



# Violent Distortions: Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators

Zrinka Stahuljak

Volume 13, Number 1, 1er semestre 2000

Idéologie et traduction  
Ideology and Translation

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037392ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/037392ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (print)  
1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Stahuljak, Z. (2000). Violent Distortions: Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators. *TTR*, 13(1), 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.7202/037392ar>

Article abstract

Violent Distortions: Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators — By using the example of translators during the 1991-1992 war in Croatia, this article addresses the position of the translator in war in order to rethink the foundations of the metaphorical relationship between testimony and translation. If the theories of testimony do not allow the translator the position of a witness, how can then translation be "une métaphore de tout témoignage"? Taking the problem of distortion in translation, the author demonstrates how the failure to translate emerges as the testimony of the translator, one which, moreover, negates the metaphorical link of testimony and translation. The article concludes by showing how the translator as a witness is also excluded from the theory of translation.

# Violent Distortions: Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators

Zrinka Stahuljak

To understand *Shoah* is not to *know* the Holocaust, but [...] to grasp the ways in which *erasure* is itself part of the functioning of our *history*<sup>1</sup>.

It is undeniable that the translator plays a crucial role in the gathering of historical testimonies and that translation is, in a very literal sense, central to their transmission. While the issue of translation in its relation to testimony has been discussed in theoretical texts written on the subject of catastrophic war events, the translator has until now remained in the theory of testimony a marginal and even erased figure whose specificity eludes us. I propose that to focus on the translator in the empirical situations of translation in war may force us, however, to

---

I would like to thank my dissertation advisor Claire Nouvet for her generous help and encouragement in the preparation of this article. I also thank the anonymous reader of the article whose comments encouraged me to develop the section on the relation of theory of translation to the translator's position of witness.

An earlier, short version of this article was presented at the "Literary and Cultural Translation and Exchange" Conference of the American Comparative Literature Association, held at the University of Texas – Austin, March 25-28, 1998.

<sup>1</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York; London: Routledge, 1992. p. 253, Felman's emphasis.

rethink the foundations of the relationship of testimony and translation. I will begin by exploring the position that the translator and translation occupy in the theory of testimony, most notably in Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's book *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. I will then further this inquiry by considering the case of Croatian translators in the 1991-1992 war in Croatia<sup>2</sup>.

In her discussion of *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann's film on the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman proposes that the presence of the translator is necessary in the testimonial process:

The technique of dubbing is not used, and the character of the translator is deliberately not edited out of the film — on the contrary, she is quite often present on the screen, at the side of Lanzmann, [...] because the process of translation is itself an integral part of the film. (Felman, p. 211)

The translator's presence is necessary because she renders an incomprehensible language accessible to Lanzmann, the interviewer of Holocaust witnesses. Translation itself is understood as "an integral part of the film" because it functions as a metaphor for the interpretation, transmission and passing-on of a historical event, the Holocaust: "It is a metaphor of the film that its language is a language of translation" (Felman, p. 212)<sup>3</sup>. On the one hand, linguistic translation becomes a metaphor by virtue of representing "the splitting of eyewitnessing" (Felman, p. 212). In other words, the temporal delay in consecutive translation stands for "the incapacity of seeing to translate itself spontaneously and simultaneously into a meaning" (Felman, p.

---

<sup>2</sup> Since in *Testimony* (chapter entitled "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*"), Felman does not examine closely the position of the linguistic translator, I found it necessary to venture outside the immediate frame of reference of the book, while still maintaining a larger frame of catastrophic war events. Thus, I remain deeply indebted to Felman's ground-breaking work on the relationship between testimony and translation which allowed me to begin rethinking this relationship in terms of the translator. The type of translation is the same in both cases: consecutive translation.

<sup>3</sup> In a literal sense, translation is a language of the film in so far as the film's language is French, "the native language of the filmmaker" but not "the language of any of the witnesses" (p. 212).

