in truth, as soon as you open your mouth. As soon as you open your mouth, as soon as you exchange a look, even silently, a “believe me” is already involved, which echoes in the other. No lie and no perjury can vanquish this appeal to belief; they can only confirm it; in profaning it, they can only confirm its invincibility. I can lie, perjure, or betray only by promising, under oath (be it implicit or explicit) to say what I believe to be the truth, only by pretending to be faithful to my promise.

Can this “believe” be thought? Is it accessible to the order of thought? The reason we referred to Being and Time and to what it demands of Bezügung, of the phenomenology of attestation, and precisely on the subject of Dasein’s authentic potentiality-of-being-one’s-self, is that Heidegger in several other places excludes or at any rate dissociates the order of faith or belief from that of thinking or philosophy. He does this very often, but in particular in an abrupt, late statement, from “Der Spruch des Anaximander” (“The Anaximander Fragment”). This statement radically excludes the order of belief from that of thinking in general. Heidegger then touches on a problem of translation. (I point it out because we too are caught up right here, in the scene of translation and bearing witness, and of the translation of the poem by Celan on bearing witness, of a poem that is virtually untranslatable and that bears witness about bearing witness.) It is for Heidegger precisely a question of the translation of a Spruch. Spruch: saying, maxim, decree, decision, poem, in any case, a saying that is not a theoretical or scientific statement and that is tied in a singular and “performative” way to language. Now what does Heidegger say in a passage that also concerns, precisely, presence (Anwesen, Präsenz), the presence that founds the classical value of bearing witness, this time presence as representation, in the “representation of representing” (“die Präsenz in der Repräsentation des Vorstellens”)? After proposing a translation of Anaximander’s saying, Heidegger declares: “Belief has no place in the act of thinking [Der Glaube hat im Denken keinen Platz].” This phrase is taken from an argument that must be reconstructed, at least in part:

We cannot prove [beweisen] the translation scientifically, nor should we, in virtue of some authority, have faith in it [geben es credit, believe it, glauben]. The reach of proof [understood: “scientific” proof] is too short [Beweis trägt zu kurz]. Belief has no place in the act of thinking. Translation can be rethought [reflected, nachdenken] only in the thinking [im Denken] of the saying [saying, Spruch: it is necessary to think the Spruch, the engaged saying, as poem, maxim, decision, pledge, in order to think, to rethink, on the basis of this, the possibility of translation, and not the other way around]. But thinking [das Denken] is the Dichten [the poem, poetizing, the poetical act or operation, the poetic that Krieger is perhaps speaking of in the passage quoted as epigraph—but the words act and operation are not quite right: there’s something there other than the activity of a subject, perhaps we should say “the event,” the “coming” of the poetic] of the truth of Being [der Wahrheit des Seins] in the historic conversation [dialogue, dual language] of thinkers [ge- schichtlichen Zweisprache der Denkenden].

Heidegger thus dismisses both scientific proof and belief, which might suggest that to this degree he gives credit to a non-scientific testimony. In this context, the believing of belief is the credulity that accredits authority, the credulity that shuts its eyes and acquiesces dogmatically to authority (Autorität is Heidegger’s word). Heidegger extends with no less force and radicality the assertion according to which believing has no place in thinking. Is this believing foreign to that which in thinking itself (in particular, the thinking that thinks in the Zweisprache and holds itself in relation to the Spruch of a thinker, in the experience of thinking translation) concerns the Bezügung, the attestation of which Being and Time speaks? Is there not a belief in the recourse to attestation (Bezügung) in the discourse that brings it into play? And in the experience of thinking in general, thinking as Heidegger refers to it, is there not an experience of believing that is not reducible to the credulity or passivity before authority that Heidegger here too easily excludes from thinking? And doesn’t the authority of some “believing,” “making believe,” “asking to believe” always necessarily insinuate itself in the invocation of a thinking of the truth of Being? What, in that which is not proof, holds the place of this Glauben in the thinking that Heidegger intends to think at the very moment when he excludes belief or faith?

II

“Raise your right hand and say, ‘I swear.’” To these words a witness must respond, when he appears before a French court. Whatever the meaning of the raised hand, it engages the visible body in the act of the oath. The same is true for the wedding ring worn on the finger. Now Schwurfinger means the three fingers that are raised in taking

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Another possible translation:

Autrefois Pontique: ici
une goutte
sur
la palme d'une rame noyée
au fond
du serment pétrifié
bruit.

Once Pontic: here
a drop
on
the palm of a drowned oar
at the bottom
of the petrified oath

sounds.

