

НОВЫЙ ФОРМАТ

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WITNESSING THE UNSPEAKABLE: ON TESTIMONY AND TRAUMA IN SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH'S THE WAR'S UNWOMANLY FACE AND ZINKY BOYS²

Perhaps following Michel Foucault's notion from *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, where the French philosopher argues that Western societies became obsessed with the task of confessing and producing truth (which turned the Western man into „a confessing animal“), Shoshana Felman claims that „testimony [is] [...] the literary – or discursive – mode *par excellence* of our times, and [that] [...] our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony“ [Felman, 1992, 5]. Defining it as a new form of literature, various scholars compare the genre of testimony with classical autobiographical and/or confessional forms of textuality and emphasize that testimonial literature significantly differs from previous textual forms in its appellative function. The unusually important role of the listener (or the witness of the testimonial speech act) rapidly alters the relationship between the subject (a witness) and the object (a listener) of a speech act. If we understand testimonial literature in a broader sense, i.e. as a form of textuality that refers to the abuse of human rights, violence and war, we could simultaneously consider it as a statement and as a declaration of the (un)speakability of a trauma. Considering the fact that literature in general and especially testimonial literature present a form of representation *par excellence*, while trauma illustrates exactly the opposite, i.e. a crisis in

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representation, testimonial literature is structured around extremely complex tensions between expressivity and speechlessness, the speakable and unspeakable and representative and non-representative. In that respect, the relationship between the subject (a witness) and the object (survivor's recollections) of a speech act is distorted on another level. Traumatic experience is, namely, almost never represented in a form of a „simple memory“ [Caruth, 1995, 151]. Every testimonial act therefore inevitably faces the question of finding the adequate discursive medium for the transfer and articulation of that experience. That search often results in narrative strategies that are characterized by the fact that *they govern the subject that pronounces them* (as in the cases of uncontrolled/unwilling speech acts in cases when recollection of traumatic experience comes to its critical pinnacle).

By means of a close reading of testimonial narratives by war survivors, collected by the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich in her works *The War's Unwomanly Face* (1985) and *Zinky Boys* (1991), my aim is to address and closely analyze the aforementioned tensions located inside the body of testimonial literature.

Keywords: testimonial literature, Svetlana Alexievich, cultural memory, autobiography, language of trauma

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**СВИДЕТЕЛЬСТВО О НЕВЫРАЗИМОМ:
О ЖАНРЕ СВИДЕТЕЛЬСТВА И О ТРАВМЕ В ТЕКСТАХ
С. АЛЕКСИЕВИЧ**

«У войны не женское лицо» и «Цинковые мальчики»

Определяя жанр свидетельства как новую форму литературы, характерную именно для литературы конца XX и начала XXI веков [Felman, 1992, с. 5], разные ученые сопоставляли этот жанр с классическими автобиографическими способами повествования и одновременно подчеркивали, что свидетельства отличаются своей четко выраженной аппелятивной функцией. Необыкновенно важная роль слушателя (т.е. свидетеля речевого акта свидетельства) влияет на структуру и динамику отношений между субъектом (свидетель) и

объектом (слушатель) речевого акта. Одновременно, если жанр свидетельства понимать в более широком смысле, т.е. как нарративную форму, которая свидетельствует о лишении человеческих прав, насилии и последствиях войны, этот жанр в то же время изображает (не)выразимость травмы. В этом смысле следует подчеркнуть, что в то же время как литература представляет собой «возможность репрезентации», т.е. возможность представления одного в другом и посредством другого, травма является хорошим примером «кризиса репрезентации». В итоге, жанр свидетельства основывается на особенно комплексных внутрижанровых тензиях между выразительным и невыразительным, представляемым и непредставимым, причем свидетельства о травматических опытах одновременно являются свидетельствами их непреодолимости. Из-за символической аморфности опыта травмы, история травмы является историей молчания, историей вытесненного, непроговоренного, из-за чего свидетель «неизбежно сталкивается с проблемой поиска адекватных дискурсивных средств» [Ушакин, 2009, с. 16]. В том числе следует подчеркнуть, что отношения между субъектом и объектом речевого акта в жанре свидетельства нарушены также на уровне свидетеля (субъекта) и им произносимого свидетельства (объекта).

Эта статья представляет собой попытку анализа выше упомянутых внутрижанровых тензиях в отношении субъекта (свидетель) и объекта (слушатель; произносимая речь свидетеля) на примерах свидетельств, собранных белорусской писательницей Светланой Алексиевич в ее книгах *У войны не женское лицо* (1985) и *Цинковые мальчики* (1991).

