

**Ethics of Reading Elie Wiesels Night**

A Dead Child Speaks

My mother held me by my hand. Then someone raised the knife of parting: So that it should not strike me, My mother loosed her hand from mine. But she lightly touched my thighs once more And her hand was bleeding—

After that the knife of parting Cut in two each bite I swallowed—It rose before me with the sun at dawn And began to sharpen itself in my eyes—Wind and water ground in my ear And every voice of comfort pierced my heart—

As I was led to death I still felt in the last moment The unsheathing of the great knife of parting.

—Nelly Sachs

The survivor [...] is a disturber of the peace. He is a runner of the blockade men erect against knowledge of "unspeakable" things. About these he aims to speak, and in so doing he undermines, without intending to, the validity of existing norms. He is a genuine transgressor, and here he is made to feel real guilt. The world to which he appeals does not admit him, and since he has looked to this world as the source of moral order, he begins to doubt himself. And that is not the end, for now his guilt is doubled by betrayal—of himself, of his task, of his vow to the dead. The final guilt is not to bear witness. The survivor's worst torment is not to be able to speak.

—Terence Des Pres

In considering ethical reading, we should differentiate between an ethics of reading and an ethics while reading. For me, an ethics of reading includes acknowledging who we are and what are our biases and interests. An ethics of reading speaks of our reading as if, no matter how brilliant, it were proposing some possibilities rather than vatically providing the solution to Daniel's prophetic reading of handwriting on the wall; it means reading from multiple perspectives, or at least empathetically entering into the readings of those who are situated differently. For me, an ethics while reading would try to understand what the author was saying to her original imagined audience and both why and how the actual polyauditory audience might have responded and for what reasons. An ethics while reading is different from but, in its attention to a value-oriented epistemology, related to an ethics of reading. An ethics while reading implies attention to moral issues; generated by events described within an imagined world. It asks what ethical questions are involved in the act of transforming life into art, and notices such issues as Pound's or Eliot's anti-Semitism and the patronizing racism of some American nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers. What we choose to read and especially what to include on syllabi have an ethical dimension. Thus, I will choose to select other Conrad works for my undergraduate lecture course than the unfortunately titled *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

Let me tentatively propose five stages of the hermeneutical activities involved in ethical reading and interpretation. Even while acknowledging that my model is suggestive rather than rigorous, I believe that we do perceive in stages that move from a naive response or surface interpretation to critical or in-depth interpretation and, finally, to understanding our readings conceptually and ethically in terms of other knowledge. Awareness of such stages enables us to read ethically. My stages are:

1. Immersion in the process of reading and the discovery of imagined worlds. Reading is a place where text and reader meet in a transaction. As we open a text, we and the author meet as if together we were going to draw a map on an uncharted space. We partially suspend our sense of our world as we enter into the imagined world; we respond in experimental terms to the episodes, the story, the physical setting, the individualized characters as humans and, the telling voice. While it has become fashionable to speak dismissively of such reading as "naive," or the result of the "mimetic illusion," in fact how many of us do not read in that way with pleasure and delight—and with ethical judgments? Who of us would be teaching and studying literature had we not learned to read mimetically?

2. Quest for understanding. Our quest is closely related to the diachronic, linear, temporal activity of reading. The quest speaks to the gap between "what did you say?" and "what did you mean?" In writing, as opposed to speech, the speaker cannot correct, intrude, or qualify; she cannot use gestures or adjust the delivery of her discourse. Because in writing we lack the speaker's help,
we must make our own adjustments in our reading. As Paul Ricouer notes, "What the text says now matters more than what the author meant to say, and every exegesis unfolds its procedures within the circumference of a meaning that has broken its moorings to the psychology of its author" (191). We complete the sign of the imagined world by providing the signified, but no sooner do we complete a sign than it becomes a signifier in search of a new signified. In modern and postmodern texts, our search for necessary information will be much more of a factor than in traditional texts. In this stage, as we are actively unraveling the complexities of plot, we also seek to discover the principles or worldview by which the author expects us to understand characters' behavior in terms of motives and values. Moreover, we make ethical judgments of intersubjective relations and authorial choices.

3. Self-conscious reflection. Reflection speaks to the gap between "what did you mean?" and "what does that mean?" Upon reflection, we may adjust our perspective or see new ones. What the interpretive reader does—particularly with spare, implicatory modern literature—is fill the gaps left by the text to create an explanatory text or midrash on the text itself. As Iser puts it, "What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning" (Suleiman and Crosman 111). While the reader half-perceives, half-creates his original "immersed" reading of the text, he retrospectively—from the vantage point of knowing the whole—imposes shape and form on his story of reading. He discovers its significance in relation to his other experiences, including other reading experiences, and in terms of the interpretive communities to which he belongs. He reasons posteriorly from effects to causes. He is aware of referentiality to the anterior world—how that world informs the author's mimesis—and to the world in which he lives. He begins—more in modern texts, but even in traditional texts—to separate his own version of what is really meant from what is said, and to place ethical issues in the context of larger value issues.

Here Todorov's distinction between signification and symbolization is useful. "Signified facts are understood: all we need is knowledge of the language in which the text is written. Symbolization facts are interpreted: and interpretations vary from one subject to another" (Suleiman and Crosman 73). A problem is that, in practice, what is understood or judged by one reader as signified facts may require interpretation or a different ethical judgment by another.

4. Critical analysis. As Paul Ricouer writes, "To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says to what it talks about" (214). In the process, we always move from signifier to signified; for no sooner do we understand what the original signifiers signify within the imagined world than these signifieds in turn become signifiers for larger issues and symbolic constructions in the world beyond the text. And we respond in terms of the values enacted by the agon and, as with Eliot's and Pound's anti-Semitism, resist where texts disturb our sense of fairness.

