

STORY AND SILENCE: TRANSCENDENCE IN THE WORK OF ELIE WIESEL

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Elie Wiesel's most recent book prompted one reviewer to recall Isaac Bashevis Singer's definition of Jews as "a people who can't sleep themselves and let nobody else sleep," and to predict, "While Elie Wiesel lives and writes, there will be no rest for the wicked, the uncaring or anyone else."¹ If uneasiness is the result of Wiesel's work, it is not a totally unintended result. Since the publication of *Night* in 1958, Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the Nazi death camps, has borne a persistent, excruciating literary witness to the Holocaust. His works of fiction and non-fiction, his speeches and stories have each had the same intent: to hold the conscience of Jew and non-Jew (and, he would say, even the conscience of God) in a relentless focus on the horror of the Holocaust and to make this, the worst of all evils, impossible to forget.

Wiesel refuses to allow himself or his readers to forget the Holocaust because, as a survivor, he has assumed the role of messenger. It is his duty to witness as a "messenger of the dead among the living,"² and to prevent the evil of the victims' destruction from being increased by being forgotten. But he does not continue to retell the tales of the dead only to make life miserable for the living, or even to insure that such an atrocity will not happen again. Rather, Elie Wiesel is motivated by a need to wrestle theologically with the Holocaust.

The grim reality of the annihilation of six million Jews presents a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to further theological thought: how is it possible to believe in God after what happened? The sum of Wiesel's work is a passionate effort to break through this barrier to new understanding and faith. It is to his credit that he is unwilling to retreat into easy atheism, just as he refuses to bury his head in the sand of optimistic faith. What Wiesel calls for is a fierce, defiant struggle with the Holocaust, and his work tackles a harder question: how is it possible *not* to believe in God after what happened?³

It is not enough merely to value Wiesel for the poignancy of his experience and then summarily write him off as another "death of God" novelist. As bleak and nihilistic as some of his work may be, taken as a whole his writings are intensely theological. The death of God is not of more interest to Wiesel than the impossibility of God's death. And if this paradox is bewildering, it must be remembered that the Hasidism in which Wiesel's work is rooted is fascinated, rather

¹Mayo Mohs, "Jeremiah II," review of *A Jew Today* by Elie Wiesel, in *Time*, December 25, 1978, p.81.

²*The Accident* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), p.45.

³*The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p.194.

than repelled by a paradox. Wiesel himself says, "As for God, I did speak about Him. I do little else in my books."⁴ How Elie Wiesel speaks about God is the concern of this essay.

Wiesel and His Work

Elie Wiesel was born on Simchat Torah in 1928 and named "Eliezer" after his father's father. Sighet, an insignificant Hungarian town in an area which now belongs to Romania, was the place of his birth and early childhood. He was the only son among four children in his family. The father was an intelligent, religious man, a hard-working storekeeper and an important leader in the Jewish community of Sighet. The mother, too, possessed a warm Hasidic piety and was a cultivated woman. She was the daughter of a renowned rebbe and was, Wiesel says, "a strange mixture of an educated person and a Hasid, with the fervor of a Hasid, a firm believer in the Rebbe and, at the same time, open to secularism."⁵

Wiesel's own life as a boy was also something of a strange mixture. On the one hand, he gave himself fervently and almost completely to the Hasidic way of life. From early till late each day, ten or eleven months out of the year, he studied Torah, Talmud, and Kabbalah. He prayed and fasted and eagerly longed to penetrate the mysteries of Jewish mysticism, firmly settled in the conviction that he would be drawn "into eternity, into that time where question and answer become one."⁶ His study and piety were of such intensity that he had little time for the usual joys of childhood and he became chronically weak and sickly from his habitual fasting.

Yet, both his mother and father urged him to combine modern secular studies with his devotion to Talmud and Kabbalah. Of his mother, he says, "Her dream was to make me into a doctor of philosophy; I should be both a Ph.D. and a rabbi."⁷ And his father made him learn modern Hebrew, a skill with which he was later able to make his livelihood as a journalist for an Israeli newspaper. Wiesel remembers his father, an "emancipated," if religious Jew, saying to him, "Listen, if you want to study Talmud, if you want to study Kabbalah, whatever you want to study is all right with me and I'll help you. But you must give me one hour a day for modern study."⁸ In that hour a day Wiesel digested books which his father brought him on psychology, astronomy, modern Hebrew literature, and music.

All of this study came to a halt in 1944 when, at the age of fifteen, Wiesel was deported with his family to the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald. There he and his father were separated from the mother and the girls. Early on, Wiesel's mother and youngest

⁴"Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future: A Symposium," *Judaism* (Summer, 1967), p.298.

⁵Harry James Cargas, *Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p.73.