Suppose that we refrain, as I would wish to do here, from "commentary" on this poem. Even before doing so, in any case, and whatever the poem or its signatory means, whatever he intends to be bearing witness to, one cannot not link a priori this figure of the oath to that of bearing witness, which comes up at the end. There is no bearing witness without some involvement of an oath (Schwur) and without some sworn word [joi juré]. What distinguishes an act of bearing witness from the simple transmission of knowledge, from simple information, from the simple statement or mere demonstration of a proven theoretical truth, is that in it someone engages himself with regard to someone else, by an oath that is at least implicit. The witness promises to say or to manifest something to another, his addressee: a truth, a sense that was or is in some way present to him as a unique and irreplaceable witness. This irreplaceable singularity links the question of bearing witness to that of the secret but also, indissociably, to that of a death that no one can anticipate or see coming, neither give nor receive in the place of the other. With this attestation, there is no other choice but to believe it or not believe it. Verification or transformation into proof, contestation in the name of "knowledge," belong to a foreign space. They are heterogeneous to the moment proper to bearing witness. The experience of bearing witness as such thus presupposes the oath. It takes place in the space of this sacramentum. The same oath links the witness and his addressees, for example—but this is only an example—in the judicial scene: "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." This oath (sacramentum) is sacred: it marks acceptance of the sacred, acquiescence to entering into a holy or sacred space in the relationship to the other. Perjury itself implies this sacralization in sacrilege. The perjurer commits perjury as such only insofar as he keeps in mind the sacredness of the oath. Perjury, the lie, the mask, only appear as such ("the role of revealing the mask as mask") where they confirm their belonging to this zone of sacrificial experience. To this extent, at least, the perjurer remains faithful to what he betrays; he pays the homage of sacrilege and perjury to the sworn word; in betrayal, he sacrifices to the very thing he is betraying: he does it on the altar of the very thing he is thereby profaning. Whence at the same time the willlessness and the desperate innocence of he who would say: "in betraying, in betraying you, I renew the oath. I bring it back to life, and I am more faithful to it than ever, I am even more faithful than if I were behaving in an objectively faithful and irreproachable way, but was all the while forgetting the inaugural sacramentum." For the unshareable secret of the oath or perjury, for this secret that cannot even be shared with the partner in the oath, with the ally of the alliance, there is consequently only bearing witness and belief. An act of faith without possible proof. The hypothesis of proof does not even make sense any more. But because it remains alone and without proof, this bearing witness cannot be authorized through a third party or through another bearing witness. For this witness there is no other witness: there is no witness for the witness. There is never a witness for the witness. This is also, perhaps, what the Celan poem might mean. It is also this that all the world's "revisionisms" might always allege, inversely, when they reject all testimonies on the pretext that testimonies will never, by definition, be proofs. What is one to answer to an allegation that might be translated like this: I can bear witness to this before my conscience, I am betraying you, I am lying to you, but in doing so I remain faithful to you. I am even more faithful than ever to our sacramentum? No objection can be made, nothing can be proved either for or against such a testimony. To this act of language, to this "performative" of testimony and declaration, the only possible response, in the night of faith, is another "performative" that consists in saying or testing out, sometimes without even saying it, "I believe you."

How can this belief be thought? Where should we situate this faith, which does not necessarily have to take on the grand appearances of so-called religious faith? This act of faith is implied everywhere one participates in what are called scenes of bearing witness.
must be coextensive with presence to other things, with having-been-
present to other things and to the presence of the other, for instance,
to the addressee of the testimony. It is on this condition that the wit-
ess can respond, can answer for himself, be responsible for his testi-
mony, as well as for the oath by which he commits himself to it and
guarantees it. In their very concepts, perjury or lying as such presup-
pose that the liar or the perjurer is sufficiently self-present; he has to
keep, self-present, the meaning or the true meaning, in its truth, of
what he is concealing, falsifying, or betraying—and of which he can
then keep the secret. Keep it as such—and the keeping of this safe-
keeping is the movement of truth (veritas, verum, wahr, wahren, which
means to keep; Wahrheit: truth).

Here is one of the joints linking the problematics of the secret, of
responsibility, and of testimony. There is no lie or perjury without
responsibility, no responsibility without self-presence. This self-pres-
ence is, of course, often interpreted as self-consciousness. Under this
heading, bearing witness before the other would imply bearing wit-
ess before one's own consciousness; this can lead to a transcenden-
tal phenomenology of consciousness. But this self-presence is not
necessarily the ultimate form of consciousness or of self-conscious-
ness. It can take other forms of existence: that of a certain Da-sein, for
instance. Think of the role (phenomenological in another sense) that
the value of testimony or attestation can play in Heidegger's Sein und
Zeit (Being and Time), especially around the passages concerning, pre-
cisely, Da-sein's attestation (Bezeugung) to its originary possibility and
its authenticity (Eigentlichkeit). Da-sein must be able to testify about
itself: that is, in Being and Time, the axiom or testimony of the existen-
tial analytic of Da-sein. From the beginning, Heidegger announces the
bringing to light, the manifestation, the phenomenological presenta-
tion (Aufweis) of such an attestation (der phänomenologische Aufweis einer
solcher Bezeugung), namely, the phenomenology of an experience that
is itself phenomenological, in other words, that consists in a presenta-
tion. It is the presentation of a presentation, the testimony of or about
a testimony: here there is witness for the witness, testimony for the
testimony.