While the reader responds to texts in such multiple ways and for such diverse reasons that we cannot speak of a correct reading, we can speak of a dialogue among plausible readings. Drawing upon our interpretive strategies, we reflect on generic, intertextual, linguistic, and biographical relationships that disrupt linear reading; we move back and forth from the whole to the part. My responses to my reading are a function of what I know, what I have recently been reading, my last experience of reading a particular author, my knowledge of the period in which she wrote as well as the influences upon her and her influence on others, and my current values. My responses also depend both on how willing I am to suspend my irony and detachment and enter into the imagined world of the text and on how much of the text my memory retains.

5. Cognition in terms of what we know. Drawing upon our interpretive strategies, we reflect on generic, intertextual, linguistic, and biographical relationships that disrupt linear reading; we move back and forth from the whole to the part. As Ricouer writes: "The reconstruction of the text as a whole is implied in the recognition of the parts. And reciprocally, it is in constructing the details that we construe the whole" (204). We return to the original reading experience and text and subsequently modify our conceptual hypotheses about genre, period, author, canon, themes, and most of all, values. We integrate what we have read into our reading of other texts and into our way of looking at ourselves and the world. Here we consciously use our values and our categorizing sensibility—our rage for order—to make sense of our reading experience and our way of being in our world. In the final stage, the interpretive reader may become a critic who writes his own text about the "transaction" between himself and the text—and this response has an ethical component. Novels raise different ethical questions, ones that enable us to consider not only how we would behave in certain circumstances, but also whether—even as we empathetically read a text—we should maintain some stance of resistance by which to judge that text's ethical implications.
Let us now turn to our example. Elie Wiesel begins *Night*, his fictionalized autobiographical memoir of the Holocaust with a description of Moshe the Beadle, an insignificant figure in a small town in Transylvania who taught the narrator about the cabala: "They called him Moshe the Beadle, as though he had never had a surname in his life. He was a man of ali work at a Hasidic synagogue. The Jews of Sighet—that little town in Transylvania where I spent my childhood—were very fond of him. He was very poor and lived humbly. [...] He was a past master in the art of making himself insignificant, of seeming invisible. [...] I loved his great, dreaming eyes, their gaze lost in the distance" (1). But Moshe is expelled in early 1942 because he is a foreign Jew, and is not heard of for several months. He unexpectedly returns to tell of his miraculous escape from a Gestapo slaughter of Jews in the Polish Forests. But no one believes him. Moshe cries: "Jews, listen to me. [...] Only listen to me" (5). But everyone assumes that he has gone mad. And the narrator—still a young boy—recalls asking him: "Why are you so anxious that people should believe what you say? In your place, I shouldn't care whether they believed me or not" (5).

Let us consider the significance of Moshe the Beadle. For one thing, Wiesel is using him as metonymy for himself in his present role as narrator who is, as he writes, calling on us to listen to his words as he tells his relentless tale of his own miraculous escape from Nazi terror. Implicitly, he is urging us that it is our ethical responsibility not to turn away from the Witnessing Voice—Moshe, himself, indeed all those who have seen, specifically, the Holocaust, and metonymically, for us, man's inhumanity to man—whether it occurs in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, or Somalia.

*Night* is a narrative that traces the dissolution of the Jewish community in Sighet, the ghettos, deportations, concentration camps, crematoriums, death marches, and, finally, liberation. Distilling memoir into narrative form, *Night* traces the growth of adolescent courage and the loss of religious faith. Wiesel's original Yiddish title for *Night* was *Un di velt hot geshvign*, or in English, *And the World Remained Silent*. He distilled 862 pages to the 245 of the published Yiddish edition and Jerome Lindon, the French publisher, further edited it to 178 pages. I am interested not in the indictment of Wiesel for transforming his nominalistic memoir into novelistic form, but in how, in response to publishing circumstances and perhaps his own transformation, he reconfigured an existential novel about the descent into moral night into a somewhat affirmative reemergence to life. While the narrator is a fifteen year old boy, Wiesel was born in 1928 and would have been sixteen for most of the 1944–1945 period. Is not this age discrepancy one reason why we ought think of *Night* as a novel as well as a memoir?

Another more important reason *Night* is a novel is that there was a substantive change from the original Yiddish text submitted in 1954, months before he met Francois Mauriac, and 1958 when the French version was published. In 1956, it was volume 117 of a series on Polish Jews entitled *Dos polyishe yidntum (Polish Jewry)*. Wiesel's title was *Un di velt*. Seidman writes:

What distinguishes the Yiddish from the French is not so much length as attention to detail, an adherence to that principle of comprehensiveness so valued by the editors and reviewers of the *Polish Jewry* series. Thus, whereas the first page of *Night* succinctly and picturesquely describes Sighet as "that little town in Transylvania where I spent my childhood," *Un di velt* introduces Sighet as "the most important city [shtot] and the one with the largest Jewish population in the province of Marmarosh."

The Yiddish goes on to provide a historical account of the region: "Until the First World War, Sighet belonged to Austro-Hungary. Then it became part of Romania. In 1940, Hungary acquired it again." And while the French memoir is dedicated "in memory of my parents and of my little sister, Tsipora," the Yiddish names both victims and perpetrators: "This book is dedicated to the eternal memory of my mother Sarah, my father Shlomo, and my little sister Tsipora—who were killed by the German murderers." The Yiddish text may have been only lightly edited in the transition to French, but the effect of this editing was to position the memoir within a different literary genre. Even the title *Un di velt hot geshvign* signifies a kind of silence very distant from the mystical silence at the heart of *Night*. The Yiddish title indicts the world that did nothing to stop the Holocaust and allows its perpetrators to carry on normal lives; *La Nuit* names no human or even divine agents in the events it describes. From the historical and political specificities of Yiddish documentary testimony, Wiesel and his French publishing house fashioned something closer to mythopoetic narrative. (5)

What Seidman calls the "mythopoetic narrative," I would call a novel with a central agon, a structure of affects, a narrative voice, an imagined narratee, and an ending that transforms, modifies, and reformulates what precedes.

