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3 Michael Richardson. *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma, and Affect in Literature*.
4 New York, London, Oxford, New Delhi,
5 Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2016, x + 220 pp.

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7 Michael Richardson's *Gestures of*
8 *Testimony. Torture, Trauma, and Affect in*
9 *Literature* makes a significant contribution
10 to the state of the art of trauma studies by
11 adding recent insights from affect studies to
12 the field and experiences of creative writing.
13 It is the "unrepresentability" of torture,
14 manifested not only in the incapacity of the
15 survivors to *speak* torture but also in the
16 social and political unwillingness to hear and
17 bear witness to it (p. 9), that provides the
18 starting point for Richardson's "aim both to
19 read torture and, elaborating theories of
20 power, affect, trauma, and testimony, to
21 speculate on the possibility of its writing"
22 through the power of storytelling (p. 10).
23 The purpose of advancing the theoretical
24 frame is carried out through the intersection
25 of "three trajectories of theory": the
26 imposition of power on the body; the
27 experience of tortured and torturing bodies
28 in the act itself; and the apparent
29 unrepresentability in language of torturous
30 trauma. The reading of torture is based on a
31 convergence of "the perspectives of power,
32 affect, and trauma [in] relation to literature"
33 (p. 19) and is aimed at developing "a
34 sequential argument driven from chapter to
35 chapter by internal necessity" and forming
36 "a gesture," or "meaningful movement of a
37 body through space and time" (p. 19).

Richardson asserts that literature in
general and the realist novel in particular
have played a crucial role in constructing the
concept of rights and humanitarian forms,
with the *Bildungsroman* contributing to the
emergence of "the subject as cohesive,
self-contained, and inviolable" (p. 6). In
agreement with this, the main body of the

book is divided into six chapters, arranged in
two sections. The first section is meant to
theorize torture in the war on terror and in
literature, and is based on the reading of
fiction, poetry, memoir, legal memoranda,
photographs, and films. The second section
of the volume moves from the representation
of torture in visual images and films to
literary texts. In this section, Richardson's
approach is informed by his double
condition as literary critic and creative writer
of trauma fiction. In the chapter "Writing
trauma," he presents creative writing as an
affective process involving the *experience* of
affect as well as its *expression*. That is to
say, as a process that opens up creative
possibilities while simultaneously exposing
the writing body to the violence of trauma:
"In the act of writing trauma, my body [...] is
changed. I am affected not only in an
abstracted way but by specific affects. By
pride, love, disgust, fear, contempt, shame,
and even pain" (p. 114). This theory of
writing as the embodied expression of violent
affects is the most controversial part of
the book, as it situates Richardson in
diametrical opposition to T. S. Eliot's
famous distinction, in "Tradition and the
individual talent," between the man who
suffers and the poet who creates.

All in all, Richardson's outlook on the
capacity of literature and art to act upon
the world does not diverge from the
common critical view that traumatic events
and experience are unspeakable and
require the transformation of traumatic
memories into narrative memories; or, in
critical terms, the translation of the
unspeakable truths of torture into the
metaphoric and symbolic language of
literature and art.

—
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