To return now to the Celan poem, let us again stress this double
reference to attestation (Bezeugung) in “Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen,” as a reference to the enigmatic and recurrent figure of the
three. While taking note of this crossover between the semantics of
the witness and that of the “three” or the third, let us beware of being
overhasty. Let us not pre-interpret this co-occurrence of the two mo-
ments in the Celan poem. Although this crossover is irreducible a priori
wherever there may be a question of the witness and of the three,
nothing allows us to go beyond this a priori in the reading of this
poem.

The same is true for the reference to the oath. The poem names the
oath and the petrified oath, that which sounds so deeply at the bottom
of the petrified oath, of the oath of stone, of the oath become stone:

Published translations:

Pontisches Einstmals: hier
ein Tropfen,
auf
dem ertrunkenen Ruderblatt
tief
im versteinerten Schwur
rauscht es auf.

L'Autrefois pontique: ici,
telle une goutte,
sur
le plat de la rame submergée,
au fond
du serment mué en pierre.
sa rumeur.

Pontische einstmal: hier

Ponce once-upon: here
a drop
on
the drowned oar-blade,
depth
in the petrified vow,
it roars up.

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who are placed in the order of believing or are asked to place themselves there. The witness marks or declares that something is or was present to him that is not so to the addressees to whom he is joined by a contract, an oath, a promise, by a sworn word [foi jure], whose performativity is constitutive of the testimony and makes it a pledge [oath], an engagement. Perjury even presupposes this sworn word, which it betrays. Perjury does indeed threaten all bearing witness, but this threat is irreducible in the scene of the sworn word and attestation. This structural threat is at once distinct and inseparable from the finitude that any testimony also presupposes, for any witness can make a mistake in good faith; he can have a limited, false perception, one that in any number of ways is misleading about what he is speaking about; this finitude, which is just as irreducible and without which there would be no place for bearing witness, is nonetheless other, in its effects, than the kind that obliges us to believe and makes lying or perjury always possible. There are thus two heterogeneous effects of the same finitude here, or two essentially different approaches to finitude: one that goes by way of error or hallucination in good faith, and one that goes by way of deceit, perjury, bad faith. Both must always be possible at the moment of bearing witness.

But the very possibility of lying and perjury (lying being a kind of perjury) attests that for us bearing witness, if there is such a thing, gains a sense only before law, before the promise, the pledge. It has a sense only in regard to a cause; justice, truth as justice. Here we will merely situate this difficulty at the moment where we encounter in the same word, marturion, and in a way that is not fortuitous, two heterogeneous meanings: (1) on the one hand, bearing witness (which belongs to the space of believing, of the act of faith, of pledge and signature, and we will constantly have to ask and re-ask ourselves: What does believe mean?); and (2) on the other hand, proof, guaranteed determination, the order of knowledge. It is always the alternation between Glauben und Wissen, the title of a work of Hegel, but also of an interminable debate between Kant and Hegel.

Whether it is phenomenological or semantic, we will not go so far as to say that this distinction between bearing witness and proof de facto exists, in the strong and strict sense of the word. We will not go so far as to say that it holds in reality, solidly, actually or presently. We are dealing here with a border that is at once rigorous and inconsistent, unstable, hermetic, and permeable, uncrossable de jure but de facto crossed. The entire problem stems from the fact that the crossing of such a conceptual limit is at once forbidden and constantly practiced.

But if there is bearing witness and if it answers properly, incontestably, to the name and the sense intended by this name in our "culture," in the world that we think we can, precisely, inherit and to which we can bear witness, then this bearing witness must not essentially consist in proving, in confirming a knowledge, in ensuring a theoretical certitude, a determinant judgment. It can only appeal to an act of faith.

To complete this inspection of the Greek vocabulary, next to marturion there is marturia, which means the action of deposing or giving a deposition: it is the attestation, the deposition of a witness. Marturias is to call to witness, to invoke witnesses, to take as witness. A good example of this "take as witness," a sentence from the Civil War of the historian Appian of Alexandria, says: marturamenos emauton te philotimias, "I take myself as witness to my zeal, to my ambition, to my taste for honors." Another common translation: "I take my conscience as witness to my ambition." Someone bears witness in front of others, because he is speaking, because he is addressing others; but he takes the others as witnesses to what he first of all takes himself as witness to, the fact that he is sufficiently conscious, self-present, to bear witness in front of others, of what he bears witness to, of the fact that he bears witness, and of that to which he bears witness, in front of others.

