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Poetic of the contingent detail in witness narratives about the reign of Terror during the French Revolution

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Abstract

The French Revolution and particularly the period called The Terror (June 1793 – 27 July 1794), incited by conflict between rival political factions, was marked by mass executions of the 'enemies of the revolution'. Aristocrats, Girondins (the political faction rival to the dominant Jacobins), and all the citizens suspected of furthering a return to Monarchy were threatened. All of this period can be considered, in fact, as traumatic. In order to be a witness to a disappearing world, to plead one's own cause, and to testify to overwhelming and horrifying events, memoirs and written accounts proliferated during the decades following the Revolution. Among a lot of accounts that were published are those whose authors were well known enough and which had the rhetoric and literary qualities necessary to interest a public. At the same time, the victims as witnesses had the will to share their feelings, to attempt to make people understand their traumatic experience. The rhetoric and poetic heritage, requiring verisimilitude and decorum, acted as a brake on the realization of this purpose. To pass on their experience, the narrators had to create specific ways to show and to make people feel what they saw and what they felt. Leaning on three testimonies of witnesses having escaped death during the Terror, which have rhetorical and literary competences, I will study in their accounts the different processes by which they create a strong effect of presence at the traumatic scene, especially by contingent details and narrative processes of *showing*, restitution of sensory perceptions, internal focusing and a confined point of view, reported discourse and narrative slowing down. Subverting requirements for a traditional plot - a narrative logic and a chain of plausible events - erasing the marks of causality, this kind of narrative, far away from any attempt at convincing or pleasing, tries to reconstitute the strangeness of the scene. These accounts of traumatic events are all the more specific in their historical context since the narrative of the period, in history as well as in a novel, remain submitted to rhetorical and aesthetic canons and to a limited set of techniques.

Poetic of the contingent detail in witness narratives about the reign of Terror during the French Revolution

Carole Dornier

In memory of Renaud Dulong

Following Paul Ricoeur and Renaud Dulong, I would define testimony first of all as a fact of language and an act of discourse, an account of a past event, certified by the fact that the narrator was present during this event: his or her account emphasizes that they were there at this time. In a more or less implicit way, the narrator requests to be believed.¹ According to Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur, all narrative implies an intrigue and a figuration; any narrative text has a literary and fictional dimension and presupposes strategies of linguistic figuration used in the writings of imagination. To emplot events is an operation more poetic than scientific, and it is a matter of choice among the various sorts of plots available in a given cultural tradition. There is no natural or logical necessity presiding over this choice, which is relatively free. A trope would, therefore, be at work in any narrative, including factual and historical, insofar as it results from emplotment.² The accounts I will speak about are written and published testimonies, in accordance with the intentions of the narrators. To publish one's own testimony means that the narrator accepts that they are taking part in a public debate.³ We can call these kinds of testimonies historical testimonies, intentionally written by narrators who were witnesses but who want to provide material for a history of their time. For Krystof Pomian, 'a narrative is given as historical when it displays the

¹ Paul Ricoeur, in *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 201-208, develops the definition of testimony by Renaud Dulong (*Le Témoin oculaire: les conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle*, (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1998), p. 43): 'Un récit autobiographiquement certifié d'un événement passé.'

² Hayden White, 'Literary Theory and Historical Writing', in *Figural Realism, Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (London/Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 8-9; Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 286-301, Carole Dornier, 'Toutes les histoires sont-elles des fictions?', in *Esthétique du témoignage*, ed. by R. Dulong and C. Dornier (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2005), pp. 91-106.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli*, pp. 205-206.

intention of submitting itself to a control of its appropriateness to the past extra-textual reality of which it treats'.⁴ From a pragmatic point of view, it is the expression of this intention which specifies the historical narration (the autobiographical pact or attestation). But it is also the possibility of carrying out this control through confrontation with sources that distinguishes history from fiction. Nevertheless, the demand which the author of the narrative of lived events, as well as historians, is trying to satisfy, includes, as Pomian has pointed out, the expectation of a restitution of what was seen and felt. What could be seen and felt by one who has lived these events, are objects required in the factual narrative and which require poetics.⁵

My hypothesis is that, in these intentional accounts which are intended to play an historical part, the traumatic event is a peculiar challenge for the narrator and implies a specific art of writing. I mean by *trauma* the subjective experience of an individual who witnessed an overwhelming life-threatening event, who felt an 'intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation'.⁶ How to transmit these specific events among others facts which are not traumatic or traumatic to such a degree and to still reach the public? How to reconstitute the part of the unbelievable or unlikely? How to deal with narrative devices to avoid stereotypes or conventional rhetoric, to share and to make the audience feel what was lived and felt? I would argue that it requires specific devices.