Ключевые слова: жанр свидетельства, Светлана Алексиевич, культуральная память, автобиография, язык травмы

1. Introduction

Autobiographical genres, which P. Lejeune defines as “all retrospective narrative prose written by a real person concerning his own existence” [Lejeune, 1989, p. 193], pose an intriguing problem for literary theory when it comes to the problematic relationship between the narrating subject and object activated by such narrative mode (the Other). From the 70s up until today, the autobiographic discourse has been a common topic

of research for numerous literature theoreticians and historians, who have focused primarily on the issues of the importance, role and nature of the Other in the creation of the author's subjectivity [see e.g. Burt, 2009]. In this respect, the "I" of an autobiography can neither be textually represented nor available to its author or reader, except as an object of their own desires, ideas and thoughts. This wide and heterogeneous problem area in literary theory has attracted the interest of some of the most prominent philosophers in the field, such as J. Derrida and P. de Man. In my paper, I will attempt to reduce the manifold problem of the autobiography to the following two aspects:

1. the subject as a narrator who in the course of his or her testimony becomes the object of his or her own speech due to "genre memory" (Bakhtin) and other types of "superconsciousness" governing the speech act;
2. the subject as a narrator, the signatory party of the autobiographical testimony in relation to the object of testimony – the real or implied interlocutor.

These problems can undoubtedly be observed on a range of various autobiographical genres, whereby each narrative type would offer different answers and interpretations to the question of the relationship between the subject and object of an autobiography. However, this paper will focus exclusively on the genre of testimonial literature, or to be more exact, on Svetlana Alexievich's testimony collections *The War's Unwomanly Face* (*Войны не женское лицо*)¹ and *Zinky Boys* (*Цинковые мальчики*).²

¹ *The War's Unwomanly Face* is Svetlana Alexievich's first collection containing testimonies of women who were 15 to 30 years old during World War II. The book was first published in Minsk in 1985. In the same year, it was translated to Bulgarian and Chinese, and in the following years also to Czech, Vietnamese, German, English, Hungarian, Romanian, Finnish and numerous other languages. In Russia, it was first published in 1988 and appeared in several editions. In this paper, I will use the edition from 2012 which is available online: <http://www.alexievich.info/booksRu.html#1>. When quoting from the *The War's Unwomanly Face*, I will use a shortened version of the title (*U vojny*) and pagination.

² The book was first published in Moscow in 1991. In this paper, I will use the edition from 2006, which is available online:

Testimonial literature imposes itself as an especially grateful material for analysis because it is in many ways a hybrid genre, a genre

between oral narration and written representation; between mimetic and diegetic narration; between reporting and confessional reflections; between a narrative reconstruction of the witness's past and their present identity; between the documentary and artistic, historiographic and publicistic discourse; between the credible and skeptical; between the whole and the fragmentary; between reliable and unreliable; between the speakable and unspeakable (Jambrešić Kirin, as cited in Zlatar 2004: 163).

The latter feature of testimonial discourse – its location between the speakable and unspeakable – is inherently connected to the question of narrating trauma, which is at the centre of my analysis. As Cathy Caruth suggests in her interpretation, that is based on Freud's earlier model of trauma from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1938) in *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), traumatic experience „does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully

<http://www.alexievich.info/knigi/ZinkovyeRus.pdf>. The book was named after galvanized (zink) coffins in which bodies of soldiers killed in the war in Afghanistan were transported back to Russia. Although the collection of testimonies entitled *The Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (Чернобыльская молитва. Хроника будущего, Moscow, 1997) is undoubtedly Alexievich's most famous book, much attention was also drawn to her other works, which, together with *The War's Unwomanly Face*, form the five-volume cycle *Voices from Big Utopia* (Красный человек. Голоса утопии.). In 1985, she published the collection of testimonies by children who were between 7 and 15 years of age during the war (*The Last Witnesses. Unchildlike Stories* – Последние свидетели. Книга недетских рассказов, Moscow 1985). Testimonies of people who committed suicide because they experienced the end of the USSR as a trauma were published in 1993, i.e. 1994 (*Enchanted with Death – Зачарованные смертью*, Minsk 1993; Moscow 1994). In 2013, Alexievich published the last, fifth volume under the title *Second-Hand Time* (Время секонд-хэнд), in which she portrays how the end of the USSR was experienced by those who spent the most of their lives predicting a “bright future”. When quoting from the *Zinky Boys*, I will use the title's initials (CM) and pagination.