Whether a novel or memoir, *Night* depends upon and affirms the concept of individual agency, for the speaker tells a wondrous and horrible tale of saving his life and shaping his role as Witness, perhaps our Daniel. As Terence Des Pres writes:
In \textit{Night} we see dramatized the process of the narrator's developing into his role of ethical witness in the face of historical forces that would obliterate his humanity, his individuality, and his voice. Notwithstanding the efficiency of Nazi cultural production and the technology of the death camps and gas chambers, the narrator recreates himself through language. In the sense of the technological fulfillment of an ordered state that subordinated individual rights to the national purpose of the State, Nazi ideology has been thought of as a product of modernism. For those, like Wiesel, who have experienced the Holocaust first hand—for whom Auschwitz is not a metaphor but a memory—language is more than the free play of signifiers. For these people and others on the political edge, their very telling—their very living—testifies to will, agency, and a desire to survive that resists and renders morally irrelevant simple positivistic explanations arguing that an author's language is culturally produced. One might ask why Wiesel writes. For one thing, it is to bear witness; for another, it is an act of self-therapy; for a third, it is a kind of transference; and as the dedication stresses ("In memory of my parents and my little sister, Tsipora") it is an act of homage. Furthermore, in psychoanalytic linguistic terms, the narrator's telling is a resistance to the way in which the word "Jew" was culturally produced to mean inferior people who were progressively discounted, deprived of basic rights as citizens, labeled with a Yellow Star of David, imprisoned, enslaved, and killed. We might recall how all male German Jews were required to take the middle name "Israel," all females the name "Sarah."

Modernism, as James Clifford notes, takes "as its problem—and opportunity—the fragmentation and juxtaposition of cultural values" (117). Wiesel's novel/memoir \textit{Night} is an essentialist rejection of that fragmentation and juxtaposition even while it records the grotesque consequences in Europe of their occurrence. According to Wiesel, "the Holocaust in its enormity defies language and art, and yet both must be used to tell the tale, the tale that must be told" (Muschamp 1). The very opening, "They called him Moshe the Beadle," is a storyteller's invitation to step into another world. As with any life writing, the selection and arrangement into narrative blur the line between fiction and fact, and the inclusion of dialogue, recalled at an immense distance of years, contributes to the novelistic aspect of his memoir.

Wiesel explains in his essay "An Interview Unlike Any Other" why he waited ten years to write his memoir:

> I knew the role of the survivor was to testify. Only I did not know how. I lacked experience, I lacked a framework. I mistrusted the tools, the procedures. Should one say it all or hold it all back? Should one shout or whisper? Place the emphasis on those who were gone or on their heirs? How does one describe the indescribable? How does one use restraint in re-creating the fall of mankind and the eclipse of the gods? And then, how can one be sure that the words, once uttered, will not betray, distort the message they bear? So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essential for at least ten years. Long enough to see clearly. Long enough to learn to listen to the voices crying inside my own. Long enough to regain possession of my memory. Long enough to unite the language of man with the silence of the dead. (\textit{AJew Today} 15)

\textit{Night} is a spare, rough-hewn text that is an eloquent testimony depending on human agency and ethical commitment. \textit{Night} reminds us, too, that the concept of author-function as a substitute for the creating intelligence does not do justice to the way in which language and art express the individual psyche. Readers will recall that the book's signification depends on a taut structure underpinning an apparently primitive testimony, and, depends, too, on its spare, even sparse style. Its eloquence derives from its apparent ingenuousness. Yet \textit{Night} speaks on behalf of meaning, on behalf of will—the will to survive, the will to witness—and on behalf of language's signification. \textit{Night} eloquently reminds us of a grotesque historical irony, namely, that with its use of modern technology and Enlightenment rationality, Western man's progress led to the efficiency of the Nazi transport system, Nazi work camps, and Nazi gas chambers. \textit{Night} is a text that resists irony and deconstruction, and cries out in its eloquence, pain, and anger as it enacts the power of language. The text traces the death of the narrator's mother, a sister, and finally, his father; it witnesses an encroaching horrible moral NIGHT, a night that includes the speaker's loss of religious belief in the face of historical events. Notwithstanding his religious upbringing, Wiesel parts company from those who, as Dawidowicz explains, accept the
Holocaust as God's will:

For believing Jews the conviction that their sacrifice was required as a testimony to Almighty God was more comforting than the supposition that He had abandoned them altogether. To be sure, God's design was concealed from them, but they would remain steadfast in their faith. Morale was sustained by rabbis and pious Jews who, by their own resolute and exalted stance, provided a model of how Jews should encounter death. (308)

We should think of the text as a physical object and note its slimness, its titleless chapters, its breaks between anecdotes. We wonder what could be added in those white spaces, whether his loss of faith, for example, is gradual? But the slim volume, the white spaces, become a kind of correlative or metonymy to emptiness, to his "starved stomach" (50). The short paragraphs give a kind of cinematic effect as if the paragraphs are like frames in an evolving film. The very simplicity—the almost childlike quality—of the imagery gives the work its parabolic quality.

