

Introduction

And what else is left to resist with but the debt which each soul has contracted with the miserable and admirable indetermination from which it was born and does not cease to be born? [. . .] This debt to infancy is one which we never pay off. [. . .] It is the task of writing, thinking, literature, arts, to venture to bear witness to it.¹

—Lyotard, *L'inhumain*, 15/7

Philosophy did not begin to reflect on the meaning of bare existence with the present-day concept of *la nuda vita*, bare life. In fact, this idea has a long history. If one were interested in writing this history, one could, for instance, start with Plato and his use of the adjective *gumnos*. If one followed the political philosophical reverberation of bare life as addressed today, one could begin with a reference to *Laws*, which describes how perpetrators of a crime in a temple, if they are slaves or foreigners, are to “be cast out naked beyond the borders of the country.”²

Yet Plato uses *gumnos* also beyond the confines of political philosophy. In the *Sophist*, for instance, the word is used to describe what is set apart or stripped bare—*apērēmōmenon*—from other beings.³ Here, *gumnos* describes a state of being exiled or banned from the sphere to which something or someone belongs. In the *Gorgias* and the *Cratylus*, this meaning of *gumnos* is taken up in a metaphysical context when Plato describes the bare soul, that is, the soul stripped bare (*gumnoō*) from the body and from all its living conditions.⁴ Thus, that which in the history of philosophy has been interpreted as the immortality of the soul in fact concerns, in these particular passages of Plato’s dialogues, the soul’s bare existence set apart from all that is normally attached to it. It is what

survives and remains of the souls when everything else is mortified, whether it be their body, their wealth, their moral guidance by the *polis* in which they live, and so on. Rather than offering a spectacle of the soul's very own and immortal wealth, the stories on the bare soul, such as the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*, tell the tale of the soul left to its own misery. The myth of Er bears witness to this uncanny realm of bare existence and makes it perfectly clear that this realm has nothing paradisiac or heavenly. Rather, it offers a dismal and ridiculous scene of souls in their utter formlessness, misery, and poverty, as I discuss in more detail in Part I of this study. Only in this realm, when the soul is stripped bare from all "leafage [. . .] by which he can conceal his misery," the soul can truly be judged because—as most of the examples offered by Er suggest—without this protection of what covers it, it plainly displays its own disorientation.⁵ When addressing the bare soul, the interlocutors in the *Gorgias* or the *Republic* do not offer a *logos*, an argument or statement concerning, for instance, a dualism of *psuchē* and *sōma*. Rather, the bare soul can apparently only be borne witness to in an exceptional testimony, which is offered by the *muthoi* because the bare soul, the poor ending and miserable provenance of all life, is only encountered in the land of the dead, which is inaccessible to the living.

With this sense of the bare soul, we are approaching the sense of bare existence that motivates this study on testimony. It is motivated by the following question: how to experience or bear witness to the soul deprived of body and all living conditions? It is not a coincidence that in the *Gorgias*, the bare soul is only addressed in a myth; and a description of the soul's ultimate trial over the past life and pivotal choice for the life to come is offered to us at the end of the *Republic* in the soldier Er's testimony of the realm in which the dead, bare souls are gathered. This testimony, this mythical attestation articulates in the discourse of the living that which cannot be experienced by the living themselves, but which is nevertheless attested to be the experience of the bare souls—as well as up to a certain point, as I explain, the experience of the soldier and guard who is positioned at the threshold of life and death. Apparently, the notion of bareness refers to an ontological depth in Plato's thought that requires a distinctive form of testimony to be made known.

Another Platonic myth that uses the adjective *gymnos* does not locate bare existence on the other side of human life but rather at its very inception, that is, at the event of the birth of humankind. Nevertheless, the sense of *gymnos* of that which remains after human life is stripped

bare of its basic living conditions is retained. The myth of this event, narrated by Protagoras in the dialogue with the same name, marks the birth of humankind by a specific lack. Whereas all other animals, the *aloga*, are provided with the natural capacities to survive and take care of their existence by nature, humankind is not. The human is thus, at the event of their birth, the animal that is offered only a bare or mere existence, without the capacities needed to provide and support it without its living conditions. Thanks to the work of Stiegler, this myth retrieved a significant place at the center of the reflection on the human's intrinsic connectedness to technics and technology. Yet by these inquiries into technology one might easily lose sight of the specific presupposition of this analysis, namely that humankind is, by its very nature, bare existence.⁶ As Protagoras narrates, the human "was naked, unshod, unbedded, unarmed."⁷ Hence, to be naked means in this context to be stripped bare of the basic powers to maintain and support existence. In particular, at the moment of its birth, humankind is deprived of what the ancients determined as its defining characteristic: *logos*. Originally, the human is thus a creature whose mode of existence is *infancy*, non-speaking-ness. According to the myth, this bare human life of the infant, *zōē*, only becomes a life that has language, *zōon logon echon*, when Prometheus steals the arts and fire from the gods. With this gift of *logos* and the other *technai*, the human receives the capacities to take care of themselves, that is, to preserve their existence in line with the sense of awe, *aidōs*, and justice, *dikē*, that Hermes delivers to humankind.⁸ Yet it also means that the human is the creature who is always indebted to the miserable state of its infancy and that the gifts of *logos* and the other *technai* are first and foremost given as response and attestation to the bare existence from which human life unfolds.