owned“ [Caruth, 1995, 151]¹. This aspect significantly complicates or even undermines the inscription of individual trauma into the body of factual history, which is also exemplified by the inability of the post-Soviet public to accept the authenticity of testimonies collected in Svetlana Alexievich's books and incorporate them into the canon of historiographic narratives about World War II and the Soviet war in Afghanistan (for more on this subject see the reactions of censorship in *The War's Unwomanly Face* and trial documents in *Zinky Boys*). Andrea Zlatar points to two key reasons for the (un)speakability of trauma: the first is philosophical and refers back to the notion of “the unspeakability of the in-human as such” [Zlatar, 2004, 182] and second is the psychiatric and analytical reason, i.e. the notion that radical traumatic events leading to the depersonalization, dehumanization of an individual and the loss of his/her identity “can neither be ‘worked through’, ‘verbalized’ or ‘spoken’ nor resolved” [ibid., 182; cf. Wilkinson, 1997/1998, 106].²

¹ Numerous scholars addressed the question of representation of trauma in the aftermath of catastrophe. Here I will mention only some of the groundbreaking works in this interdisciplinary field: **Ahmed, S.; Stacey, J.** „Testimonial Cultures: an Introduction“. – *Cultural Values*, 5 (1), 2001. Pp. 1-6.; **Berlant, L.** „Trauma and Ineloquence“. – *Cultural Values*, 5 (1), 2000. Pp. 41-58; **Hirsch, M.** *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. – Harvard University Press, 1997.; **Hirsch, M.** „The Generation of Postmemory“. – *Poetics Today*, 29 (1), 2008. Pp. 103-128.; **Hirsch, M.** *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. – Columbia University Press, 2012.; **Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the «Final Solution»** / Friedländer, S. (ed.). – Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 1992.; **The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture**. / Guerin, F., Hallas, R. (eds.). – London: Wallflower Press, 2007.; **The People's War: Responses to World War II in Soviet Union**. / Thurston, R. W.; Bonwetsch, B. (eds.). – The University of Illinois Press, 2000; **Trauma and Visuality in Modernity**. / Saltzman, L.; Rosenberg, E. (eds.). – Dartmouth College Press, 2006.; **Tumarkin, N.** *The War of Remembrance*. // Stites, R. (ed.). / *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*. – Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. 194-207.; **Young, J. E.** *At Memory's Edge: After-images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. – Yale University Press, 2002.

² For Dominic LaCapra, as Zlatar's interpretation of his arguments suggests, trauma cannot be textually represented, without it being “‘entered’, ‘experienced’ or ‘reenacted’” [Zlatar, 2004, p. 182-183]. Similarly to LaCapra, Judith Butler argues that “trauma [...] itself cannot be directly symbolized in

In this context it should be mentioned that while literature constitutes the “*study and possibility of representation*” [Zlatař, 2004, 182], trauma serves as an example for the “crisis of representation” [ibid.]. Consequently, the genre of testimonial literature is itself based on extremely complicated inner tensions between the speakable and unspeakable; between what can and cannot be represented. These tensions are also reflected in the specific structure of Alexievich’s “polyphone novels” (as they were characterized by the Russian culturologist Petr Vail in 2008), which contain a series of stories spreading in concentric circles. Individual memories are occasionally interrupted by authorial comments which provide at least a thematic link between disparate narratives. However, in spite of these authorial interventions, each testimony remains a separate entity only loosely connected to other stories.¹ The gap between traumatic experience and its linguistic representation, which forces the subject attempting to verbalize trauma to incessantly search for adequate and sufficiently eloquent discursive modes of expression, is so deep that traumatic experience cannot be verbalized through the classic narrative framework characterized by clear causal relations and spatial and temporal coordinates. As it is known, symptoms of trauma often occur in the form of flashbacks, amnesia and fragmentary memory. As a consequence, trauma cannot become ““a narrative memory” that is integrated into a completed story of the past” [Caruth, 1995, 153]. Moreover, Caruth also argues that:

the history that a flashback tells [...] is therefore a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood [ibid.; cf. LaCapra, 2001, 186].

language. [...] It persists as the real, where the real is always that which any account of reality fails to include” [Butler, 1993, p. 192].

¹ In the context of the external composition of Alexievich’s works it is significant that the collection *The War’s Unwomanly Face* begins with verses from the anthological poem *Verses on the Unknown Soldier* (*Стихи о неизвестном солдате*) by O. Mandelstam. Mandelstam’s poem is not only Mandelstam’s longest but also his most enigmatic text in which, according to Oleg Lekmanov, “every word is a bundle of meanings directed in every possible and not just one direction” [Лекманов, 2013]. Similarly to Alexievich’s collections, the poem does not have a unique theme which would incorporate all the motifs into a single unit, so its structure is based on the arrangement of several, mutually unrelated motifs [ibid.].