Wiesel draws upon a tradition of prophetic hyperbole: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. [...] Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never" (32). The camps dissolve traditional morality and replace it with extreme conditions that make the struggle to survive the only value. Thus the death of his father "frees" him to save himself; he is at once "free at last" and emotionally anaesthetized: "nothing could touch me any more" (106–107). We might recall the words of Lucy Dawidowicz:

The wish to live, the inability to believe in one's own imminent death, the universal human faith in one's own immunity to disaster—all these factors conspired to make the Jews believe that resettlement, not death, was the fact. "At bottom," wrote Freud, "nobody believes in his own death." Not gullibility, or suggestibility, but universal human optimism encouraged them to believe in the deceptions that the Germans perpetrated. In the process of repressing and denying the overpowering threat that confronted them, perceptual distortion and skewed interpretation based on wishful thinking managed to reconcile the illogic and inconsistencies of their fears and hopes. Without accurate information, without corrective feedback from authoritative sources on the course of events, their isolation helped give credence to their distorted and distorting evaluation of their predicament. This mechanism of denial, this arming oneself against disquieting facts, was not pathological, but, as psychologists point out, a tool of adaptation, a means of coping with an intolerable situation in the absence of any possibility for defensive action. The alternative was despair, the quiet stunned reaction of the defeated. (306)

Wiesel's text is written in the biblical style in which highlighted moments full of significance are presented without the careful concatenation of events we find in the realistic novel. Yet, he has an eye for details that may owe something to his journalistic career in the years prior to meeting Mauriac. The biblical style owes itself to his being steeped not only in the Old Testament—a text that pays little attention to background or setting, and eschews gradual introductions of its heightened and sublime moments—but also to a Talmudic tradition by which parabolic anecdotes are used to illustrate important themes. Rather than gradual change when he loses faith, a change developing from the Nazi arrival, he experiences loss of faith as an epiphanic moment. Unlike the realistic novel or memoir, we cannot relate his role of passionate witness to a grammar of specific causes such as his father's tears:

For the first time, I felt revolt rise up in me. Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for? (31)

Assuming in its form—especially its prophetic voice—an ethical narratee, Night also demands an ethical response. By that I mean a real attention to issues that pertain to how life is lived within imagined worlds. Truth in novels takes place within the hypothesis "as if" which is another way of saying that, as we think about our reading we are never completely unaware of the metaphoricity of literature. At one time, some critics may have naively ignored the metaphoricity of language and confused characterization with actual human character. But have not some theorists reached the other pole of willfully denying analogies to human life and naively repressing the possibilities of significance? We shall see that Holocaust fiction—like Night—has an ethical narrator, demands an ethical narratee, believes at least hypothetically in essential truths, insists on strong analogies to life lived within the Holocaust, and has faith that language signifies.

Rereading Night is a powerful experience, one that requires self-conscious reflection about how language can rescue meaning from the moral vacuum surrounding Holocaust events. What strikes the reader is its efficiency as a work of art. Derived, as we
have seen, from a much longer Yiddish typescript, the precise, lucid, and laconic telling is in ironic juxtaposition to the historical complexity in Europe, but appropriate for the simple cause and effect of annihilating an entire people. Such stark imagery as that with which he described a work detail—"we were so many dried up trees in the heart of a desert"—(*Night* 35) is all the more effective for its sparseness. Wiesel has written:

> There are some words I cannot bring myself to use; they paralyze me. I cannot write the words "concentration," "night and fog," "selection," or "transport" without a feeling of sacrilege. Another difficulty, of a different type: I write in French, but I learned the language from books and therefore I am not good at slang.

All my subsequent works are written in the same deliberately spare style as *Night*. It is the style of the chroniclers of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath. You never knew when the enemy might kick in the door, sweeping us away into nothingness. Every phrase was a testament. There was no time or reason for anything superfluous. Words must not be imprisoned or harnessed, not even in the silence of the page. And yet, it must be held tightly. If the violin is to sing, its strings must be stretched so tight as to risk breaking; slack, they are merely threads.

To write is to plumb the unfathomable depths of being. Writing lies within the domain of mystery. The space between any two words is vaster than the distance between heaven and earth. To bridge it you must close your eyes and leap. A Hasidic tradition tells us that in the Torah the white spaces, too, are God-given. Ultimately, to write is an act of faith. (Memoirs 321)

The English translation of *Night* was published in the U.S. in 1960 by Hill and Wang; it sold only a few thousand copies in its first few years. As Wiesel recalls,

> As for *Night*, despite Mauriac's preface and the favorable reviews in the French, Belgian, and Swiss press, the big publishers hesitated, debated, and ultimately sent their regrets. Some thought the book too slender (American readers seemed to prefer fatter volumes), others too depressing (American readers seemed to prefer optimistic books). Some felt its subject was too little known, others that it was too well known. In short, it was suggested over and over again that we try elsewhere. Refusing to lose heart, Georges [Borchardt, a New York literary agent] kept trying. In the end Hill and Wang agreed to take the risk. (Memoirs 325)

Although the basic unit of form is the retrospective memory of the teller who wrote after a ten year hiatus, the book is also organized around a number of motifs. The most important is the loss of faith in the face of evidence that God can do or will do nothing to prevent the Holocaust. Young Wiesel has a transvaluation of faith to disbelief and unbelief. He loses all illusions about a purposeful world. As Naomi Seidman put it:

> In the description of the first night Eliezer spends in the concentration camp, silence signals the turn from the immediate terrors to a larger cosmic drama, from stunned realism to theology. In the felt absence of divine justice or compassion, silence becomes the agency of an immune, murderous power that permanently transforms the narrator. (1)

Let us continue our critical analysis. As if the narrator were struggling to stay alive, as if he were having trouble breathing, the unnumbered and untitled chapters get shorter; the last three of nine chapters take up only seventeen pages. That he moves, on occasion, to a postwar retrospective gives the reader the sense, as in Conrad's Marlow's telling in *Heart of Darkness* that his memory is struggling with the narrative and that at times he needs to avoid the horrors. Wiesel's breaks between anecdotes has the same effect, as if a pithy anecdote was all the narrator could stand to tell before being overcome. The recurring term "empty" reminds us of how, except for the will to live, his life had become a negation—that is, an absence of love, comfort, health, food. But in the retelling it reminds us of how he has become spiritually anaesthetized and how he has left behind everything he had on the written page. The verbal correlatives to "empty" include "Night" and "Never" and of course anticipate the survivors mantra, "Never Again."