The French Revolution and particularly the period called The Terror (June 1793 – 27 July 1794) was incited by conflict between rival political factions, and was marked by mass executions of 'enemies of the revolution'. Aristocrats, Girondists (political faction rival to the dominant Jacobins), and all the citizens suspected of furthering a return to Monarchy were threatened. All this period can be considered, in fact, as traumatic, 'unnamed experience [...] [an] irruption of the incredible', which then gives rise to a political instrumentalization, amalgamating revolution and terror.⁷ In order to be a witness to a disappearing world, to

⁴ Krzysztof Pomian, *Sur l'Histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 34.

⁵ Pomian, pp. 64-65.

⁶ See Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York : Basic Books, 1997), pp. 33-34.

⁷ See Jean-Clément Martin, 'Les Mots de la violence: les guerres révolutionnaires', in *La Violence de la guerre (1914-1945), approches comparées des deux conflits mondiaux*, ed. by S. Audoin-Rouzeau (Paris : éditions Complexe, 2002), pp. 34-35; About *trauma* as a concept for understanding Terror, and about the variety of explanations on the origins of the Terror, see Patrice Higonnet, 'Terror, Trauma and the 'Young Marx' Explanation of Jacobin Politics', *Past and Present*, 191, (May, 2006), pp.

plead one's own cause, and to testify to overwhelming and horrifying events, memoirs and written accounts proliferated during the following decades.

Among a lot of accounts that were published are those whose authors were well known enough and which had the rhetorical and literary qualities necessary to interest a public. They could borrow from contemporary literature such genres as history, novel, memoirs and autobiography, theatrical melodrama, pamphlets, trial briefs and courtroom literature. These witnesses were eager to share their feelings, to make people understand their traumatic experience. The literary, rhetorical and poetic heritage, requiring verisimilitude and decorum, acted as a brake on the realization of this purpose. To pass on their experience, the narrators had to create specific ways to show and to make people feel what they saw and what they felt. It is these specific ways I would like to emphasize in this paper.

Leaning on three testimonies of witnesses who escaped death during the Terror and having rhetoric and literary skills, I will study in their accounts the different devices used to create a strong effect of presence at the traumatic scene, especially by contingent details and narrative devices of *showing*, restitution of sensory perceptions, internal focusing and a confined point of view, reported discourse and narrative slowing down.⁸ Subverting requirements for a traditional plot - a narrative logic and a chain of plausible events - omitting marks of causality, this kind of narrative, far away from any attempt at convincing or pleasing, tries to reconstitute the strangeness of the scene. These accounts of traumatic events are all the more specific in their historical context since the narrative of the period, as well in history as in a novel, remains submitted to rhetorical and aesthetic canons and to a limited set of techniques.

For obvious reasons, testimony in memoirs or historical narratives written after the French Revolution uses forensic or epideictic rhetoric, as defined by Aristotle. Testifying after a time of trouble following civil and internal conflicts is often a way to justify or to accuse, to praise or to censure. The main issue is to convince the audience of what must be considered as just or not, in an imaginary trial. However, in the case of traumatic events, things are

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⁸ About this concept, see Tobias Klauk and Tilmann Köppe, 'Telling vs Showing', in *The living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by P. Hühn (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014), <<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/telling-vs-showing>> [accessed 20 March 2018].

different, as I would like to uphold. The aim of the traumatic testimony discourse is less to convince than to imagine and believe what is hard to believe, to share an extreme experience.