2. The Subject as an Object of Its Own Trauma: “It’s not me, but my troubles speaking...” («Это не говорю я, это горе мое говорит...», *U voiny*: 154)

In every autobiographic writing, including testimonial literature, the subject’s linguistic competence is the necessary precondition for the articulation of its “I”: “The subject is an effect of the representation process, it is the effect of its own narration. In order for this to be possible, the subject must first ‘appropriate’ language” [Zlatar, 2004, 26]. What happens to the subject and does the subject even come to the fore if autobiographic discourse is structured around trauma, i.e. around the unspeakable, around something that does not have a language that the subject could appropriate? The representational, i.e. linguistic impotence of the subject to express its suffering is present in almost all of the testimonies collected by S. Alexievich. By comparing testimonial literature to literature in general as the representational discourse *par excellence*, the following excerpt serves as a particularly illustrative example for the deeply problematic representational nature of testimonial literature: «Я читала много военных книжек, там красиво наспиано. А мне рассказать нечего...» (СМ, 87). In cases when the emotional weight of trauma reaches its pinnacle, witnesses often resort to examples from literature. Consequently, one witness poses the following question: «Как там в сказке? Я – раб волшебной лампы Аладдина» (СМ, 79). Another witness who speaks about the trauma of waiting for her son to return from the battlefield says: «Ждала его, как у Симонова: жди меня, и я вернусь» (СМ, 74). Survivors of the war are at the same time witnesses of dying and dead comrades and enemies:

Человек умирает совсем не так, как в кино. Не по Станиславскому человек умирает. Попала пуля в голову – взмахнул руками и упал. А на самом деле: попала пуля в голову, мозги летят, а он за ними бежит, может полкилометра бежать, и их ловит (СМ, 41).

In these examples, trauma is represented and mediated through intertextual quotes taken from narratively more competent subjects, i.e. trauma is represented with the help of narrative procedures significantly deprived of the speaker's subjectivity. In that respect, it is possible to argue that various tropes (including the trope of Stanislavsky’s artistic legacy,

Konstantin Simonov's famous song, and fairytale motif) mobilize the work of traumatic memory. It could therefore be said that in the case of testimonial literature narrative procedures are not articulated by the subject, but rather that the quotes in question *articulate the subject itself*. The subject-object relationship is therefore significantly destabilized, so that the speaking subject becomes an object articulated by quotations. In other words: *in testimonial texts trauma itself acquires the status of the subject articulating the testimony, turning the speaker (yet again) into the object of his or her own trauma*.¹ The reason for this lies in the individual's inability to experience and process trauma in the moment when it occurs, i.e. in the "belatedness" of trauma.² As suggested by V. Biti, the subject can "submit

¹ In the *Introduction* to an anthology dedicated to the notion of trauma, Sergey Oushakin argues that the unspeakability of trauma "threatens to become the foundation of the next – secondary – traumatization" [Ушакин, 2009, p. 30]. In testimonies collected by Alexievich there is a number of examples supporting this claim, which has also been a topic of one of my previous analyses entitled *The Body as a Communicative Resource (On War and Trauma in The War's Unwomanly Face and Zinky Boys)*, presented on a symposium under the title *Corporeality in Literature* which was organized by Department of East-Slavic languages and literatures, University in Zagreb, and held in Lovran in May 2014.

² Closely related to this aspect is the notion of the "collapse of witnessing" which was coined by the psychoanalytic psychiatrist Dori Laub in the chapter *An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival* published in the book *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, which he co-authored with Shoshana Felman [Felman, Laub, 1992, p. 75-92]. On the one hand, the notion of the collapse of witnessing implies that only those who lost their lives can be considered true witnesses, witnesses who cannot speak about their traumatic experience. On the other hand, it also implies that due to specific psychological and emotional incapacity that trauma causes in survivors what they can produce is only a mere shadow of a credible testimony. "History is [therefore] taking place with no witness: it was also the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist... The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially not be met during the actual occurrence [Laub, 1992, 84, cf. Caruth, 1995, p. 7]. The belatedness of testimony as a key reason for its incredibility is also discussed by Cathy Caruth in her *Introduction* to the anthology *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, where she argues that the pathology of trauma stems precisely from the fact that "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be

the object to representational activities of its consciousness only if it does not feel dependent of it; if it can observe it from the outside and not get drawn into the temporal stream of its creation" [Biti, 2000, p. 521]. Trauma constitutes the very opposite of this process, because the subject attempting to articulate it is forced to bring it into consciousness and re-experience it at the same time. During the act of witnessing, the subject is therefore once again *in* the traumatic experience. The influence trauma has over the subject who has experienced it is can also be observed in statements of witnesses during the lawsuit against Svetlana Alexievich which was filed by her interlocutors after she had published one part of the collected testimonies in the journal "Komsomolskaja pravda" ("Komsomol Justice"). For example, during his testimony during the lawsuit one witness-survivor points out the following:

Алексиевич полностью исказила мой рассказ, дописала то, что я не говорил, а если говорил, то понимал по-другому (emphasis by D. L.V., CM, 130).