Why this translation? Why this example? Because in it we encounter one of the irreducible folds of bearing witness and presence, of being present as witness [de l'assistance], of being present as witness, in existence, as presence: it is the fold of presence as self-presence. A witness can claim his having been present at this or that, having been witness to this or that, having had the experience of or having experienced this or that, only on the condition of being and having been sufficiently self-present as such, only on the condition of claiming, at any rate, to have been sufficiently conscious of himself, sufficiently self-present to know what he is talking about. There are no masks here any longer. If there still were, the masks would be exhibited as masks, in their truth of being masks. I can claim to offer reliable testimony only if I claim to be able to witness about it in front of myself, sincerely, without mask and without veil, only if I claim to know what I saw, heard, or touched, only if I claim to be the same as yesterday, if I claim to know what I know and mean what I mean. And thus to reveal or unveil—beyond the mask or the veil. In bearing witness, self-presence, the classic condition of responsibility.
not mean "I prove," but "I swear that I saw, I heard, I touched, I felt, I was present." That is the irreducible sense-perceptual dimension of presence and past presence, of what can be meant by "being present" and especially by "having been present," and of what that means in bearing witness. "I bear witness"—that means: "I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, sense-perceptible), and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, you have to believe me, because I engage myself to tell you the truth, I am already engaged in it. I tell you that I am telling you the truth. Believe me. You have to believe me."

The addressee of the testimony, the witness of the witness, does not see what the first witness says she or he saw; the addressee did not see it and never will see it. This direct or immediate access of the addressee to the object of the testimony is what marks the absence of this "witness of the witness" to the thing itself. This absence is essential. It is connected to the speech or the mark of testimony to the extent that speech can be dissociated from what it is witness to: for the witness is not present either, of course, presently present, to what he recalls, he is not present to it in the mode of perception, to the extent that he bears witness, at the moment when he bears witness; he is no longer present, now, to what he says he was present to, to what he says he perceived; he is no longer present, even if he says he is present, presently present, here and now, through what is called memory, memory articulated in a language, to his having-been-present.

II

This "you have to believe me" must be rightly understood. "You have to believe me" does not have the sense of the theoretico-epistemic necessity of knowledge. It is not presented as a probative demonstration, where we cannot but subscribe to the conclusion of a syllogism, to the chain of an argumentation, or, indeed, to the display of a thing present. Here, "you have to believe me" means "believe me because I tell you to, because I ask it of you," or, equally well, "I promise you to tell the truth and to be faithful to my promise, and I engage myself to be faithful." In this "you have to believe me," the "you have to," which is not theoretical but performative-pragmatic, is as determining as the "believe." At bottom, it is perhaps the only rigorous introduction to the thought of what "to believe" might mean. When I subscribe to the conclusion of a syllogism or to the production of proof, it is no longer an act of belief, even if the one who conducts the demonstration asks me to "believe" in the truth of the demonstration. A mathematician, a physicist, or a historian does not seriously, as a scholar, ask me to believe him or her. He does not appeal, in the final analysis, to my belief at the moment when he presents his conclusions.

"What is believing?"—what are we doing when we believe (which is to say all the time, and as soon as we enter into relationship with the other): this is one of the questions that cannot be avoided when one tries to think about bearing witness.

In spite of the examples invoked to begin to make things a little clearer, bearing witness is not through and through and necessarily discursive. It is sometimes silent. It has to engage something of the body, which has no right to speak. We should thus not say, or believe, that bearing witness is entirely discursive, through and through a matter of language. But we will not, in general, call "bearing witness" something that is not open to the order of the comme tel, of the present or having-been-present comme tel, en tant que tel, of the as such or of this as that Murray Krieger rightly stresses—as truth itself, the truth of the lie or the simulacrum, the truth of the mask—in the sentence quoted in the epigraph ("the role of revealing the mask as mask"). This "as such" is presupposed by language, unless on its side it presupposes at least the possibility of a mark, or a pre-linguistic experience of the mark or the trace "as such." This is where the whole formidable problem of the apophantic opens up—of the as such, of presence and of language. We will not enter into it directly here in its own right.