Among these testimonies, *Mon agonie de trente huit heures de Jourgnac de Saint-Méard* (*My agony during thirty-eight hours*) is well known by the historians working on the French Revolution.⁹ It is one of the most famous and complete accounts of the September Massacres, seen by a survivor, the journalist Jourgnac de Saint-Méard. Jourgnac was arrested because he was suspected to be a counter-revolutionary and consequently someone who would aid the invading Prussians. During these days, hundreds of people were killed by a mob or condemned and executed, usually with a sabre, after a summary trial in the prisons where the slaughter took place. The second testimony is by Jean-Baptiste Louvet, a novelist who became a Girondist representative during the beginning of the Revolution.¹⁰ In 1793, the Montagnard faction, considering the Girondists as reactionary enemies, obtained from the Convention their arrest. Louvet was among those who escaped Paris, lived in the country and was hunted down while the Terror was expanding. The third account comes from the memoirs by Madame Campan, lady-in-waiting to Queen Marie-Antoinette, who was in the Tuileries on 10 August 1792.¹¹ She had remained in the palace, where a number of servants and courtiers were hunted down and killed by the insurgents.

Jourgnac, in his prison, was sure to die; nevertheless, he escaped death, thanks to his ability to win sympathy and to justify himself during his trial. Louvet was several times very nearly discovered, and eventually eluded investigation and reached Switzerland. Campan saw the sabre brandished over her head miraculously stopped by an unexpected order. The three witnesses are then survivors and I have chosen to focus on the account of the life-threatening experience that they have told.

In different parts of their accounts, all of them use forensic rhetoric to plead their own cause. Jourgnac who cannot hide his royalism, and published his text in Paris a few days after the events, must adopt an opportunist attitude, so, he presents himself as a faithful

⁹ Jourgnac de Saint-Méard, 'Mon agonie de trente-huit heures', *Les Massacres de septembre* (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 1907). My translation.

¹⁰ *Mémoires de Jean-Baptiste Louvet* (Paris: éditions Desjonquères, 1988). My translation.

¹¹ *Mémoires de madame de Campan* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1988), <<http://www.authorama.com/book/memoirs-of-marie-antoinette.html>> [accessed 20 March 2018].

citizen who admits his mistakes. Louvet who writes in exile, out of danger, can give vent to his opinion against the Terror and the Jacobins leaders and to his plea for the Girondist faction. As for Madame Campan, her memoirs are a sober but efficient defence of the Queen and the Royal Family, and of herself, whose faithfulness was suspected because of her role under Napoleon 1st. This forensic rhetoric must take the political context into account to reach its public, but it can also be considered as a limit of the expression of a human truth. The suspicion of partiality often soils such testimonies, which is precisely why narrators are led to follow others tracks when they want to transmit extreme experiences and the human truth which can be drawn from it. They try to share the strangeness of the traumatic experiences they went through; that is the reason why I would rather speak about the poetics of these testimonies than rhetoric about the scenes I am going to focus on.

In these scenes, Jourgnac, Louvet and Campan use the narrative device of *showing* or *mimesis*, that is to say, the direct representation of events and speech (versus *telling* or *diegesis*, indirect presentation and summary). They give greater importance to sensory details, internal focusing and a confined point of view, direct speech and narrative slowing down.

The narrative showing mode suits, particularly, the traumatic scenes because it presents the events of the story less as elements of a plot, that is to say, an esthetic unit providing causal linking than as scenes or images without logical connections. The showing mode is a verbal way to express how traumatic memories can be reactivated in their whole intensity. Particularly in the account of Jourgnac, which relates the events of a few days, but in the two others too, slowing down is given first by more and more precise chronological details: 'Monday 3rd at three o'clock in the morning [...] Tuesday at one o'clock in the morning [...]' and so on.¹² If these details sound like an official document and tag the story with marks of factuality, they also stretch the duration of telling, suggesting an unbearable wait and an imminent threat for the prisoners destined to slaughter in the case of Jourgnac, the length of days and nights spent outside trying to escape detection for Louvet, and the intensity of dangerous moments in front of an angry mob for Campan.

By techniques of dramatisation, narrators stay in the background to let the characters speak the story. When Jourgnac tells of his arrest and his questioning, the narrator fades; the

¹² Jourgnac de Saint-Méard. My translation.

words pronounced are reproduced without any introduction or commentary, emphasizing the procedural features of the dialogue. This dialogue between the accused, defending himself, and his judges is sometimes interrupted by elements of the account which focus on sinister facts, disturbing the course of questioning as following:

The caretaker, full of alarm, went and warned that a prisoner was escaping through the chimney. The presiding judge ordered him to be shot with pistols. [...] He was the unfortunate Maussabré. [...] He was finished off in front of the wicket.¹³

The dialogue and these kinds of narrative breaks stretch the account and make the reader feel present at the scene, increasing its crucial intensity.