Especially interesting and illustrative examples of the subject's ontological and epistemological instability in testimonies of trauma are narrative mechanisms developed within the framework of "narrative fetishism" [Ушакин, 2009, с. 14]. Sergey Oushakin convincingly argues that witnesses attempting to describe their traumatic experience tend to use fixed, already existing modes of representations in the range of their narrative competence in order to compensate for their "expressionless" (the notion of the "expressionless" stems from the writing of W. Benjamin, ger. "das Ausdruckslose"). Alexievich's interlocutors, especially those from *Zinky Boys*, often use different "automated, strictly predefined forms" [ibid., 14], the use of which is "independent from personal memory" [ibid.]. In this way, the witness not only testifies the unspeakability of trauma, but also his or her own inability to narrate painful experience. In this respect, trauma is

possessed by an image or event" [ibid.: 4; cf. LaCapra, 2001, 186]. Aleida Assmann points out that "survivors as witnesses do not, as a rule, add to our knowledge of factual history; their testimonies, in fact, have often proved inaccurate" [Assmann, 2006, p. 263]. In her journal, Svetlana Alexievich, who herself spent some time in Afghanistan during the war, writes as follows: "During the war, I reflected upon the impossibility of writing a book about the war" («Думала о невозможности писать книгу о войне на войне», CM: 11).

“not just the experience of physical loss but also the physical experience of one’s own symbolic incompetence or inability to tell the story about what happened” [ibid., 35]. In other words, “all attempts to memorialize trauma must inevitably face the problem of finding adequate discursive methods, regardless whether it is an attempt to translate loss into the language of the object (the praxis of ‘eternalizing’) or an emotional investment into certain symbolic structures (‘songs about pain’)” [ibid., 16].

It is hence not unusual that those text moments that are especially emotionally saturated are often intertwined with black humor, verses from Soviet mass songs, curses or proverbs etc. In all of these cases cultural clichés, historical patterns and semantically empty, stereotypical sayings function as a powerful medium for the representation of events that remain unimaginable. One veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan unexpectedly interrupts his narration of traumatic experience, in which tone and rhythm of narration change as his memories gradually approach their emotional peak, and decides that it would be “better to tell a joke instead”:

Человек меняется не на войне, человек меняется после войны. Меняется он, когда смотрит теми же глазами, которыми видел то, что было там, на то, что есть здесь. В первые месяцы зрение двойное – ты и там, и здесь. Ломка происходит здесь. Теперь я готов подумать, что со мной там происходило... Охранники в банках, телохранители у богатых бизнесменов, киллеры, – все это наши ребята. Встречал, разговаривал и понял: они не захотели возвращаться с войны... Сюда возвращаться... Там им понравилось больше. Оттуда... После той жизни... Остаются непередаваемые ощущения... Самое первое-презрение к смерти, что-то выше смерти... «Духи» не боялись смерти, они, к примеру, знали что их завтра расстреляют – смеялись, как ни в чем не бывало, разговаривали между собой. Даже, казалось были рады. Веселы и спокойны. Смерть – это великий переход, ее, как невесту, надо ждать. Так написано у них в Коране...

Лучше анекдот... А то застрашал писательницу. (*Смеется*) (СМ, 49).

In addition to that, testimonies collected in *Zinky Boys* can be considered a true anthology of the Soviet mass song. There are two particularly illustrative examples of the way traumatic experience is translated into the cliché of Soviet/“Afghan” mass songs:

(...) На улицу редко выхожу... Стесняюсь...

Вы когда-нибудь пристегивали или видели вблизи наши протезы? На них ходишь и боишься шею сломать. Говорят, в других странах «протезники» на горных лыжах катаются, играют в теннис, танцуют. Купите их на валюту вместо французской косметики... Вместо кубинского сахара... Марокканских апельсинов и итальянской мебели...