212). On the other hand, because meaning is still not immediately available after linguistic translation, the "literal" meaning of testimonies must undergo further "translation" by the filmmaker and the historian who are

catalysts — or agents — of the process of reception, agents whose reflective witnessing and whose testimonial stances aid our own *reception* and assist us both in the effort toward comprehension and in the unending struggle with the foreignness of signs [...] (Felman, p. 213; her emphasis)

The interviewer, the historian and the spectator are thus given testimonial stances, they become "witnesses of [original] witnesses, witnesses of the testimonies" (Felman, p. 213)<sup>4</sup>. In the sense that bearing witness inevitably entails a removal from the "original" occurrence, "translation [...]" becomes a metaphor for the historical necessity of bearing witness [...]" (Felman, p. 153). It is a metaphor for the foreignness of witnessing and of bearing witness, a metaphor for that which is untranslatable,

the very namelessness of a catastrophe which cannot be possessed by any native tongue and which, within the language of translation, can only be named as the *untranslatable*: that which language cannot witness; that which cannot be articulated in *one* language; that which language, in its turn, cannot witness without *splitting*. (Felman, pp. 212-213; her emphasis)

The foreignness of language is inherent to translation. The catastrophe splits the language, it renders it inadequate to the event. Likewise, translation, split between at least two languages, embodies the very tension between the seeing and the unseeable, the saying and the unsayable, by always leaving a remainder that is beyond translation and which remains both foreign to language and within the foreign language. Although the act of translation thus represents the process of testimonial transmission, the translator is nevertheless reduced to a position of minor consequence in that she is "processing [...] merely [...] the literal meaning of testimonies" (Felman, p. 213). While her empirical position remains unaccounted for, her concrete linguistic

---

<sup>4</sup> In Laub's terms, the interviewer is a witness to the witness — he steps into the position of a secondary witness to assist in the emergence of testimony from the original witness.

performance becomes a theoretical *metaphor* for the kind of "translation" into meaning that the interviewer, the historian, and ultimately the spectator, are said to perform. The translator, who like them, has been identified as a "second-degree witness" (Felman, p. 213), is denied a testimonial stance, because she transmits "merely [...] the literal meaning of the testimonies. Thus, even though the translator is central to the testimonial process, she remains on the margins of the theory of testimony. Moreover, any indication of her testimonial stance is perceived as a "distortion".

[T]he translator in some ways distorts and screens [the visual/acoustic information] because (as is attested by those viewers who are native-speakers of the foreign tongues which the translator is translating, and as the film itself points out by some of Lanzmann's interventions and corrections) the translation is not always absolutely accurate<sup>5</sup>. (Felman, p. 212)

I argue, however, that this "distortion" is a unique and otherwise unrecognizable testimony of the translator. Moreover, this testimony of the translator provides us with the means to rethink the relationship between testimony and translation. I propose the case of the Croatian translators in and of the war in order first to better understand the reasons for which the translator is denied the testimonial stance that the filmmaker, the historian, and the spectator have, and then to suggest the ways in which this "distortion" emerges as the translator's testimony<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> "L'interprète ne voulait pas traduire ce qu'elle entendait [...] Parfois elle gauchissait tout, mes questions, les réponses. Elle les adoucissait. À d'autres moments elle était coincée par la vérité, et elle explosait dans sa traduction d'une façon très brutale. En fait, mon questionnement têtue la rendait elle-même folle, et de temps en temps elle me jetait ça au visage, exactement ce qu'ils disaient, parce qu'elle n'en pouvait plus," says Claude Lanzmann of the Polish translator in *Shoah*. "Les non-lieux de la mémoire," in *Au Sujet de Shoah, le film de Claude Lanzmann*, Paris: Belin, 1990. pp. 280-291.