In the memoirs of Louvet, a longer text to tell events spreading over several years, slowing down is obvious in the part regarding his escape in the country, which is the most traumatic part of his experience. Louvet organizes his account around a few scenes, telling in which circumstances he was very nearly discovered and arrested. For instance, near Rostrenen, in Brittany, the little troop of runaways is submitted to a particularly dangerous check in the barn where they spend the night:

At one hour in the morning, [the danger] arrived. 'Open up in the name of the law', shouted someone. [...] Our only candle was blown out. One of us slowly opened the door and shut it at once. 'There are people around the house', he said. A threatening and louder voice repeated from outside: 'Open up in the name of the law'. At once after a deep silence among us, first surprised, an only unanimous and really terrible cry followed: 'To arms!' Everybody was looking for them, everybody was groping for clothes. It couldn't be very quick. We were hearing from time to time 'in the name of the law', but the tone was less assertive. 'We won't go out before being ready', we answered. I remember that it took me a long time to find my gun. [...]. Eventually, we opened. A figure

¹³ Jourgnac de Saint-Méard, p. 234. My translation. Original: '[...]Le concierge entra tout effaré, pour avertir qu'un prisonnier se sauvait par la cheminée. Le président lui dit de faire tirer sur lui des coups de pistolet [...] C'était le malheureux Maussabré [...]. Il fut achevé devant la porte du guichet.'

wearing a tricoloured scarf was barring the door. Close behind him was a quite numerous troop of national guards. Torches were lightening the scene. 'What were you doing here?' asked abruptly the administrator of the district [...]¹⁴

The narrator keeps on depicting the scene with so many details that he needs to apologize to the virtual readers for the length of his account.¹⁵ He uses dramatic visualization, representing the event with descriptive details, rendering gestures and dialogue to make the scene more visual and imaginatively present to the reader. The visual memory underlines the dark, the light and the colours; on the other hand, as a dramatic device, the accurate words are reported in direct speech, more as sounds and auditory memories than for their meaning. For a short while, after that episode, the runaways escaped to their arrest and to death. Louvet will use the same devices in other following episodes: when the outlaws hidden in a cave hold their breath, or when a shelter is refused to them during a rainy night, or when Louvet is lying, the barrel of his pistol in his mouth to kill himself if discovered, in a carriage under clothes, straw and boxes, while a guard, checking the vehicle, is walking on his body.

Madame Campan uses dramatic visualization, narrative slowing down and sensory details to represent the overwhelming, increasing popular violence which defies belief and made her go into an entirely unknown world:

On the 20th of June [1792] this mob thronged about the Tuileries in still greater numbers, armed with pikes, hatchets, and murderous instruments of all kinds, decorated with ribbons of the national colours, shouting, 'The nation forever! Down with the veto!' [...] The Queen could not join the King; she was in the

¹⁴ *Mémoires de Jean-Baptiste Louvet*, p. 85. My translation. Original: 'À une heure du matin, il arriva. Au nom de la loi, criaient-ils, ouvrez. [...] Notre unique chandelle était éteinte. L'un de nous entrouvrit doucement la porte et la referma sur-le-champ. La maison est entourée, nous dit-il. Une voix menaçante et plus forte répéta du dehors: Au nom de la loi, ouvrez. Aussitôt au profond silence qu'un premier mouvement de surprise avait causé parmi nous succéda un seul cri, un cri unanime et vraiment terrible: Aux armes! Chacun les cherchait, chacun s'habillait à tâtons. Cela ne pouvait être fort prompt. Le nom de la loi se faisait de temps en temps entendre; mais d'un ton moins assuré. Nous ne sortirons que quand nous serons prêts, lui répondait-on. Je me souviens que mon fusil se fit longtemps chercher [...] Enfin nous ouvrimus. Un personnage à ruban tricolore barrait la porte. Un peu derrière lui était un groupe assez fort de gardes nationales. Des flambeaux éclairaient la scène. Que faisiez-vous là? demanda brusquement l'administrateur de district.'