Мне двадцать два года, вся жизнь впереди. Надо жену искать. Была девушка. Сказал ей: «Я тебя ненавижу», – чтобы она ушла. Жалела. Хочу, чтобы любила.

Снится мне ночами дом родной
И в рябинах тихая опушка.
Тридцать, девяносто, сто...
Что-то ты расщедрилась, кукушка...

з наших песен... Любимая... А иногда даже день
неохота прожить... (СМ, 69)

(...) Вспоминаются наши «афганские» песни. Спешешь на работу и вдруг начинаешь бормотать:

Скажи, зачем и для кого отдали жизнь они свою?
Зачем в атаку взвод пошел под пулеметную струю?

Оглядываешься – хотя бы никто не слышал! Решат – чокнутый или контуженный оттуда приехал. (*Поет*).

Афганистан – красивый, дикий, горный край.
Приказ простой: вставай, иди и умирай...

Вернулся и два года во сне хоронил себя... А то просыпаюсь в страхе: застрелиться нечем! (СМ, с. 100)

Testimonies are often interrupted by petrified phrases, such as in the case of the witness cursing Afghanistan (“Damn you, Afghanistan!” – «Будь ты проклят, Афганистан!»), or using abusive language and swearing: «Афган, твою мать!» (СМ, с. 106-107) or «Мать честная!» (СМ, с. 124). In all these examples stereotypical language serves as a foothold of memory, i. e. as structures of transmission of memory in the aftermath of catastrophe. The language of trauma hence conveys an impression of a cliché or a prosthetic device, and it could be described as textual mimesis of trauma through pre-established tropes. In this context both verses from mass songs as well as the aforementioned phrases “burst” out spontaneously, without conscious control of the speaking subject (as mentioned before, they are the ones articulating the subject and not the other way around). Apart from the fact that it suggests the fragility inherent to the process of mediating traumatic experience, the unwillingness of these speech acts also illustrates that testimonies tend to assume the form of a performative speech act.¹

3. The Object of Testimony as the Subject of Traumatic Experience

In her study *The Juridicial Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Shoshana Felman writes about the incident during the Eichmann trial in 1961, when one of the witnesses fainted. The witness under the pseudonym K-Zetnik, who was called to testify because he had personally met Eichmann in Auschwitz, fainted before he was given a

¹ The performativeness of testimony has also been discussed, among others, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. On this issue, Felman argues: “What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*. To testify – to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement“ [Felman, 1992, p. 5].

chance to testify. According to Felman, the guilt for this incident lies in the listening party of the judicial process, i.e. the judge: "Out of the witness stand falls, in my vision, not a 'disappointed witness', but a terrified one. The witness is not 'deeply wounded', but *re-traumatized*. The trial reenacts the trauma" [Felman, 2002, p. 146]. The American literary critic also points out that:

When the judge admonishes Dinoor from the authoritarian position of the bench, coercing him into a legal mode of discourse and demanding his cooperation as a witness, K-Zetnik undergoes severe traumatic shock in reexperiencing the same terror and panic that dumbfounded him each time when, as an inmate, he was he was suddenly confronted with the inexorable Nazi authorities of Auschwitz. [...] the imposition of a heartless and unbending rule of order violently robs him of his words and, in reducing him to silence, once more threatens to annihilate him, to erase his essence as a *human* witness. Panicked, K-Zetnik loses consciousness [ibid.].

Although Felman's analysis of this incident is interesting also in regards of the ways body testify trauma beyond cognitive reasoning, in further development of my key arguments I will focus on the abovementioned example because it leads me to the next level in the destabilization of the subject-object relationship in the genre of testimonial literature. Testimony does not exist in a socio-cultural vacuum or outside the (autobiographical) contract between the speaker and listener. Testimony is never a monologue: it always presupposes an interlocutor and must therefore be interpreted as a speech act which is in essence a dialogue such as described by Bakhtin [Бахтин, 1979, 237–280]. In this context, the narrative frames of testimony are not defined only by the system of social conventions, but also by the listener of the words spoken. In the testimonies collected by Svetlana Alexievich her interlocutors often emphasize not just the importance of the Other, but also the importance of its active role as the recipient of the message, whereby the example analyzed by S. Felman clearly shows that the outcome of a testimony is inherently related to the reaction of its listener. Very often it is precisely the explicit and immediate

act of addressing the testimony to the listener which defines its content, composition and stylistic features:

Ты спрашиваешь, что на войне самое страшное? Ждешь от меня... Я знаю, чего ты ждешь... Думаешь: я отвечу: самое страшное на войне – смерть. Умереть. Ну, так? Знаю я вашего брата... Журналистские штучки... Ха-ха-а-а... Почему не смеешься? А? А я другое скажу... Самое страшное для меня на войне – носить мужские трусы. Вот это было страшно. И это мне как-то... Я не выражусь... Ну, во-первых, очень некрасиво... Ты на войне, собираешься умереть за Родину, а на тебе мужские трусы. В общем, ты выглядишь смешно. Нелепо. Мужские трусы тогда носили длинные. Широкие. Шили из сатина. Десять девочек в нашей землянке, и все они в мужских трусах. О, Боже мой! Зимой и летом. Четыре года.