<sup>6</sup> This portion of the article is based on 24 interviews with Croatian translators conducted by the Croatian social psychologist Ivan Magdalenic from Fall '92 to Spring '93. Ten translators are female, ages 19-50, and fourteen are male, ages 18-41. Along with the accounts provided by my former colleagues, I draw information from my own personal experience. I wish to emphasize, however, that all the quotes are taken from Magdalenic's study. All the translations from Croatian into English are mine. The quotes appear in quotation marks and italics in the body of the text, so as to distinguish them from other quotes and

The 1991-1992 war in Croatia erupted as a result of a conflict about borders between Croatia and Serbia during the break-up of Yugoslavia. The urgency of this first major armed conflict on European soil since World War II required immediate action by the Western allied powers. They responded by setting up the European Community Monitor Mission (henceforth ECMM)<sup>7</sup>. ECMM's task was to inform a larger international politico-military community of the war events in Croatia with the objectives of negotiating a cease-fire and monitoring the respect of minority rights. In order to follow the progress of the conflict and to gather the information necessary to complete their task, EC monitors collected testimonies from the members of the warring parties, Croats and Serbs alike, civilians and military, on and close to the front-lines. Ethnic Croat translators translated witnesses' oral testimonies into English, the *lingua franca* of the Mission. Without the translator these testimonies could not be transmitted and thus the triangular structure of translation was formed: the interviewer (an EC monitor), the witness (a Croat or a Serb), and the translator (an ethnic Croat)<sup>8</sup>.

But why does an ethnic Croat accept to translate a war? She accepts after the ECMM invites Croats to volunteer as translators. She volunteers precisely because she is politically involved in the conflict. She volunteers out of "*patriotism*," because she wants "*to do something*," "*to help*" by using her language skills. The translator volunteers out of the desire to be a witness, "*to see for myself what is really happening on the front-lines*." Most importantly, she accepts in order to testify herself, a desire to which she confesses only in situations outside translation:

---

other uses of quotation marks. To maintain consistency with Felman's text, I continue referring to the translator as "she."

<sup>7</sup> At the time when the European Community Monitor Mission was set up, the European Community had not yet changed its name to the European Union. At that time it was comprised of 12 member-countries: Germany, France, England, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Denmark and Luxembourg.

<sup>8</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub work with these three terms, albeit not explicitly in terms of a triangular structure.

*"A translator cannot and should not be just a 'transmitter.' One needs to have unofficial conversations."*

*"Regardless of the official function, I try to play the role of an unofficial representative of the Republic of Croatia, I explain the situation in this part of the world to the monitors."*

The patriotic response of the translator who volunteers fulfills the first condition of possibility of translation — her physical presence.

However, the very structure of translation does not allow the translator to be the patriotic, engaged witness that she wants to be. Another condition of possibility conflicting with the desire to bear witness has to be satisfied before the translation structure can transmit testimony. Within this structure, the translator functions as the conduit of an address from which she is excluded. Through the translator, the interviewer and the witness address and are addressed respectively: they become interlocutors. The translator as the third term remains outside the address; she is a mere "intermediary" (Felman, p. 211) through whom the address takes place. The translator's linguistic neutrality is necessary to the transmission of a witness' testimony, even in cases when the translator feels insulted:

*"I translated all of her words [insults] calmly."*

*"One of the monitors was saying bad things about Croatian politics. I did not participate in the debate."*

To translate "*calmly*" indicates that the translator is focused on maintaining a certain relationship to language. On the other hand, not to "*participate in the debate*" testifies to her attempt to keep her linguistic function apart from her testimonial desire. The translator transmits the words of the witness without performing any evaluative or interpretative gesture in translation. She translates this structural neutrality in terms of professionalism and responsibility:

*"I am a part of the team."*

*"[I]t is all a part of the job."*

*"Translation is a job of responsibility."*

*"I try to maintain objectivity, professionalism. Even though I am a volunteer, I am still a professional."*

Because she is a "*professional*," the translator must erase herself, at least while translating.