¹⁵ *Mémoires de Jean-Baptiste Louvet*, p. 87.

council chamber, where she had been placed behind the great table to protect her, as much as possible, against the approach of the barbarians [...] She had fixed a tricoloured cockade, which one of the National Guard had given her, upon her head. The poor little Dauphin was, like the King, shrouded in an enormous red cap. The horde passed in files before the table; the sort of standards which they carried were symbols of the most atrocious barbarity. There was one representing a gibbet, to which a dirty doll was suspended; the words 'Marie Antoinette à la lanterne' were written beneath it. Another was a board, to which a bullock's heart was fastened, with 'Heart of Louis XVI' written around it. And a third showed the horn of an ox, with an obscene inscription.¹⁶

More than the vocabulary expressing value judgment ('barbarians...atrocious barbarity'), these are visual details ('ribbons of the national colours...tricoloured cockade...red cap'), precise description of unseemly objects ('a dirty doll...bullock's heart...the horn of an ox') quotations of threatening words ('Marie Antoinette à la lanterne', 'Heart of Louis XVI') which share the frightening oddness of the scene. Imagery and dramatic visualization representing strange details are here at the opposite of narrative *patterning*. In this true story, discerning and anticipating the structure of the plot, leaning on common beliefs or causal connections that most readers will have some direct experience with, turn out to be impossible. To quote Aristotle, history 'relates what has happened', and fiction 'what may happen [...], according to the law of probability or necessity'.¹⁷ This horrific scene, from the point of view of Campan, has happened even if it should not have happened, being completely out of

¹⁶ *Mémoires de madame de Campan*, Book VI, chapter VII. My translation. Original: 'Le 20 juin, cette troupe encore plus nombreuse armée de piques, de haches et d'instruments meurtriers de toutes sortes garnis de rubans aux couleurs de la nation, se porta vers le palais des Tuileries criant : *Vive la nation ! A bas le veto !* [...] La reine n'avait pu parvenir jusqu'au roi. Elle était dans la salle du Conseil et on avait eu de même l'idée de la placer derrière la grande table, pour la garantir autant que possible de l'approche de ces barbares [...] Elle avait attaché à sa tête une cocarde aux trois couleurs qu'un garde national lui avait donnée. Le pauvre petit dauphin était, ainsi que le roi, affublé d'un énorme bonnet rouge. La horde défila devant cette table; les espèces d'étendards qu'elle portait étaient des symboles de la plus atroce barbarie. Il y en avait un qui représentait une potence à laquelle une méchante poupée était suspendue; ces mots étaient écrits au bas : *Marie-Antoinette à la lanterne*. Un autre était une planche sur laquelle on avait fixé un cœur de bœuf, autour duquel était écrit : *Cœur de Louis XVI*. Enfin un troisième offrait les cornes d'un bœuf avec une légende obscène.'

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 9, 1451a, 35.

verisimilitude. That is the reason why the narrators of traumatic experiences try to reconstitute these strange and contingent details which sound like marks of truth.

Journac too in his account gives horrifying details to show the terrible situation of prisoners destined to be massacred:

The main issue for us was to know which posture we should get to receive death with the least suffering when we would go into the place of the slaughter; [...] that is the horrible details we were deliberating on.¹⁸

And Louvet emphasizes these apparent trifles which are almost unbearable in the life of outlaws: 'Measuring each footstep, softly breathing, suppressing a sneeze, a laugh, a cry, the faintest noise [...]'.¹⁹ He underlines, for instance, an incidental event, which does not play any role in the course of the story but emphasizes his desperate situation: after a night spent in an inn, he noticed that he had lost a dose of opium he kept to commit suicide in case of arrest. He describes his anxiety and his distraught search for this instrument of death.

These contingent details testify to the authenticity of the account, while the facts defy imagination. They are like useless pieces of memory; they don't help to organize the narrative and to build the plot. Without any explaining function, they are clues to nothing, drawing their value from this lack of usefulness.

Another way to share the feelings of the victims at the moment of the events is the internal focalization and a restricted narrative point of view. Journac refrains from anticipating, from using flashforward or prolepsis in these parts of his account. He reconstitutes the tension felt at the time, the uncertainty about the conclusion of events. As soon as he was acquitted, after a long scene when he hardly defended himself in front of the court which was judging him, he noticed:

I heard above me people applauding and giving a cheer. I looked up and saw several heads gathering and leaning against the bars of the cell window; and as

¹⁸ Journac de Saint-Méard, pp. 218 - 219. My translation. Original: 'Notre occupation la plus importante était de savoir quelle serait la position que nous devons prendre pour recevoir la mort le moins douloureusement, quand nous entrerions dans le lieu du massacre. [...] C'était sur ces horribles détails que nous délibérions.'