Whoever bears witness [in English in the original] does not provide proof; he is someone whose experience, in principle singular and irreplaceable (even if it can be cross-checked with others in order to become proof, in order to become probative in a verification process) attests, precisely, that some "thing" has been present to him. This "thing" is no longer present to him, of course, in the mode of perception at the moment when the attestation takes place: but it is present to him, if he alleges this presence, as presently re-presented in memory. At any rate, even if—something unusual and improbable—it were still contemporary at the moment of attestation, it would be inaccessible, as perceived presence, to the addressees receiving the testimony.
Here Benveniste’s statements open onto a larger context that we should reconstruct, in particular around supraste, the one who survives determined as one who testifies, and around testis, testes, determined as third. The one who testifies is the one who will have been present. He or she will have been present at, in the present, the thing to which he testifies. The motif of presence, of being-present or of being-in-presence, always turns out to be at the center of these determinations. In The Differend, a book in which the question of the witness plays a large role, Jean-François Lyotard addresses this question of the witness as third person a number of times, without reference to Benveniste or to Celan. But by privileging the example of Auschwitz and the debate about “revisionism” (which is, naturally, a debate about the status of testimony and of survival), he problematizes the idea of God as absolute witness.

Obviously, we must take into account an undeniable fact: like the institutions to which it is thought to refer, which it ought to reflect, represent, or incarnate, Latin semantics (testis, testes, supraste) denotes only one etymologico-institutional configuration among others—even one among others for “us,” assuming that we can say “we” Westerners. It cannot, for example, be found in German.

The family Zeugen, bezeugen, Bezeugung, Zeugnis, translated as “witness,” “to bear witness,” “testimony,” “attestation,” belongs to a completely different semantic network. One would be hard put, in particular, to find in it explicit reference to the situation of the third, not to mention presence. All these words, in a family that we would not dare simply to call homonymy, recur in a fundamental way in Celan’s poem (Zeug, Zeugen, Zeugung). Elsewhere, they also mean “tool, procreation, engendering,” and, precisely, “generation”—at the same time biological and familial. Following what the word lémoin (terstis, testis) testifies to by its supposed genealogy, we have also what the word Zeugen bears witness to in its supposed genealogy or generation. If we consider the lémoin, the one who testifies, to be testis supraste, the surviving third, even the testamentary heir, guarantor, and legatee, in principle, of what was and is now gone, then the crossover between, on the one hand, a genealogical or generational semantics of Zeugen and, on the other hand, the semantics of testis supraste becomes vertiginous.

Crossover of a vertiginous filiation, yes, perhaps. But it is a vertigo that turns our heads, a vertigo in which we will turn and let ourselves be turned round, even sink down, and not only in between the tropes, stanzas or strophes, and apostrophes of Celan.

In English, with testimony and to testify, attestation, protest, testament [in English in the original], the Latin root does, of course, remain. It thus articulates for us the two themes of survival and testimony. But the family of witness and bearing witness [in English in the original] is something else altogether. It opens, no doubt, onto the aspect of seeing (a privileging of ocular witnessing), and thus toward another semantic and poetic space in the final words of Celan’s poem in [English] translation: “No one bears witness for the / witness.” Finally—but this is where we should have begun—Greek makes no explicit reference to the third, to surviving, to presence, or to generation: martus, martire, the witness, who becomes the martyr, the witness of faith, does not literally entail any of these values (third, surviving, presence, generation). Marturion means, following the institutional usage, “bearing witness,” but also “proof.”

Here we touch on a sensitive and deeply problematic distinction: between bearing witness, the act or experience of bearing witness as “we” understand it, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, proof—in other words, between bearing witness and, on the other hand, theoretical-constative certitude. This conceptual distinction is as essential as it is unsurpassable in principle, de jure. But the confusion always remains de facto possible, so fragile and easily crossed can the limit sometimes appear, whatever the language and word may be. For this is not limited to the Greek marturion alone: the Latin testimonium—testimony, deposition, attestation—can come to be understood as proof. Therefore, language cannot of itself alone, as a lexicon or dictionary would do, be guardian and guarantor of a usage. A pragmatic slippage from one sense to another, sometimes in the passage from one sentence to another, can always occur. We should ask for what necessary—not accidental—reasons the sense of “proof” regularly comes to contaminate or divert the sense of “bearing witness.” For the axiom we ought to respect, it seems to me, even though it may be problematized later, is that bearing witness is not lying. Bearing witness is heterogeneous to producing proof or exhibiting a piece of evidence. In the case of a statement under oath, bearing witness appeals to the act of faith [acte de foi], and thus takes place in the space of pledged or sworn word [ser juré] (“I swear to tell the truth”), or of a promise engaging a responsibility before the law, a promise always open to betrayal, always hanging on the possibility of perjury, infidelity, or abjuration.

What does “I bear witness” mean? What do I mean when I say “I bear witness” (for one only bears witness in the first person)? I do
Ash-
glory behind
your three-forked
hands.
(Neugroschel)

One could also translate another way:

Gloire
de cendres derrière
vous les mains
du triple chemin.