Thus, to translate for someone else was originally a way of bearing witness, a way of infiltrating the testimonial structure because of the desire to participate, to testify. Translation was seen as a weapon to occupy the position of an interlocutor, to persuade the EC monitors that Croatia was the victim in the conflict, aggressed by the Serb minority of Croatia and by Serbia proper. But the requirement of professional neutrality erases the translator's testimony. In other words, the translator, who accepts to translate in order to testify, is denied the very possibility of testimony. The two conditions that make translation in and of a war possible, the desire to bear witness and maintain linguistic neutrality, come into conflict with each other. The positions of the witness and the translator are mutually exclusive. The actual borderline conflict that she translates for the international community produces in the translator a violent internal conflict: she is torn between political allegiance to her native country and professional neutrality, in other words between testimony and translation. So in order to transmit the border conflict, she herself becomes the site of a violent conflict. Furthermore, she is working on the front-lines, the site of the physical violence of war, the front lines that form the internal borders within Croatia<sup>9</sup>. This physical position on the margins parallels the marginal, self-erased position of the translator as the third term of the structure of translation.

We thus end up with this paradox of the translator of testimonies: while she sees herself as *"a part of the team,"* she is nevertheless marginalized and excluded from it. The structural impossibility of speaking from within translation and the necessity of persuasion from within it, combine to produce an internal conflict in the translator. This tension is heightened by the life-threatening exposure on the front-lines and the witnessing of horrifying events:

*"The most difficult are the stories of [Croatian] refugees and displaced persons."*

*"Six buses with [Croatian] refugees were arriving, and they [the Serbs] were shooting at them, the situation was very tense, and I was hiding with the monitors in some ditch."*

*"A meeting with the parents of a child born in the refugee camp was very moving."*

---

<sup>9</sup> These front-lines constituted the internal borders between the free Croatia and the Croatian territory occupied by the Serbs.



*"On several occasions, I was at an exhumation (from the well, from the corn field) and at the exchange of corpses, and I translated the identification procedure. It was sickening to look at the corpse taken out of the well."*

*"I saw masssacred bodies of [Croatian] soldiers and civilians. I also watched a village burning at night."*

The translator is further tested when the speakers of the target language do not have adequate linguistic competence in it:

*"The most difficult situation is when monitors speak poor English and then sometimes blame me for what they didn't understand."*

*"Among monitors there are those who are not up to the occasion, also with poor language control, unfamiliar with translation techniques."*

These pressures on the translator eventually result in a failure of neutral, professional translation, a "distortion" (Felman, p. 212). A translator was recalled from duty after "[m]ostly translating, although I was explaining to them what was happening there." Other translators confess:

*"I 'jump in', it's more than translation: conversations with monitors, discussions about everything that is going on, explanation of our [Croatian] situation."*

*"Sometimes there is a need to speak in one's own language, without translation."*

The structure of address within which translation takes place is exploded as the translator stands on the physical borders of the front-lines. The translator becomes a subject speaking for herself, no longer just an "intermediary" with no personal history. She becomes a witness through her interpretation, in her failure to be a translator. However, acting as a witness, the translator fails to render faithfully the testimony of an original witness. She diverts the address to herself and responds in lieu of the original witness, only to find herself testifying, not, as she originally desired, to the war events, but instead to her own task and failure as the translator, as well as to the inadequacy of language.

The translator's disruption is undeniably a violent act committed against the witnesses and their testimony. But precisely because this failure of translation can, at any given moment, disrupt the testimonial structure, thereby reminding the witness, the interviewer, the historian and the spectator of the precariousness of the translator's

"professional," "neutral" and "self-erasing" stance, I believe it has to be read as testimony. At that moment the translator testifies to the fact that she has no testimonial stance within translation. The translator's internal conflict, otherwise kept under control with self-erasure, erupts in the failure of "neutral" translation and demands acknowledgment. The translator testifies to the fact that while translating she can never bear witness politically. Her failure also reveals that the translator cannot bear witness to herself structurally from within translation. Bearing witness to being a translator can only happen outside this structure, in the moment when translation stops, when there is no longer a translator.

The task of the translator requires a radical self-erasure while translating. What is erased is the translator's testimony. But in addition, she also erases the witness' testimony as she translates it. Indeed, the structure of consecutive translation is such that in order to "receive" the continuous flow of the testimony, the translator must listen, deliver a translation and erase from her memory what she just translated in order to repeat the move over and over again: receive, deliver, forget. Translation is not a memorizing but a forgetting — a forgetting of oneself and a forgetting of what is heard. For the translator, the event of testimony is an unrecognized event. Paradoxically, the transmission of a testimony which is translated precisely in order to be remembered happens through a forgetting.