¹⁹ *Mémoires de Jean-Baptiste Louvet*, p. 135.

their eyes were opened and moving, I came to realize that the muffled and worrying buzz I heard during the questioning came from there.²⁰

The narrator avoids anticipating: it is a way to feel his fear but also the extreme tension of the accused, completely absorbed in his defence. The restricted point of view is also conveyed by sensorial details, especially auditory perceptions and by emphasizing the gaps in information. For example, here were the only events related by Jourgnac are for the 27th August:

27th . We heard a gunshot from inside the prison; at once they hurriedly run in the stairs and in the corridors; they quickly lock and bolt; they go into our room where one of our jailers counts us and says to be quiet, that we are out of danger. That's all that we can say about that abrupt and taciturn character.²¹

We do not know who shot, and what was the danger that the jailer was talking about. Till the end of the account, we won't get any further information about it, simply because we know only what the victim and the narrator knew. In this example, the restricted point of view is not only a device to understand what the protagonist could feel during the events. The lack of information still lasts when the narrator tells the story, perhaps at the opposite of the novel, where the writer will later give the missing explanations the reader expects, we'll never know.

The narrow perspective fits with the confinement of the prisoners, as shown by the following extract of detailing what happened on 2nd September, at four o'clock:

²⁰ Jourgnac de Saint-Méard, p. 238. My translation. Original: 'J'entendis au-dessus de moi applaudir et crier bravo. Je levai les yeux, et j'aperçus plusieurs têtes groupées contre les barreaux du soupirail du guichet; et comme elles avaient les yeux ouverts et mobiles, je compris que le bourdonnement sourd et inquiétant, que j'avais entendu pendant mon interrogatoire, venait de cet endroit.'

²¹ Jourgnac de Saint-Méard, p. 209. My translation. Original: 'Le 27 - Nous entendîmes le bruit d'un coup de pistolet qu'on tira dans l'intérieur de la prison; aussitôt on court précipitamment dans les escaliers et les corridors; on ouvre et on ferme avec vivacité des serrures et des verrous; on entre dans notre chambre, où un de nos guichetiers, après nous avoir comptés, nous dit d'être tranquilles, que le danger était passé. Voilà tout ce qu'a voulu nous dire sur cet événement ce brusque et taciturne personnage.'

The agonizing cries of a man who was cut to pieces with a sabre drew us to the window of the turret and we saw, facing the wicket of our prison, the body of a dead man laid on the street.²²

Locked in their cell, the prisoners hear noises, cries and words, and they can't know where they come from and what they mean. The restricted narrative point of view is particularly efficient to make the reader feel the fear of these moments.

Louvet uses the same devices in different scenes. His companions and he were confined in shelters, caves, barns, attics, where they avoided making noise and stay in the dark lying in wait, as in the following example:

The following day, at ten o'clock in the evening, when everything seemed asleep in the smallholding but the too faithful dog barking without respite, we believed to hear around the barn a noise like men softly walking and quietly talking; a few minutes later we saw a big light in the cowshed which was always dark; some were talking, but cautiously; then there was a deep silence. A faint noise started again from outside; at last, we heard that they were climbing our ladder. Were we discovered? Was the barn surrounded? We took our arms.²³

The hidden group cannot move and make any noise. Where they are, they can hear from outside and try to guess, relying on their auditory perceptions, what is happening. The restricted point of view conveys the uncertainty of the situation when the runaways cannot know if the presence they notice is dangerous or not; it conveys the state of mind of the outlaws, who have to hide their presence and ward off the threats.

²² Jourgnac de Saint-Méard, p. 213. My translation. Original: 'Les cris déchirants d'un homme qu'on hachait à coups de sabre nous attirèrent à la fenêtre de la tourelle, et nous vîmes, vis-à-vis le guichet de notre prison, le corps d'un homme étendu mort sur le pavé.'