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never. (32)

The observant young boy who at the outset wished to be initiated into the mysteries of the cabbala feels the "void" of unbelief; the void is the alternative to the plenitude of belief (66, 93).

Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled. Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many factories of death? How could I say to Him: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our father, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory? Praised be Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar"?

This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied for so long. (64, 65)

III

Our ethics of reading requires that we look back and understand how the themes organize the agon. The title motif of Night is moral death, or historical void. Antithetical to light and its association with understanding—the Enlightenment of Europe—and with inner faith and wisdom, "night" is the dominant pattern around which the novel is organized. In Night, death is the antagonist, an active principle present at every moment. During the death march from Auschwitz, Wiesel recalls:

Death wrapped itself around me till I was stifled. It stuck to me. I felt that I could touch it. The idea of dying, of no longer being, began to fascinate me. Not to exist any longer. Not to feel the horrible pains in my foot. Not to feel anything, neither weariness, nor cold, nor anything. To break the ranks, to let oneself slide to the edge of the road. (82)

During the transport to Buchenwald, he remarks:

Indifference deadened the spirit. Here or elsewhere—what difference did it make? To die today or tomorrow, or later? The night was long and never ending. (93)

Yet, as Des Pres writes, Wiesel's narrative gives the lie to indifference and moral nights:

Survivors do not bear witness to guilt, neither theirs nor ours, but to objective conditions of evil. In the literature of survival we find an image of things so grim, so heartbreaking, so starkly unbearable, that inevitably the survivor's scream begins to be our own. When this happens the role of spectator is no longer enough. But the testimony of survivors is valuable for something else as well. By the very fact that they came to be written, these documents are evidence that the moral self can resurrect itself from the inhuman depths through which it must pass. These books are proof that human heroism is possible. (Des Pres 49–50)

At first night is juxtaposed to day, but gradually it devours day:

The night was gone. The morning star was shining in the sky. I too had become a completely different person. The student of the Talmud, the child that I was, had been consumed in the flames. There remained only a shape that looked like me. A dark flame had entered into my soul and devoured it. (Night 34)

That last sentence contains a major motif. Night becomes something that nullifies and obliterates; finally night overwhelms light, language, and meaning:

The days were like nights, and the nights left the dregs of their darkness in our souls. The train was traveling slowly,
often stopping for several hours and then setting off again. It never ceased snowing. All through these days and nights we stayed crouching, one on top of the other, never speaking a word. We were no more than frozen bodies. Our eyes closed, we waited merely for the next stop, so that we could unload our dead. (94–95)

On the death march, when he recalls that "the night had now set in. The snow had ceased to fall" (88), it is rich with metaphorical meaning. We recall his words as he is leaving Buna:

The last night in Buna. Yet another last night. The last night at home, the last night in the ghetto, the last night in the train, and, now, the last night in Buna. How much longer were our lives to be dragged out from one "last night" to another? (79)

Night threatens everything, even the cosmos:

Night. No one prayed, so that the night would pass quickly. The stars were only sparks of the fire which devoured us. Should that fire die out one day, there would be nothing left in the sky but dead stars, dead eyes. (18)

An important image is that of fire and burning. When during the death march, he feels his infected foot "burning," we recall Madame Schächter's prophetic delirious nightmare on the train to Auschwitz:

"Jews, listen to me! I can see a fire! There are huge flames! It is a furnace!"

It was as though she were possessed by an evil spirit which spoke from the depths of her being. (23)

Note how fire and death are associated with night. Her words turn out to be all to true:

"Jews, look! Look through the window! Flames! Look!"

And as the train stopped, we saw this time that flames were gushing out of a tall chimney into the black sky.

Madame Schächter was silent herself. Once more she had become dumb, indifferent, absent, and had gone back to her corner.

We looked at the flames in the darkness. There was an abominable odor floating in the air. Suddenly, our doors opened. Some odd-looking characters, dressed in striped shirts and black trousers leapt into the wagon. They held electric torches and truncheons. They began to strike out to right and left shouting:

"Everybody get out! Everyone out of the wagon! Quickly!"

We jumped out. I threw a last glance toward Madame Schächter. Her little boy was holding her hand.

In front of us flames. In the air that smell of burning flesh. It must have been about midnight. We had arrived—at Birkenau, reception center for Auschwitz. (25–26)

Within Wiesel's dramatization of Madame Schächter's psyche are the warnings of Moishe, the rumors of cremation, the anxiety about the two sons and husbands being deported early. But she also is part of the prophetic and mystical tradition when she foresees the fire. Of course, the very meaning of the word Holocaust is the complete destruction of people or animals by fire, and an offering the whole of which is burned.

As in other Holocaust texts, hunger is a dominant theme in Auschwitz. The narrator recalls he soon took little interest in anything except my daily plate of soup and my crust of stale bread. Bread, soup—these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the
passage of time. (50)

After a hanging he recalls: "I remember that I found the soup excellent that evening" (60). Or, after another hanging,

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:
"Where is God now?"
And I heard a voice within me answer him:
"Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows
[…]
That night the soup tasted of corpses. (62)

We might ask whether the last sentence is a metaphor or a searing actuality? Is "soup" that "tasted of corpses" a tactile transference of his feelings to his senses or vice versa? We recall Des Pres's words about how survival depended on fulfilling basic needs at the loss of ethics:

To oppose their fate in the death camps, survivors had to choose life at the cost of moral injury; they had to sustain spiritual damage and still keep going without losing sight of the difference between strategic compromise and demoralization. Hard choices had to be made and not everyone was equal to the task, no one less than the kind of person whose goodness was most evident, most admired, but least available for action. (131)

Another motif is the father-son tie, one that is so essential in Jewish life. Within the horrors of the Holocaust, these bonds threaten to dissolve. In an awful scene after the evacuation of Auschwitz, when he and his father are being transported to Buchenwald, a son fights his father for bread:

"Meir. Meir, my boy! Don't you recognize me? I'm your father […] you're hurting me […] you're killing your father! I've got some bread […] for you too […] for you too. […]"

He collapsed. His fist was still clenched around a small piece. He tried to carry it to his mouth. But the other one threw himself upon him and snatched it. The old man again whispered something, let out a rattle, and died amid the general indifference. His son searched him, took the bread, and began to devour it. He was not able to get very far. Two men had seen and hurled themselves upon him. Others joined in. When they withdrew, next to me were two corpses, side by side, the father and the son.