Перешли советскую границу... Добивали, как говорил на политзанятиях наш комиссар, зверя в его собственной берлоге. Возле первой польской деревни нас переодели, выдали новое обмундирование и... И! И! И! Привезли в первый раз женские трусы и бюстгалтеры. За всю войну в первый раз. Ха-а-а... Ну, понятно... Мы увидели нормальное женское белье... Почему не смеешься? Плачешь... Ну, почему?

Лола Ахметова, рядовая, стрелок (U voiny, 53).

Numerous witnesses also point out that silence was often a consequence of a passive and an inadequate reaction of the message's recipient, which caused a deepening and prolonging of the war trauma:

Мы столько лет молчали, даже дома молчали. (...) Первый год, когда я вернулась с войны, я говорила – говорила. Никто не слушал. И я замолчала (*U voiny*, 30).

Through the aspect of its pronouncedly appellative nature the processuality of literature analyzed in the previous chapter acquires a new dimension. While C. Caruth states that “the history of trauma [...] can only take place through the listening of another” [Caruth, 1995, p. 11] and that it

is a kind of knowledge “intricately bound up with the act of listening itself”, Dori Laub points out that:

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other* – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to *somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for a long time [Laub, 1992, p. 71].

However, unlike other autobiographical genres, in which the Other functions as the implied reader and/or the Other of the author,¹ in the genre of testimonial literature the listener and the reader are much more drawn into the “temporal current” of creating a testimonial statement. The recipient not only defines his or her horizon of expectations, thereby modeling the testimonial statement in accordance with his or her own expectations, but also allows him- or herself to become the object onto which emotions connected to the traumatic experience are transferred. *The object (listener or reader) therefore also becomes the subject of the traumatic experience* [cf. Felman, 1992, p. 47-55]. This claim can be supported by numerous excerpts from *Zinky Boys*. S. Alexievich, namely, also quotes a part of her journal written in 1986 in which she says that the act of listening transposes the listener from a passive, emotionally unattached position of the object into an emotionally attached position of the *subject* re-experiencing the same trauma:

Когда закончила «У войны не женское лицо» долго не могла видеть как от обыкновенного ушиба из носа ребенка идет кровь, убегала на отдыхе от рыбаков, весело бросавших на береговой песок выхваченную из далеких глубин рыбу, меня тошнило от ее застывших, выпученных глаз. У каждого есть

¹ Up to a certain extent, the notion of dialogue is present in all autobiographical genres because the subject’s discourse, which is at the same time the theme and the object of an autobiography, by its very nature cannot be a monologue. According to Andrea Zlata, “the space of a polyphonic discourse is opened even within an only seemingly “one-sided” soliloquy. Even when we are talking to ourselves, there are *more of us* talking, conversing and dissolving ourselves” [Zlata, 2004, p. 27].

свой запас защиты от боли – физический и психологический, мой был исчерпан до конца. Меня сводил с ума вой подбитой машиной кошки, отворачивала лицо от раздавленного дождевого червяка (СМ, с. 6).

In the foreword to the English edition of her book *War's Unwomanly Face*, S. Alexievich, who lost 11 members her family in World War II, says:

My own “war” also lasted four years, and I was often shattered by what I heard. To tell you the truth, at times I felt I couldn't endure it any longer. Many a time I wished to forget what I had heard. I wished it but no longer could. All this time I kept a diary which I have also ventured to include in my book. It records my feelings and experiences, and also the geography of my search, which covered more than a hundred towns and cities, settlements and villages in various parts of the country. I was for a long time in doubt whether I had the right to use the words “I feel”, “I am anxious” and “I doubt” in my book. What are my feelings and torments compared with their feelings and torments? Will anybody be interested in a diary concerned with my emotions? But the more material accumulated in my files the more confident I became that a document was fully valid only when its author had made his or her presence felt along with its contents. There are no dispassionate testimonies: each conveys a patent or hidden passion that the author experienced. And many years later that very passion will also serve as a document [Alexievich, 3].