²³ *Mémoires de Jean-Baptiste Louvet*, p. 127. My translation. Original: 'Le lendemain, il était dix heures de nuit, et tout semblait dormir dans la métairie, excepté le chien trop fidèle, dont les aboiements ne nous laissaient point de repos: nous crûmes entendre autour de la grange un bruit semblable à celui que produiraient plusieurs hommes qui marcheraient doucement et parleraient bas; quelques minutes après, nous vîmes une grande clarté dans l'étable, où la lumière n'entraît jamais; quelques-uns y parlaient d'abord, mais avec précaution; puis il se fit un profond silence; un peu de bruit recommença au-dehors; enfin, nous entendîmes qu'on montait à notre échelle. Étions-nous découverts, la grange était-elle entourée? Nous prîmes nos armes'.

This restricted point of view, refraining from anticipating, is very obvious in the most traumatic episode of the account of Madame Campan. On 10 August 1792, the 'insurrectionary' Paris Commune besieged the Tuileries palace. King Louis XVI and the royal family took shelter with the Legislative Assembly. Mme Campan, her sister and other servants and courtiers had stayed in the palace, besieged soon by the mob and the Marseillais. Campan who tried to escape was caught by an assailant:

I ran towards the staircase followed by our women. The murderers left the heyduc to come to me. The women threw themselves at their feet, and held their sabres. The narrowness of the staircase impeded the assassins; but I had already felt a terrible hand thrust into my back to seize me by my clothes, when someone called out from the bottom of the staircase, 'What are you doing above there? We don't kill women'. The horrid Marseillais who was going to murder me answered a 'heim' whose sound I will always remember. I was on my knees; my executioner quitted his hold of me, and said, 'Get up, you rascal; the nation pardons you'.²⁴

The narrator used, as a device of restricted point of view and of internal focalization, the obliteration of personal reference ('a terrible hand' is the agent of the verbs *thrust* and *seize*), which is a way to express the situation of the woman running and turning her back on her attacker. The direct speech, especially the onomatopoeia 'heim', or the insulting words 'you rascal' (*coquine* in French), report the accurate words, as contingent details definitely related to the traumatic scene, as she noticed herself:

²⁴ *Mémoires de madame de Campan*. My translation. Original: 'Je cours vers l'escalier, suivie de nos femmes. Les assassins quittent l'heyduque pour venir à moi. Ces femmes se jettent à leurs pieds et saisissent les sabres. Le peu de largeur de l'escalier gênait les assassins; mais j'avais déjà senti une main terrible s'enfoncer dans mon dos pour me saisir par mes vêtements, lorsqu'on cria du bas de l'escalier: que faites-vous là-haut? L'horrible Marseillais qui allait me massacrer, répondit un *heim* dont le son ne sortira jamais de ma mémoire. L'autre voix répondit ces seuls mots: "On ne tue pas les femmes." J'étais à genoux, mon bourreau me lâcha et me dit: "Lève-toi, coquine, la nation te fait grâce". Book VI. Chapter VIII. I translate this extract, the english quoted translation being uncomplete ('The horrid Marseillais [...] I will always remember').

The brutality of these words did not prevent my suddenly experiencing an indescribable feeling which partook almost equally of the love of life and the idea that I was going to see my son, and all that was dear to me, again. A moment before I had thought less of death than of the pain which the steel, suspended over my head, would occasion me. Death is seldom seen so close without striking his blow. I heard every syllable uttered by the assassins, just as if I had been calm.²⁵

In her own words, Campan tries to make her reader understand the peculiar nature of this experience when she faced death. She suggests the difficulties in expressing her indescribable relief and, on the other hand, she uses approximate sentences to do it ('which partook almost equally of [...]') She highlights the specific features of her mental state: she feared more suffering than death, she notices a phenomenon of heightened awareness ('I heard every syllable') and a kind of dissociation or emotional detachment ('just as if I had been calm').

Before relating this event, she had told of the death of a heyduque (a servant of the court dressed as a Hungarian) and how numbing and dazing makes him unable to escape:

I saw there only our two femmes de chambre and one of the Queen's two heyducs, a man of great height and military aspect. I saw that he was pale, and sitting on a bed. I cried out to him, 'Fly! the footmen and our people are already safe.'- 'I cannot', said the man to me; 'I am dying of fear'. As he spoke I heard a number of men rushing hastily up the staircase; they threw themselves upon him, and I saw him assassinated.²⁶

²⁵ *Mémoires de madame de Campan*, Book VI, Chapter VIII. My translation. Original: 'La grossièreté de ces paroles ne m'empêcha pas d'éprouver soudain un sentiment inexprimable qui tenait presque autant à l'amour de la vie qu'à l'idée que j'allais revoir mon fils et tout ce qui m'était cher. Un instant auparavant, j'avais moins pensé à la mort que pressenti la douleur que m'allait causer le fer suspendu sur ma tête. On voit rarement la mort de si près sans la subir. Je peux dire qu'alors les organes, lorsqu'on ne s'évanouit pas, sont dans tout leur développement et que j'entendais les moindres paroles des assassins, comme si j'eusse été de sang-froid.'

