What is Literature of Witness?

Witnessing *something*, whether it be a great moment in history or the view from one’s window, is something we, as human beings, do all the time, arguably even when we are asleep, witnessing something or other in our dreams. Literal witnessing is an inherent part of the human condition; it is, in fact, one of the things that makes us uniquely human, at least to the degree we engage in it and to the depth of intellectual analysis we bring to it, especially the extraction of “meaning.” In this broad, literal sense, therefore, it would seem that it is hard to say that there is some distinct body of literature that is set apart by its commitment to witnessing, to being a clearly definable “literature of witness.” *All* literature (fiction, poetry, non-fiction) is literally witnessing something; it’s unavoidable, literature *is* an act of witness—it can’t help it.

But, things (fortunately, I think) are not quite so simple.

The first mistake, perhaps, in thinking about our question, is to try to determine whether a particular piece of literature is or is not “witnessing.” To ask this question is to trap us in a false dichotomy and an ensuing debate that will probably get us nowhere, except unnecessarily agitated and trying to defend positions that are in the end indefensible. That much has been made clear already, I hope.

The *real*, most useful, question to ask is not whether a piece of literature is an act of witness or not, but, rather, to what *degree* is it thusly engaged, and in what *way* or ways does it do so?

All literature can rather trivially witness acts and events: “Bobby saw Alex raise his hand,” is an act of witness, but it is little more, if anything, than the reporting of a fact, and largely, in literary or aesthetic terms, of not that much interest, emotive or otherwise, either. It is like a pedestrian trying to describe an accident on a street corner: crucial evidence and an act of witness in its own factual reportage, but quite a distance from the kind of witness that moves us like a great piece of literature does. This kind of literature as witness *is* such, literally speaking, but in the end it doesn’t really deserve any especial demarcation *as* such. No, something that deserves a special appellation as “the literature of witness” needs something more. It needs to be further along the continuum of witness that has at its most extreme end forms of literature that move us emotionally and with such an intensity of witness that they engage us in the critical issues at hand, perhaps to an extent that we might be subsequently moved to try to change ourselves and the world we live in in order to remedy them, change things for the better. A “radical” literature of witness, in this sense, is a literature that potentially changes lives by *bearing* witness to (not *just* observing) some situation (often, but not always, of tragic proportions) that desperately needs our collective attention, at first by raising our consciousness about what is going on, and then, perhaps, by getting us to do something about it. A radical literature of witness says, “Hey, look at this! Do you see what’s going on here? How are you going to react? Can you just stand by and shrug your shoulders?”

A good example of this form of witness is in Forché’s poem, “The Colonel,” especially the line where the colonel spills the severed ears onto the dining table. There’s no direct commentary in the poem as to the grossness and immorality of what lies behind this act, but the graphic nature of the gesture speaks volumes in its vocal silence. I think we know what Forché wants us to think and hopefully do in response to reading it. She’s for sure bearing witness in the way I have been describing it here. Extrajudicial torture and murder have taken place and Forché wants us to be aware of the callous way they have been carried out so that we might be moved to press for justice to be served upon the perpetrators. She wants us to either join or support human rights activists like herself.

A second example is Gaines’ “A Gathering of Old men.” But, in this work the witness of silence is joined, interestingly, by the witness to truth that emerges from them giving a half-hidden “false witness,” so to speak. All of the old black men who have gathered at the scene of Beau Boutan’s murder falsely testify that they killed the deceased, even though everyone knows their individual claims are entirely without foundation. But, in truth, their false witness is really a witness to the truth of decades, if not centuries, of black slavery and the many injustices that accompanied it and followed in its wake, right up to the time when the story takes place. Bearing such false witness is one of the few ways these old men can claim the truth of the structural injustices that swamp their lives, injustices whose falsities need to be exposed by the falsity of their own false witness. The white judicial system is thus hoisted by its own petard; by their actions the old black men make white injustice look at itself in the mirror, so to speak. Their toting of guns also bears witness to the fact that they have reached the end of their tether and that they are now willing to fight and die for their just desserts; that they, like the white jurisprudence they suffer under, are willing to play vigilante in what is supposed to be a system that respects “equality before the law.”

At the very least, then, a literature of witness that deserves the epithet has to observe things that need pointing out, and, at least for some, motivate us to act in some, perhaps prescriptive, manner in order to remedy something. These qualifications to observation as an act of witness necessarily invoke the use of the verb “to bear,” to bear witness, not just witness (observe), to “testify” as one might do in church, to speak to the “truth” and to exhort our moral responsibility to address its demands. Whether the literature of (radical) witness always, or even just occasionally, achieves these lofty ends is a matter of some debate, and I am personally skeptical that art of any form has too much effect on what we get up to as humans. Nevertheless, this is what I take an authentic literature of witness to look like, and even if it falls short of its ultimate aims, we still need to have such a literary form ready at hand. Indeed, to date at least, this is the kind of literature I am most drawn to. There’s plenty of hurt in the world and I feel compelled in my fiction writing to address it over and over again, “’til the cows come home” and even if they don’t.

Of course, what I am describing as an authentic literature of witness clearly has a (often brazenly didactic) “point” to it. (In fact, I don’t know that an act of witness is worth much if it doesn’t, at least to a significant degree. Otherwise, why not just say you’re “observing” something, as opposed to “witnessing” it?) And, I am aware that in what remains of our so-called “postmodern” age it’s a bit of a sin to have a “point” to your fiction writing, in making it too didactic. We’re often supposed to let the reader figure things out for themselves, perhaps even less: just get off on the pure aesthetic enjoyment of it all—stories without a point at all. Not only do I think that this kind of claim is ultimately bogus (all fiction has a point of some kind, even if it’s only to say that the human condition is pointless), but I also claim that a literature of witness *has* to have a point, *by definition*, as I’ve tried to argue above. For sure, it’s better to be subtle, as opposed to blindly obvious, about making your point, especially in a work of fiction, but if you’re trying to bear witness, then how can you possibly *not* have a point of some kind, even if it’s only to point out the tragedy, the ambiguity, or the irresolvable nature of the act that is worth bearing witness to in the first place? The act of witness in an authentic literature of that name *necessarily* has a point, not just a neutral observation concerning what’s going on.

It may well be that for many I have not been persuasive in my arguments about what constitutes a literature of witness, and that, therefore, such a literary form does not exist. To that, my response would be: “You may be right that there is no clearly definable literature of witness. Even so, we need one now just as much as we ever have.” If no one bears witness, the sins of this world will for sure go unpunished. Fiction has a uniquely powerful way to tell the human story in all its joy and in all its tragedy. Let it bear witness; it’s one of the few lifelines we have.