Glory
of ashes behind
you the hands
of the triple road.

Euch (plural you) has just replaced the deinen of the second line ("deinen erschüttert-verknoteten / Händen am Dreieweg"; thine, thy hands, the hands that are thine). The addressee of the apostrophe is pluralized. At any rate, it is no longer simply the same, no longer reducible to the being in the singular, masculine or feminine, to whom the first stanza is addressed. The two stanzas turn, they turn round, as a stanza [strophe] and an apostrophe always do. The latter, in a line [vers], turns toward [vers]. The two stanzas apostrophize more than one addressee. They turn from one toward the other; they turn away from one toward others; they return. They turn round; they turn around, from one to the other.

Why even point out this allusion to the three, whether in connection with the road (Dreieweg) or hands (Dreieweg/Händen)? Because in fact we will soon be butt ing up against this motif of the third in the scene of possible/impossible testimony, of possible testimony as impossible. In its Latin etymology, witness, ténmin (testis), the one testifying, is the one who is present as a third (tertius). We would have to look very closely to understand what this might imply. Testis has a homonym in Latin. It usually occurs in the plural, to mean "testicles." Plautus plays on the word in Curculio, and exploits this homonym. Testittrabus means at once complete and male, masculine. Some feminists, men or women, could, if they wanted, playfully or not, derive from this an argument about the relations between a certain thinking of the third and testimony, on the one hand, and the chief, the head and phallocentric capital, on the other. It is true that, in English, testis, testes has kept the sense of testicle—which could be an incitement to militancy.

In the chapter "Religion and Superstition" in his Vocabulaire des institutions européennes (Indo-European Language and Society), Benveniste analyzes a word, superstitio, which can mean témoin, "the one testifying," in the sense of surviving: someone who, having been present then having survived, plays the role of the one who testifies. He both associates superstitio and testis and distinguishes between them: "We can now see the difference between superstitio and testis. Etymologically testis means the one who is present as the 'third' person (tertius) at a transaction where two persons are concerned; and this conception goes back to the common Indo-European period." As always, Benveniste analyzes the etymology by following the line of a genealogical recollection that goes back to institutions, customs, practices, pragmatics. In this invaluable but profoundly problematic work, which wants to be a "vocabulary of Indo-European institutions," words are selected and then placed in a network according to institutional figures, to which they are also supposed to testify. The words testify to institutions; the vocabulary attaches to an institutional meaning. But even assuming that the meaning exists before and outside of these words (an improbable hypothesis, or one with little sense), it is at any rate sure that the meaning does not exist without these words, which is to say, without that which testifies to it, in a sense of testifying that remains highly enigmatic but inescapable. If the words testify to a usage and an institutional practice, the paradox here is concentrated in the analysis of the word testis, tertius, which attests, with regard to knowledge, thus giving rise to this putative knowledge, to the existence of an institution or a practice, a social organization, a "conception"—Benveniste's word—which, he says, "goes back to the common Indo-European period." In order to illustrate—in reality, to establish—this filiation, to prove this fact, Benveniste adds:

A Sanskrit text has it: "every time two persons are together, Mitra is there as the third person," thus Mitra is by nature "the one who testifies." But superstitio describes the one who testifies as the one "who survives," as the one who testifies in virtue of his surviving, or as "the one who keeps to the thing," who is present at it.

We can now see what superstitio can and must theoretically signify, namely the quality of being a superstitio. This would be the "property of being present" as "the one who testifies."
A decision, as its name indicates, always appears as interruption, it decides inasmuch as it is a cut that tears. What counts, then, is not that the poem names some motifs we know in advance must be at the heart of a reflection on responsibility, bearing witness, or poetics. What matters most is the strange limit between what can and cannot be determined or decided in this poem’s bearing witness to bearing witness. For this poem says something about bearing witness. It bears witness to it. Now in this bearing witness to bearing witness, in this apparent meta-witnessing, a certain limit makes meta-witnessing—that is, absolute witnessing—at the same time possible and impossible.

Let us try to go into the region of this limit, to the passage of this line. We will be guided by a hypothesis: this line is perhaps also the line of necessary “extravagance” of which Murray Krieger speaks.

We have just alluded to some motifs that are in some way signaled by this poem and that we know in advance intersect at the heart of the questions of responsibility, of the secret, of bearing witness.

What, then, are these motifs? Well, for example, the three, the figure of everything that carries beyond the two, the duo, the dual, the couple. Three is named two times, in the first stanza and close to the final stanza, which names, precisely, the Aschen (Aschenglorie, to repeat, in one single word) in the first line, but Aschen-glorie, cut or gathered by a hyphen across two lines, near the end). Two times there is a trileness, which affects the road (Weg) and the hands (Händen), the knotted hands (let us also keep hold of the knot, the knotting of the link and the hands).