Translation requires yet another erasure: the erasure of translation itself. The self-erasure of the translator incarnates, as it were, the self-erasure of translation. Translation, where the translator remains self-erased throughout, makes itself transparent and performs what Jean-François Lyotard calls the dream of a pre-Babel state, of an ideal form of interlinguistic communication in which there is no need for translation. That is every translation's ideal. To render itself useless, impossible even, and to erase the interlinguistic gap which motivates it."<sup>10</sup> As the translator erases herself, makes her physical presence transparent, so does the translation erase itself from the testimony that it translates. Born out of an interlinguistic gap, it aims at making us forget this gap.

---

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Foreword" in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, Cambridge, MA : B. Blackwell, 1989, pp. vi-xiv.

Theories of testimony both reiterate and forget the translator's self-erasure when they use her as a mere metaphor. As we saw, all three agents of the testimony structure, the interviewer, the historian and the spectator, have been compared to the "professional interpreter" in so far as they are asked to "receive" the testimony (Felman, p. 213) and "translate" it. This "translation" is itself likened to "bearing witness" (Felman, p. 153). But the reception on the part of the translator differs from that of the others: it requires her self-erasure as a witness. Theories of testimony acknowledge the specificity of the translator's position: "[T]his impossibility of witnessing is paradoxically inherent in the very position of the translator, whose task is nonetheless to try to render — to bear witness — to the original" (Felman, p. 159), only to forget it. In order to use translation as a metaphor of testimony, the theory of testimony must forget the specificity of the translator's position in the structure of testimony. It must erase the translator's self-erasure as a witness.

Ironically, the theory of testimony is unable to recognize that the translator does become a witness precisely when she fails to translate. So, to what does the failure of self-erasure in translation testify? The failure in translation highlights the erasure that the structure of testimony requires. It reminds us that the witness' testimony is "normally" passed on through the erasure of the translator and of translation itself. In her failure, the translator is testifying to the interlinguistic gap that motivates translation, to the erasure that it requires and to the impossibility of providing a smooth and exhaustive translation. Her failure indicates that there is something which does not lend itself to translation, that the testimony will always remain partially unavailable. The translator's failure is a mark of the untranslatable, the inaccessible. In the case of a war, the failure of translation is a passing-on of the untranslatability of the conflict and its history. It tells us that the scandal of a war is unacceptable and unassimilable to mere translation. Not only does the failure testify to a conflict, but its violent disruption reiterates the very scandal of war. It reminds us that the shock, the violence of an event such as a war, cannot be translated/processed without "shocking" the very structure of its transmission, and especially any claim to neutrality. War is a proof of history that is too complex, too inaccessible, untranslatable, to be understood in its own terms. Instead, it opens itself to recognition in the moment of failure, the literal inscription of tension and violence in the translation:

The translation is thus not quite a cognition but, rather, a performance of historical change to which it testifies in the very process of achieving it, of putting the change into effect (Felman, p. 163).

But with the self-erasure and neutralization of the translator, the fact that the war is accessed only through translation, mediation, is itself erased, neutralized. The failure of the translator testifies to this mediation. Finally, it bears witness to the fact that the translation of a conflict cannot remain neutral, that the translator cannot remain a marginal on the border of the conflict. The occasional failure of the translator's self-erasure cannot simply be dismissed as "distortion" caused by ethnic allegiance. The translator's failure, her need to testify, is part and parcel of the historical narrative she translates. The translator's testimony is a part of transmission since, as Claude Lanzmann says, "[t]he only objectivity is the *esprit de parti*."<sup>11</sup> In other words, the *parti pris* of the translator is also a part of the transmission of war. Not to recognize that "distortion" is an integral part of the process, is perhaps to silence the war and its scandals.