²⁶ IBID, Book VI, Chapter VIII. My translation. Original: 'Je n'[e] vis [dans cette pièce] que nos deux femmes de chambre et l'un des deux heyduques de la reine, homme d'une très haute taille et d'une physionomie tout à fait martiale. Je le vis pâle et assis sur un lit ; je lui criai : « Sauvez-vous, les valets de pied et nos gens le sont déjà. - Je ne le puis, me dit cet homme, je suis mort de peur. » Comme il

The 'great height and military aspect of the heyduc' contrasts with the fact he is completely paralysed by fear and unable to struggle. Following the narrative fictional patterns and the canon of verisimilitude in the novel, this contrast is not suitable or decent except for parodic or ironical purposes. The tone of the narrator here is, however, whatever you want but ironical. In fact, the scene can be defined as *uncanny*: as far from the licenses of fiction as from what sounds familiar in the common reality.²⁷ The extreme experience defies verisimilitude which can be better understood as readers' expectations than plausibility. The three narrators try to make the reader understand a very specific experience: they very nearly died and felt the death inside of them. Campan says: 'Death is seldom seen so close without striking his blow'. Jourgnac names his account: 'My agony during thirty-eight years'. Louvet speaks of a companion who should never go back: 'he had death in his eyes'.²⁸ However, what does it mean to face or see your own death or to agonize when you are still living, or to see the death in someone's eyes, rationally speaking? It means, probably, that the only figurative discourse, that is to say, a metaphoric or metonymic one, is able to take in charge such an experience as representing his own death. Literary devices here are the only way to represent what is not possible to represent in a mere factual account. And that also the role of literature in traumatic testimony a way of working through, that is to say, to gain critical distance, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. The narrators of these traumatic experiences alternate between two types of discourse: they relate astonishing traumatic events which can astonish the reader and they reassure the narratee by explanations and analysis of the facts. These alternating discourses can be understood as a compromise between a concern for accuracy and authenticity and the needed restoration of a common world, where rationality and humanity do exist. Thanks to this compromise, readers can conciliate critical distance and empathy.

The survivors have to share their extreme experience without shaping their narrative in a coherent plot, without following criteria of verisimilitude and decorum, which were very important at their time when the scientific history did not yet exist and historical writing was still submitted to literary patterns. In others parts of their works they use, as many authors of memoirs since the religious wars when this kind of writing spread because of conflictual

me disait ces mots, j'entends une troupe d'hommes monter précipitamment l'escalier : ils se jettent sur lui, je le vois assassiner.'

²⁷ About *uncanny* and *trauma*, see Claude Janin, *Figures et destins du traumatisme* (Paris: PUF, 1996).

²⁸ *Mémoires de Jean-Baptiste Louvet*, p. 134.

legitimacy, forensic and epideictic rhetoric, and fictional patterns as epic and heroic scenes. However, these devices, and particularly conventional *pathos* stand in the way of sharing experience.

If these three witnesses have succeeded in transmitting testimonies that we still read today, it is not because they forgot an art of writing which they owned before their cruel experience. At the opposite, the fact that they were particularly talented at writing enabled them to find a way off the beaten track. Even if in parts of their accounts, they use conventional patterns and devices, in the traumatic scenes I have focused on, they described details which attend to the scene, which reconstitute its strangeness, and showed their ability to get rid of arguing purpose and, partiality, to transmit a human truth. A poetics of the contingent and meaningless detail, which is actually a sign of the experience, tries not to convince but to pass down. Far away from social and political context requiring rhetoric involvement, it gives to the testimony a universal impact. The poetics of the factual seems a particularly interesting challenge for literary criticism. Involving narratological, rhetorical and stylistic criteria, it derives from the place taken by the analysis of discourse in history. The ultimate consequence is to displace the object of literary studies, which would no longer be a corpus of recognized genres, but a certain quality of the writings which, by a work of form, attempts to restore and share an experience.

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