ASH-GLORY behind
your shaken-knotted
hands on the three-forked road.
(Neugroschel)

It would also be possible to translate as follows:

GLOIRE POUR LES CENDRES, derrière
tes mains défaillées effondrées—toutes nouées
à la fourche des trois voies.

GLORY FOR ASHES, behind
thy demolished collapsed hands—all knotted
at the fork of the three ways.

I am not satisfied with this “pour les cendres,” “for ashes,” because the phrase concerns the glory of ashes as much as the glory promised to ashes. If, as I also considered doing, we translated this as “glorie aux cendres [glory to ashes],” it would be necessary to hear in it not only the glorification of ashes, but, as one might say of a still life, the figure of glory surrounded by ashes, having a background or an ornament of ashes. So many ways of noting the poetic stroke of genius in this untranslatable Aschenglorie. The composite word remains untranslatable, untranslatable word for word, one word for the other, there where it does not decompose. For in the original version it is not divided, as it will be lower down, near the end, disarticulating and unifying itself with itself, this time, at the end of the line, via a strange hyphen. Such a hyphen is also an act of poetical memory. It re-marks, in return, the incipit; it gives a reminder of the initial undividedness of Aschenglorie:

ASCHENGLORIE hinter
den erschuttert-verknoteten
Händen am Dreiweg.

Let us quote French and English translations; they are not wholly satisfactory, but no one should pose as an authority here, by definition:

CENDRES-LA GLOIRE revers
de tes mains heurtées-nouées pour jamais
sur la triple fourche des routes.
(du Bouchet)

GLOIRE DE CENDRES derrière
tes mains nouées-bouleversées
au Trois-chemins.
(Lefebvre)

GLOIRE POUR LES CENDRES, derrière
tes mains défaillées effondrées—toutes nouées
à la fourche des trois voies.

GLORY FOR ASHES, behind
thy demolished collapsed hands—all knotted
at the fork of the three ways.

(Cendres-la gloire, revers
de vous—fourche triple,
mains.
(du Bouchet)

Gloire de
cendres
derrière vous, mains
au Trois-chemins
(Lefebvre)
name (and metonymic name—an immense problem that I leave hanging here) of “Auschwitz.” The German language of this poem will have been present at everything that was capable of destroying by fire and reducing to “ash” (Auchenglorie is the first word of the poem, a double and divided word) existences of innumerable number—innumerable. Innumerably but also unnameably, unspeakably, revoltingly, incinerating thus, together with the name and the memory, even the guaranteed possibility of testimony. And since I have just said “even the guaranteed possibility of testimony,” we will have to ask whether the concept of testimony or bearing witness is compatible with a value of certitude, of warrant, and even of knowing as such.

Ash, this is also the name of what annihilates or threatens to destroy even the possibility of bearing witness to annihilation. Ash is the figure of annihilation without remainder, without memory, or without a readable or decipherable archive. Perhaps that would lead us to think of this fearful thing: the possibility of annihilation, the virtual disappearance of the witness, but also of the capacity to bear witness. Such would be the only condition for bearing witness, its only condition of possibility as condition of its impossibility—paradoxical and aperiotic. When testimony appears guaranteed and then becomes a demonstrable theoretical truth, part of a legal proceedings or report, a substantiation of evidence or even a piece of evidence, it risks losing its value, its sense or its status as testimony. That comes down to saying—always the same paradox, the same paradoxeopoetic matrix—that as soon as it is guaranteed, certain as a theoretical proof, a testimony can no longer be guaranteed as testimony. For it to be guaranteed as testimony, it cannot, it must not, be absolutely certain, absolutely sure and certain in the order of knowing as such. This paradox of as such is the paradox we can experience—and there is nothing fortuitous about this—apropos of the secret and responsibility, of the secret of responsibility and the responsibility of the secret. How can one manifest a secret as secret? To take up Murray Krieger’s words again, how can one reveal a mask as a mask? And in what way is a poetic opus called upon to put this strange operation to work?

So it is necessary first to hear these lines in their own tongue, and to see them in their space. Necessary out of respect for their spacing, but above all because the spaced writing of this language does not admit of translation into a simple speech, French or English. We see already announcing itself the poignant question of untranslatable testimony. Because it must be linked to a singularity and to the experience of an idiomatic mark—for example, that of a language—testimony resists the test of translation. It thus risks not being able to cross the frontier of singularity, if only to deliver its meaning. But what would an untranslatable testimony be worth? Would it be a non-testimony? And what would a testimony that was absolutely transparent to translation be? Would it still be a testimony?