The translator inhabits a double bind: on the one hand, she is central to the testimonial process, while, simultaneously, she is forced by neutrality into the margins of the process she enables. By turning the translator into a metaphor, the theory of testimony repeats this double bind. But if the translator is not allowed to be a witness herself, how can then translation be "*une métaphore de tout témoignage*."<sup>12</sup> What does it mean to use translation as a metaphor of testimony, if the translator, the agent of translation, cannot bear witness? To reinscribe her self-erasure, then, within the structure of testimony is to question the validity of the metaphorical link between translation and testimony, a questioning which the theory of testimony, in repeating the double bind, not only allows, but also invites.

In *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, both Felman and Laub treat the issue of what can be called failed testimony, precisely as the "crises of

---

<sup>11</sup> "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann" in Caruth, Cathy ed., *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. pp. 200-220.

<sup>12</sup> Anny Dayan-Rosenman, "Shoah : L' Écho du silence," in *Au Sujet de Shoah*. pp. 188-197.

witnessing." They are concerned with the impossibility to witness and the inadequacy of eye-witnessing to say what it bore witness to in any straightforward terms. Therefore, the witness to the witness, that is, to the interviewer, the historian and the spectator, constructs "the possibility of *seeing again* what in fact was never seen the first time, what remained *originally unseen* due to the inherent blinding nature of the occurrence" (Felman, p. 255; her emphasis), of the catastrophe. Similarly, the translator's testimony cannot be said unless it interrupts translation, that is, unless it emerges outside the "original" occurrence. On the one hand, her interruption can never come in lieu of the "original" occurrence of her testimonial desire: "The failure of the translator [...] is thus exemplary in that it is a *failure to see*, a failure to witness history in its original occurrence" (Felman, p. 159; her emphasis). On the other hand, she bears witness to the "original" occurrence of translation only outside of translation. Failure turns into something other than failure: it becomes a testimony to her role of translator, which is otherwise erased and forgotten, unless in the negative form of "distortion." Thus, the failure which is inherent in the structure of witnessing, returns as a testimony, as a "translation," as it were, of eye-witnessing the unseeable, and Felman's theory of testimony accounts for its own lack of consideration of the translator's testimony. The failure of the theory of testimony to consider the position of the translator, to bear witness, as it were, to the translator, is part and parcel of the testimonial process, a process which inherently fails and thus demands that these failures be addressed, over and over again, as parts of the "erasure" inherent in "the functioning of our history" (Felman, p. 253; her emphasis)<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, paradoxically, while it has not accounted for the translator's "translation" of literal meaning into testimony, the theory of testimony has nevertheless made the translator, through the use of metaphor, essential to our understanding of the process of historical transmission. To say that "[t]he namelessness of a catastrophe" constitutes the "crises of testimony," is to say that the literality of the

---

<sup>13</sup> This article is thus an attempt to reinscribe into the theory of testimony, in agreement with Felman's theory of testimonial failure, a reading of the failure of translation which serves as the translator's testimony, but one which no longer corresponds with her initial desire to bear witness to the war. However, the translator's testimony, that is the failure of translation, remains hard, and perhaps impossible, to "translate," for the testimony of the translator occurs only at the moment when translation is outside of itself.

event cannot be witnessed because (and unless) it is under the mark of an erasure. I argue that this same literality cannot be *translated* either, unless in a crisis, as a "distortion," in other words, as a failure. The specificity of the translator's position, then, allows us to see that the metaphor of translation lies, first of all, as Felman proposes, in the foreignness in and of languages representing the unsayable foreignness of the event: "The original is killed because there is no possible witnessing of the original event" (Felman, p. 159). Witnessing and bearing witness emerge from under a mark of an erasure, a failure, albeit a "distortion," precisely the kind of mark of erasure under which the translator works. Secondly, the distance between the original event, witnessing and bearing witness, is incarnated in the very foreignness which the translator's distortion imposes on the testimony: "Translation is the metaphor of a new relation to the past, a relation that cannot resemble [. . .] any past relation to the past but that consists, essentially, in the historical performance of a radical discontinuity" (Felman, p. 162). This inscription of discontinuity is a literal inscription of erasure on history. In other words, distortion is not a performance of an erasure, rather it is the inscription of the erasure back into history. It is the index pointing at erasure, thereby allowing us to "grasp the ways" of "erasure" in history (Felman, p. 253). Finally, it is precisely in this literal inscription that translation emerges as a metaphor that is not a metaphor. If "translation [. . .] becomes a metaphor for the historical necessity of bearing witness" (Felman, p. 153), it does so because it *is* already the translator's "historical necessity," and, indeed, impossibility to bear witness. The metaphor, which is not one, bears witness to the distortion and the erasure always already at work in witnessing, testimony and in translation.