I was fifteen years old. (96)

On another occasion, a son—a pipel, that is, a boy belonging to the Kapo—beats his own father for not making his bed well (60). Whenever Wiesel thinks fleetingly of his father as a burden, he feels pangs of guilt. Indeed, his loyalty to his father is among the text's most touching motifs. He rejects the terrible advice of "the head of the block" (104).

"Don't forget that you're in a concentration camp. Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else. Even of his father. Here, there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone. I'll give you a sound piece of advice—don't give your ration of bread and soup to your old father. There's nothing you can do for him. And you're killing yourself. Instead, you ought to be having his ration."

I listened to him without interrupting. He was right, I thought in the most secret region of my heart, but I dared not admit it. It's too late to save your old father, I said to myself. You ought to be having two rations of bread, two rations of soup. […]

Only a fraction of a second, but I felt guilty. I ran to find a little soup to give my father. But he did not want it. All he wanted was water. (105)

By contrast to Wiesel's devotion to his father, the son of another inmate, Rabbi Eliahou wanted to get rid of his father! He had felt that his father was growing weak, he had believed that the end was near
and had sought this separation in order to get rid of the burden, to free himself from an encumbrance which could lessen his own chances of survival. (87)

While Wiesel's narrative is informed by retrospective guilt, we ask what more could Wiesel, the son, have done? Isn't Wiesel's guilt disproportionate to his behavior? In a way, the father represents the tradition for which he has departed, the man he would have been. His early perceptions are informed by his Jewish upbringing. Describing the SS Officer when he arrived at the barracks, he writes as if the German were stamped with the mark of Cain, who would kill his brother:

An SS officer had come in and, with him, the odor of the Angel of Death. [...] A tall man, about thirty, with crime inscribed upon his brow and in the pupils of his eyes. He looked us over as if we were a pack of leprous dogs hanging onto our lives. (35–36)

His father is the eternal flame to which he returns as a boy and his memory returns in the telling.

One terrible irony is that the bad luck of a choice he and his father made is a cause of their worst days:

I learned after the war the fate of those who had stayed behind in the hospital. They were quite simply liberated by the Russians two days after the evacuation. (78)

But how could he and his father have known that if they had stayed behind in the hospital as they could have, that they could have been liberated two days later and that his father would have lived. The dramatic action is filled with missed chances; the opportunity of emigrating to Palestine (6); the missed warning by the Hungarian police inspector because they didn't open the window in time: "It was not until after the war that I learned who it was that had knocked" (12); the maid Martha who could have hidden them in her village, and of course Moshe's warning. Palestine becomes the anti-tale, the Utopian alternative. He meets two brothers in Auschwitz:

Having once belonged to a Zionist youth organization, they knew innumerable Hebrew chants. Thus we would often hum tunes evoking the calm waters of Jordan and the majestic sanctity of Jerusalem. And we would often talk of Palestine. Their parents, like mine, had lacked the courage to wind up their affairs and emigrate while there was still time. We decided that, if we were granted our lives until the liberation, we would not stay in Europe a day longer. We would take the first boat for Haifa. (48)

Transformation is as much a theme here as it is in Kafka. By showing us how life was in Sighet at the outset, we can see the terrible transformation in young Wiesel and his father. When he writes of the masquerade of clothes before the death march, we think of the clown motif in Picasso and the grotesque carnival in James Ensor:

Prisoners appeared in strange outfits: it was like a masquerade. Everyone had put on several garments, one on top of the other, in order to keep out the cold. Poor mountebanks, wider than they were tall, more dead than alive; poor clowns, their ghostlike faces emerging from piles of prison clothes! Buffoons! (79)

When we see his father as a virtual corpse—broken in spirit, a musulman—before dying, we realize how little time had passed since he was a respected fifty year old senior member of his village.

My father was a cultured, rather unsentimental man. There was never any display of emotion, even at home. He was more concerned with others than with his own family. The Jewish community in Sighet held him in the greatest esteem. They often used to consult him about public matters and even about private ones. (2)

As in Primo Levi's Survival in Auschwitz, recurring memorable characters, employed in relationship to the evolving plot give the text unity: Juliek, the violinist who plays Beethoven—in violation of the German prohibition of Beethoven—when they arrive in Gleiwitz; and who is dead in the morning.

I could hear only the violin, and it was as though Juliek's soul were the bow. He was playing his life. The whole of his life was gliding on the strings—his lost hopes, his charred past, his extinguished future. He played as he would never play again (90);
Madame Schächter with her prophetic nightmares; Idek the psychotic kapo; Rabbi Eliahou; Meir Katz, the healthy giant who finally gives up and dies; the faceless cynic in the hospital who says: "I've got more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He's the only one who's kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people" (77).

Wiesel occasionally moves to the present as when he tells us what he learned after the war about the liberation of Auschwitz, when he speaks of the man who knocked on the window to warn his family, or the women throwing coins to the poor in Aden, or when he concludes his testament with a searing bridge across time:

One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto.

From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me.