The close connection between the speaker and the listener is also confirmed by the reaction of the public to the publication of *Zinky Boys*. In a series of law suits which were filed against the Belarusian author, she was accused of making “a whole generation of Afghanistan soldiers appear immoral” («лишила моральной жизни все наше афганское поколение», СМ, с. 149) and making honorable children appear like murderers : “You made our children look like murderers. You wrote this terrible book...” («Это вы сделали наших детей убийцами. Это вы написали эту страшную книгу...», СМ, с. 141). This partly unexpected public reaction and negative perception of testimonies by the witnesses themselves inadvertently corroborate my thesis that the listener, i.e. object of testimony

has been experienced as speaker, i.e. as the real subject of the collected testimonies.

4. Testimonial Literature – Autobiography or Autothanatography?

If we move argumentative line of this paper one step further, several key arguments will speak in favor of my final thesis that a more appropriate term to designate testimonial literature would be “autothanatographic”¹ instead of autobiographic. Namely, testimonies collected by S. Alexievich are structured around survivors’ attempts to negotiate “unknowable” experiences in their writings, where death and the Other often feature “as the ‘unknowns’ that bring about or fuel the autobiographical act” (Bainbrigge, 2005, p. 361). As they often represent descriptions of near-death states, one could pose the question “To what extent does a focus on *thanatos*, rather than *bios* in autobiography, highlight the particular challenges of writing about the self?” (ibid., p. 359). To be more exact, as Svetlana Alexievich claims in her introduction to the book *The War’s Unwomanly Face*, in the process of testimony there are more than two participants (the speaker, i.e. subject and listener, i.e. object, whose roles my analysis of this hybrid genre has shown to be instable and often switching places). According to Alexievich, the true number of participants in a testimonial process amounts to three: the witness bearing

¹ The relationship between autobiography and death was point of departure for G. T. Thomas in his 1978 essay *The Shape of Death in American Autobiography*. Philosopher J. Derrida in his 1984 book *Otobiographies: L'enseignement De Nietzsche Et La Politique Du Nom Propre*, that was translated in English in 1985 (*The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*), as well as L. Marin in his books *La Voix excommuniée. Essais de mémoire* (1981) and *L'Écriture de soi* (1999) wrote extensively about the possible applications of a term autothanatography (see Bainbrigge, 2005). In 1994. N. K. Miller wrote that „every autobiography (...) is also an autothanatography“ (Miller, 1994, 12). My use of this term was highly motivated by the usage of it in E. S. Burt's book *Regard for the Other: Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire, and Wilde* in 2009.

the testimony; the person from the war whom the witness is trying to remember and the listener. War veterans namely:

всегда в ином пространстве, чем слушатель. Их окружает невидимый мир. По меньшей мере три человека участвуют в разговоре: тот, кто рассказывает сейчас, этот же человек, каким он был тогда, в момент события – и я (*U voiny*, 7).

The idea about a division within one's self appears in different forms throughout the majority of testimonial narratives by Svetlana Alexievich's interlocutors. A series of witnesses who wish to speak about the trauma of witnessing the death of numerous war comrades and enemies also witnessed the experience of a physical and psychological death of their own "self" as the pre-war Other of the post-war speaker. One of the witnesses thus wrote a letter to Alexievich, in which she wrote: "No matter what our date of birth was, we were all born in 1941" [Alexievich, 2]. Although these witnesses are not recorded in the number of people who were killed or went missing during these two wars, they often emphasize that the person they had been before the war no longer exists and was replaced by someone else, someone alien to their own pre-war selves. In so doing they also testify the unspeakability of trauma because trauma in that regard can be defined as witnessing one's own death. One might argue that survivors are actually bearing witness to their own death, and in that respect, testimonial literature offers an outlet for representation of how death and writing the self are sometimes closely interlaced. If we understand testimony as speaking about (unspeakable) violence and loss of civil rights, then at the same time trauma means speaking about the "absence of the 'I'".¹

Вы думаете, что мы жестокие? А догадываетесь ли, какие жестокие вы? Нас не спрашивают и не слушают. Но о нас пишут...

¹ For example, female witnesses have often spoken about the loss of their own femininity that triggered feelings of their own death. For them the end of the war meant either an absolute retreat into the world of their memories and attempts to restore their "female I" back to life or the experience of the post-war reality as an entirely new beginning, a new life which they started as completely new people.

Имени моего не называйте... Считайте, что меня уже нет... (СМ, с. 119).

Could the language of trauma therefore be described as the language of one's own death? Since it operates as record of the death of its subject, should testimonial literature fall into a genre-transcending category of *autothanatography* instead of *autobiography*?

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