As we saw, the translator's distortion says that which cannot be said in the moment of translating the testimony, or even giving the testimony. Her intervention in the testimonial process interrupts history: history as testimony and history as translation. The "distortion" testifies to the task of the translator, it is a testimony which can happen only outside translation, outside of its own frame of reference, in the moment when translation stops. It is here that the full specificity of the translator as a witness emerges and sets her off from the other "translators"/witnesses. A witness to translation outside of her own performance, the translator turns translation into a theory of translation. The position of the translator and the emergence of theory of translation are thus dependent one on the other: the theory of translation is born

out of failure, out of failure to maintain its own task and condition of translatability.

However, to constitute itself outside of its own performance must bring about a failure of theory. Theories of translation repeat the erasure of the position of the translator in "privilégiant l'étude des structures et des processus [...] dans l'échange."<sup>14</sup> Theory often erases that which (or the one who) gives birth to it, as if wanting to silence its own place of origin, because that place of origin is the one of failure. Beyond testifying to the original inadequacy of translation, which is the mark of the untranslatable, theories of translation should also bear witness to the task of the translator. The fact that there is a need to erase in such general terms its own point of origin would indicate that there is a possibility of considering the case of wartime translators in generalized terms: that there is indeed an agency of the translator which always disrupts translation and thus shows that translation is not outside of the functioning of history, not outside its own historicizing narrative, but rather complicitous with it. Thus it is that by reinscribing the translator, her position and her "distortion" into the processes of historical transmission, as well as into theories of testimony and of translation, that our understanding and knowledge of history changes: "To understand *Shoah* is not to *know* the Holocaust, but to gain new insights into what not *knowing* means, to grasp the ways in which *erasure* is itself part of the functioning of our *history*" (Felman, p. 253; her emphasis).

Agnes Scott College

**ABSTRACT : Violent Distortions: Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators** — By using the example of translators during the 1991-1992 war in Croatia, this article addresses the position of the translator in war in order to rethink the foundations of the metaphorical relationship between testimony and translation. If the theories of testimony do not allow the translator the position of a witness, how can then translation be "une métaphore de tout témoignage"? Taking the problem of distortion in translation, the author demonstrates how the failure to translate emerges as the testimony of the translator, one which, moreover, negates the metaphorical link of testimony and

---

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from the anonymous reader report.

translation. The article concludes by showing how the translator as a witness is also excluded from the theory of translation.

**RÉSUMÉ : Distorsions violentes : Témoigner de la tâche des traducteurs en temps de guerre** — En utilisant l'exemple des traducteurs en temps de guerre en Croatie (1991-1992), cet article prend en considération la position du traducteur afin de repenser les fondements de la relation métaphorique établie entre le témoignage et la traduction. Si les théories du témoignage invalident le rôle de témoin du traducteur, comment se peut-il que la traduction soit "une métaphore de tout témoignage"? En se concentrant sur le problème de la distorsion dans la traduction, l'auteur montre comment le défaut de la traduction devient le témoignage du traducteur, témoignage qui annule le lien métaphorique entre témoignage et traduction. L'article se termine en démontrant comment le traducteur en tant que témoin est également exclu de la théorie de la traduction.

**Keywords:** war, testimony, metaphor of translation, theory, translator as witness.

**Mots-clés :** guerre, témoignage, métaphore de la traduction, théorie, le traducteur en tant que témoin.

**Zrinka Stahuljak:** Agnes Scott College, 2210 Lenox Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30324.

**E-mail:** [zstahul@learnlink.emory.edu](mailto:zstahul@learnlink.emory.edu)