The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me. (109)

The mirror as a reflection of the inner self—the other self—is the recurring image in modernism, but the mirror is also a traditional image of realistic representation in the Western tradition. By his act of writing, Wiesel rejects the corpse as his double. In both cases, he makes a rhetorical gesture that positions himself within Western culture and away from his iconoclastic position as witness or as one of the humble anonymous Lamed Vov or Just Men. As Seidman puts it,

In the final lines of *Night* when the recently liberated Eliezer gazes at his own face in a mirror, the reader is presented with the survivor as both subject and object, through his inner experience and through outward image of what he has become. (3)

But when we note how different this is from the original ending, we begin to place our reading in the context of what we now know. In his 1995 *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Wiesel recalls the original ending before Lindon edited it:

The book ended this way (I only quote it for its relevance today):

I looked at myself in the mirror. A skeleton stared back at me.

Nothing but skin and bone.

It was the image of myself after death. It was at that instant that the will to live awakened within me.

Without knowing why, I raised my fist and shattered the glass, along with the image it held. I lost consciousness.

After I got better, I stayed in bed for several days, jotting down notes for the work that you, dear reader, now hold in your hands.

But […]

Today, ten years after Buchenwald, I realize that the world forgets. Germany is a sovereign state. The German army has been reborn. Ilse Koch, the sadist of Buchenwald, is a happy wife and mother. War criminals stroll in the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past has been erased, buried.

Germans and anti-Semites tell the world that the story of six million Jewish victims is but a myth, and the world, in its naivete, will believe it, if not today, then tomorrow or the next day.

So it occurred to me that it might be useful to publish in book form these notes taken down in Buchenwald.

I am not so naive as to believe that this work will change the course of history or shake the conscience of humanity.

Books no longer command the power they once did.
Those who yesterday held their tongues will keep their silence tomorrow.

That is why, ten years after Buchenwald, I ask myself the question, Was I right to break that mirror? (*Memoirs* 319–320)

He questions whether his breaking the mirror as an affirmation of his decision to live is appropriate. Seidman comments:

> By stopping when it does, *Night* provides an entirely different account of the experience of the survivor. *Night* and the stories about its composition depict the survivor as a witness and as an expression of silence and death, projecting the recently liberated Eliezer's death-haunted face into the postwar years when Wiesel would become a familiar figure. By contrast, the Yiddish survivor shatters that image as soon as he sees it, destroying the deathly existence the Nazis willed on him. The Yiddish survivor is filled with rage and the desire to live, to take revenge, to write. Indeed, according to the Yiddish memoir, Eliezer began to write not ten years after the events of the Holocaust but immediately upon liberation, as the first expression of his mental and physical recovery. In the Yiddish we meet a survivor who, ten years after liberation, is furious with the world's disinterest in his history, frustrated with the failure of the Jews to fulfill "the historical commandment of revenge," depressed by the apparent pointlessness of writing a book. (7–8)

But should we not also notice how Seidman, too, especially in the last of the above sentences, appropriates Wiesel for her own purposes, namely to indict Wiesel and his successors for eschewing a rhetoric of revenge. As Seidman puts it, "*Un di velt* does not spell out what form this retribution might take, only that it is sanctioned—even commanded—by Jewish history and tradition" (6).

### IV

We continue to our final phase of hermeneutics—cognition in terms of what we know—when we turn to the introduction to the French edition. Originally, when Wiesel was a young unknown, Francois Mauriac, a French Catholic Nobel Laureate, not only helped him get his book published in France but also wrote the introduction which with its Christian meditation on the narrator’s loss, became part of the text:

> And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that the conformity between the Cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished? Zion, however, has risen up again from the crematories and the charnel houses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among its thousands of dead. It is through them that it lives again. We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each one of us belongs to Him. This is what I should have told this Jewish child. But I could only embrace him, weeping. (*Night* x—xi)

The introduction frames the book in a Christian context and implies a different set of beliefs. Mauriac was the kind of cultural icon who gave legitimacy to the novel. It were as if a young writer were now being published under Wiesel's auspices. In 1963, as Wiesel notes in his *Memoirs*, Mauriac wrote in his newspaper column:

> Someday Elie Wiesel will take me to the Holy Land. He desires it greatly, having a most singular knowledge of Christ, whom he pictures wearing phylacteries, as Chagall saw him, a son of the synagogue, a pious Jew submitting to the Law, and who did not die, "because being human he was made, God," Elie Wiesel stands on the borders of the two testaments: he is of the race of John the Baptist. (271)

There can be no doubt that Mauriac's introduction shapes the response of some readers into a more Christian reading. For example, when a child is among three condemned prisoners, Christian students see the parallel to a crucifixion scene, and see the longer and slower death of "a child with a refined and beautiful face" as a Christ figure (*Night* 60). Yet, didn't Wiesel mean the
scene as a challenge to the original Christian readers—whether Poles or French, most of whom had—while night engulfed Europe—either remained silent or done far worse? In his memoir he distances himself from Mauriac's teleology:

Where I come from and from where I stand, one cannot be Jew and Christian at the same time. Jesus was Jewish, but those who claim allegiance to him today are not. In no way does this mean that Jews are better or worse than Christians, but simply that each of us has the right, if not the duty, to be what we are. (Memoirs 271)

But has he written a novel that fulfills the paradigm of rebirth and resurrection to use Mauriac's words "of a Lazarus risen from the dead" and does he really speak to us not as a twenty-six year old adult but as a child, as Mauriac contends?