Ash, we were saying, annihilates or threatens to annihilate even the possibility of bearing witness to annihilation.

It so happens that Celan’s poem has as its title its own incept. Its first line speaks of ashes, and it appears quite translatable. Du Bouchet translates Auchenglorie, a single word, with three words, as Cendres-la gloire; Lefebvre does the same, in Gloire de cendres; Neugroschel uses two hyphenated words, Ash-glory. Word-for-word translation is already impossible. Infidelity has begun, and betrayal and perjury, from the very threshold of this arithmetic, with this accountability of the incalculable. The poetic force of a word remains incalculable, all the more so, surely, when the unity of a word (Auchenglorie) is that of an invented composition, the inauguration of a new body. All the more so, surely, when the birth of this verbal body gives the poem its first word, when this first word becomes the word that comes at the beginning. En arkté en bo logos. And if for John this logos is a light, here it is a light of ashes. In the beginning was (the word) Auchenglorie.

This glory of ashes, this glory of ash, this glory which is that of ashes but is also of ash, in ashes—and glory, at the very least, the light or shining brightness of fire—here sheds light on a poem that I shall not even attempt to interpret with you. Light is also knowing, truth, meaning. Now this light is no more than ashes here, it becomes ash, it falls into ashes, as a fire goes out. But (and the mobile and unstable articulation of this “but” will be important for us) ashes are also of glory, they can still be renowned and renamed, sung, blessed, loved, if the glory of the renowned and renamed is not reducible either to fire or to the light of knowing. The brightness of glory is not only the light of knowing [connaissance], and not necessarily the clarity of knowledge [savoir].

Why not even attempt to interpret this poem? I’d like to try to explain this limit here. What matters is not what this poem means, or that it mean, or that it bear witness to this or that, or even that it names and what it names—elliptically, as always. Ellipsis and caesura and the cut-off breath no doubt designate here, as always in Celan, that which, in the body and in the rhythm of the poem, seems most
somewhere else, or of obeying its laws like a transcendent authority, but rather by itself promising, in the act of its event, the foundation of a poetics. It would be a matter, then, of the poem "constituting its own poetics," as Krieger puts it, a poetics that must also, through its generality, become, invent, institute, offer for reading, in an exemplary way, signing it, at the same time sealing and unsealing it, the possibility of this poem. This would come about in the event itself, in the verbal body of its singularity: at a particular date, at the both unique and repeatable moment of a signature that, in the reference that carries it beyond itself, toward the other or toward the world, opens the verbal body to things other than itself.

As testimony of warm gratitude. I would like to take, in my turn, a certain risk, in order to share it with Murray Krieger—the risk of "entertain[ing] such an extravagant proposal." And to try it out, I would like to put to the test this experience of bearing witness. Wanting to recall places where, for over ten years, I have enjoyed living near Murray Krieger, I chose to return to a particular text of Celan that I happened to read with my students at the University of California, Irvine, in the course of a three-year seminar about witnessing. And especially about responsibility, when it engages a poetic signature, at a singular date. Hypothesis to be verified: all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language.

I

Without renouncing, far from it, thinking about the secret within the horizon of responsibility, how must one come up against the question of testimony (testimonium)? And why is the question of testimonium no different from that of the testamentum, of all the testaments, in other words, of surviving in dying, of surviving before and beyond the opposition between living and dying?

ASCHENGLORIE hinter . . .

Niemand
zeugt für den Zeugen.

CENDRES-LA GLOIRE révers . . .

Nul
ne témoigne
pour le témoin.

(du Bouchet)
Sovereignties in Question

The Poetics of Paul Celan

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Poetics and Politics of Witnessing

The world becomes its language and its language becomes the world. But it is a world out of control, in flight from ideology, seeking verbal security and finding none beyond that promised by a poetic text, but always a self-unsealing poetic text.

— Murray Krieger, *A Reopening of Closure: Organicism Against Itself*

[It is the role of art to play the unmasking role—the role of revealing the mask as mask. Within discourse it is literary art that is our lighthouse... It would seem extravagant to suggest that the poem, in the very act of becoming successfully poetic—that is, in constituting itself poetry—implicitly constitutes its own poetic. But I would like here to entertain such an extravagant proposal.

— Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*

Signing, sealing, revealing, unsealing. This will be about bearing witness. And about poetics as bearing witness—but testamentary witness: attestation, testimony (in English in the original), testament.

A poem can “bear witness” to a poetics. It can promise it, it can be a response to it, as to a testamentary promise. Indeed it must, it cannot not, do so. But not with the idea of applying a previously existing art of writing, or of referring to one as to a charter written...