Thus, according to this myth, *logos* is only a supplement to the human's natural condition of infancy and bare existence, the "miserable [. . .] indetermination from which it was born," as Lyotard suggests. When he writes in the passage that I used as an epigraph to this introduction that it is the task of thinking and literature to bear witness to this bare existence, which withdraws itself from the self-experience of the humans who understand themselves as always already having language and the arts, it makes sense to read the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Republic* as offering such testimonies in the exceptional form of *muthoi*. These testimonies are of crucial importance because they reflect a dimension of bare existence at the heart of human life, which is forgotten and erased from human memory and experience as soon as the gift of *logos* is received

or, in the case of the bare soul as depicted in the myth of Er, the soul's new turn of life has started. Only in these testimonies is this dimension of existence preserved and guarded, announced and made known.

What if—thus are the stakes of this study—we begin to understand testimony proceeding from the task to bear witness to the bare existence at the heart of human life? What if this dimension of existence were set apart from our common human experience and from our common human discourse or *logos* because the latter is somehow denied access to the realm of bare existence?⁹ Would this not assign to testimony a distinctive, exceptional sense on the threshold of *logos* and bare existence? Yet perhaps testimony has always already been marked by such an exceptional sense throughout the history of its philosophical and theological usage, and perhaps the contemporary “normalization” of testimony in the epistemological approaches to this theme is the mark of the forgetfulness of this particular exceptional provenance of testimony.¹⁰

The stakes of such an inquiry into testimony are to (1) characterize the contemporary continental philosophical interest in bearing witness and (2) offer possibilities for a new theory of testimony. Concerning (1), there are, in fact, good reasons to claim that continental philosophy's account of testimony privileges the bearing witness to bare existence. This is not only the case in the reflections on testimony in Agamben's *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, in which the witness bears witness to the *Muselman*, the figure of *nuda vita*, bare life, but also in Lyotard's attention to testimony as the bearing witness to infancy. Moreover, it is already the case in Heidegger's account of attestation in *Sein und Zeit*. The call that marks attestation calls from the mode of being disclosed by the basic attunement of anxiety. Heidegger describes this mode of being as *das nackte Dasein*, “bare existence,” which he also paraphrases as “the naked ‘that it is and has to be,’” and “the naked ‘that’ in the nothingness of the world.”¹¹ In each of these cases, the question of bearing witness is raised with respect to this exceptional phenomenon of bare existence. Leibniz, perhaps, has offered the most striking description of this realm when he speaks of the “monads that are wholly bare,” *les Monades toutes nues*, which are the monads that exist at a level of perception marked by a “continual state of stupor” and that do not arrive at the capacity of *logos* and discourse.¹² Concerning (2), this means in more general terms, for a theory of testimony, that the reflection on testimony is never simply an epistemological issue but finds its motivation in the ontological question of how to acknowledge and articulate this particular realm of being. In

the examples mentioned above, bearing witness is not simply a mode of speech among others, but it is a mode of speech that takes place on the threshold of bare existence, which excludes human speech, and human speech; on the threshold of the mere voice and meaningful discourse; on the threshold of *alogos* and *logos*.

This first orientation of what the stakes of a continental philosophy of testimony are suffices for this introduction. Part I as a whole offers a further orientation. Following the basic insight of Derrida as explored in *Demeure* that testimony has to be thought in relation to literature and Agamben's suggestion that literature offers experiments that allow us to experience and be oriented in a certain domain of being, this study on a continental philosophy of testimony does not set out with a definition of testimony but begins with an attempt to gain an appropriate sense of bearing witness in its reflection on some literary examples and experiments. Part I offers the report of these experiments and the accompanying reflection. Thus, a first sense of bearing witness is taking shape that guides the more theoretical reflections in Part II and Part III, in which the different elements of testimony are discussed and the specific ontological sense of testimony is developed. Therefore, let us turn without further ado to (some of) the literary texts that give to think and give to understand what bearing witness is.