The child who tells us his story here was one of God's elect. From the time when his conscience first awoke, he had lived only for God and had been reared on the Talmud, aspiring to initiation into the cabbala, dedicated to the Eternal. Have we ever thought about the consequence of a horror that, though less apparent, less striking than the other outrages, is yet the worst of all to those of us who have faith: the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly discovers absolute evil? [...] It was then that I understood what had first drawn me to the young Jew: that look, as of a Lazarus risen from the dead, yet still a prisoner within the confines where he had strayed, stumbling among the shameful corpses. (Night viii-ix)

Is Mauriac's construction not only a Christian appropriation of Night's angst, but, no matter how well meant, an ethical transgression? It is as if, for Mauriac, Wiesel were the Christ child, an archetype for all victims whose suffering was redemptive. Seidman writes:

The friendship between the older Christian and younger Jew began, then, with Wiesel relinquishing his aim of manipulating Mauriac for Jewish purposes and turning, in all sincerity, to the man himself. With the psychological shift, Wiesel began his transformation from Hebrew journalist and (still unpublished) Yiddish memoirist to European, or French writer. [...] The French reworking of Un di velt hot geshvign and Mauriac's framing of this text together suggest that La Nuit—read so consistently as authentically Jewish, autobiographical, direct—represents a compromise between Jewish expression and the capacities and desires of non-Jewish readers, Mauriac first among them. (13,14)

She concludes:

Was it worth "unshattering" the mirror the Yiddish Eli breaks, reviving the image of the Jew as the Nazis wished him to be, as the Christians prepared to accept him, the emblem of suffering silence rather than living rage? In the complex negotiations that resulted in the manuscript of Night, did the astonishing gains make good the tremendous losses? It is over this unspoken question that the culture of Holocaust discourse has arisen and taken shape. (16)

V

What is the grammar of cause and effect within Wiesel's testament? To a contemporary reader, historical ironies abound. Why did the Germans continue to persecute Jews when they needed every resource to stem defeat? Was it an attempt on the part of a compulsive if not psychotic collective group psychology—or should we say psychopathology?—to shift blame and erase evidence? Why did they use Jewish slave labor mostly for useless tasks and systematically starve that labor? As Des Pres puts it,

But here too, for all its madness, there was method and reason. This special kind of evil is a natural outcome of power when it becomes absolute, and in the totalitarian world of the camps it very nearly was. The SS could kill anyone they happened to run into. Criminal Kapos would walk about in groups of two and three, making bets among themselves on who could kill a prisoner with a single blow. The pathological rage of such men, their uncontrollable fury when rules were broken, is evidence of a boundless desire to annihilate, to destroy, to smash everything not mobilized within the movement of their own authority. And inevitably, the mere act of killing is not enough; for if a man dies without surrender, if something within him remains unbroken to the end, then the power which destroyed him has not after all crushed everything. (59)

By confronting the horrors of the Holocaust and insisting on bearing witness (and resisting Mauriac's Christian gloss), Wiesel's text is an antidote to the way that Anne Frank's story had been manipulated to "glorify," as Bruno Bettelheim puts it, "the ability to
This improbable sentiment is supposedly from a girl who had been starved to death, had watched her sister meet the same fate before she did, knew that her mother had been murdered, and had watched untold thousands of adults and children being killed. This statement is not justified by anything Anne actually told in her diary. (Bettelheim 250)

But, of course, we see Anne's last word as ironic because she has been killed. Bettelheim is quite harsh in his judgments:

Those Jews who submitted passively to Nazi persecution came to depend on primitive and infantile thought processes: wishful thinking and disregard for the possibility of death. Many persuaded themselves that they, out of all the others, would be spared. Many more simply disbelieved in the possibility of their own death. Not believing in it, they did not take what seemed to them desperate precautions, such as giving up everything to hide out singly; or trying to escape even if it meant risking their lives in doing so; or preparing to fight for their lives when no escape was possible and death had become an immediate possibility. (251)

In an essay entitled "Freedom From Ghetto Thinking" Bettelheim defines "Ghetto thinking": "to believe that one can ingratiate oneself with a mortal enemy by denying that his lashes sting, to deny one's own degradation in return for a moment's respite, to support one's enemy who will only use his strength the better to destroy one. All that is part of Ghetto philosophy" (Freud's Vienna and Other Essays 261). For him the Franks embody ghetto thinking:

The Frank family created a ghetto in the annex, the Hinter Haus, where they went to live; it was an intellectual ghetto, a sensitive one, but a ghetto nevertheless. I think we should contrast their story with those of other Jewish families who went into hiding in Holland. These families, from the moment they dug in, planned escape routes for the time when the police might come looking for them. Unlike the Franks, they did not barricade themselves in rooms without exits; they did not wish to be trapped. In preparation, some of them planned and rehearsed how the father, if the police should come, would try to argue with them or resist in order to give his wife and children time to escape. Sometimes when the police came the parents physically attacked them, knowing they would be killed but thus saving a child. (Freud's Vienna 270)

Bettelheim, who himself committed suicide, writes in his essay "Surviving" how the survivor "knows very well that he is not guilty, as I, for one know about myself, but that this does not change the fact that the humanity of such a person, as a fellow being, requires that he feel guilty, and he does. This is a most significant aspect of survivorship" (Surviving 297). Bettelheim reminds how, while the foremost condition for survival was luck, other factors helped, such as, to quote Bettelheim, correctly assessing one's situation and taking advantage of opportunities, in short, acting independently and with courage, decision and conviction. [...] Survival was, of course, greatly helped if one had entered the camps in a good state of physical health. But most of all, as I have intimated all along, autonomy, self-respect, inner integration, a rich inner life, and the ability to relate to others in meaningful ways were the psychological conditions which, more than any others, permitted one to survive in the camps as much a whole human being as overall conditions and chance would permit. ("Owners of their Faces," Surviving 109)

Whether we agree with Bettelheim and whether we chide him for letting his rage distort and appropriate Anne Frank's text as Mauriac and Seidman have appropriated Wiesel, his words give us some sense of how difficult it is for us readers of Holocaust texts to respond ethically to such a searing and heart-rendering narrative of memory, trauma, and literary imagination as Night.


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