⁶*Night* (New York: Avon, 1960), p.14.

⁷Harry James Cargas, *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, p.73.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp.75-76.

sister were killed by the Germans, and before the prisoners were liberated by the Allies, his father died of malnourishment and mistreatment.

After the liberation, Wiesel was sent to France along with four hundred other orphans. He spent two years as a ward of a French Jewish welfare agency, attempting to resume his religious studies. As the result of the publication of his photograph in a French newspaper, his two older sisters, who had survived the camps, were able to make contact with him. He had learned French and assumed French nationality by 1947 when he entered the Sorbonne. There he studied, among other things, philosophy and psychology. The Tel Aviv newspaper, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, hired him as a Paris correspondent, and because of the hard work of supporting himself as a journalist, he left the Sorbonne without submitting the six hundred-page doctoral dissertation he had written comparing Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist concepts of asceticism.

His journalistic work became his occupation and carried him to the Far East, to Palestine, and finally to New York in 1956. He was critically injured in an accident in New York and, unable to return to France, he became a U.S. citizen in 1963. He settled in New York and has lived there since with his wife, Marion, whom he married in 1968. Wiesel became a teacher in 1972 when he was invited to be Distinguished Professor of Jewish Studies at City College in New York. He filled that position until recently when he became Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Boston University.

Wiesel's literary output has been enormous. In addition to his sixteen books, he has written a steady stream of essays and articles in a variety of publications, he has given numerous addresses and lectures, and he has been the subject of more than a few interviews and documentary films. Along with all this teaching, speaking, and writing, Wiesel has given generously of his time to a host of projects within the Jewish community. He is a man clearly possessed of a drive to justify every second of his existence.

Wiesel's literature is all of a piece with his life. His books, even the novels, are autobiographical. And each of them is a vital part of the mosaic formed by his past experiences, his spiritual growth, and his present activity. His books are far from being the products of some peripheral avocation, and still farther from being mere entertainment pieces. They mirror his own soul, and they were written in fulfillment of a mission which encompasses not only his writing, but everything else he does.

Since his books are so autobiographical and so intimately connected to one another and to his life, development is to be expected within Wiesel's work. Read in the order they were written, his books trace the torturous odyssey which has been his inner struggle to deal with the Holocaust. The early works are saturated with black despair, but by small degrees the successive pieces move toward Wiesel's triumphant achievement of faith in *Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again*. Even the titles of the early books suggest this progression: *Night*, *Dawn*, *Le Jour* (unfortunately entitled *The Accident* in the English edition).

Wiesel's first book, *Night*, is at the center of all he has written since. It is a somber, moving memoir of his faith-destroying experience in the death camps. Wiesel says of this book,

Night, my first narrative, was an autobiographical story, a kind of testimony of one witness speaking of his own life, his own death. All kinds of options were available: suicide, madness, killing, political action, hate, friendship. I note all of these options: faith, rejection of faith, blasphemy, atheism, denial, rejection of man, despair and in each book I explore one aspect. In *Dawn* I explore the political action; in *The Accident*, suicide; in *The Town Beyond the Wall*, madness; in *The Gates of the Forest*, faith and friendship; in *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, history, the return. All the

stories are one story except that I build them in concentric circles. The center is the same and is in *Night*.⁹

In addition to this successive exploration of possible responses to the Holocaust, there is another pattern to Wiesel's work: namely, the successive treatment in an entire book of one of the characters in *Night*.

Night was the foundation; all the rest is commentary. In each book, I take one character out of *Night* and give him a refuge, a book, a tale, a name, a destiny of his own.¹⁰

This structural center of Elie Wiesel's entire literary corpus comprises only 127 pages in its English paperback edition. When it was originally issued in Argentina in 1955, written in Yiddish, it ran to some 800 pages. The material cut out for the French edition in 1958 has provided the substance of much of Wiesel's subsequent "fiction" – so the novels are quite literally, as Wiesel says, commentary on *Night*.

Night, of course, stands for the Holocaust. The book poses the problem and depicts the abysmal blackness out of which Wiesel has struggled to free himself. In *Night* the young faith of the Hasid is devoured in the fires of the crematoria. God dies, and Wiesel's life is cursed.

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.¹¹

Among other horrors, Wiesel and his fellow prisoners were forced to watch the hanging of a young boy by the Germans. The child was still alive when he filed past the scaffold and heard someone behind him wonder aloud, "Where is God? Where is He?"

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.¹²

It is a long distance between this bitter, raging despair and the eloquent hope expressed in Wiesel's cantata, *Ani Maamin*, written for the hundredth anniversary of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and performed at Carnegie Hall in November, 1973. The title of this work means "I Believe" and refers to one of the thirteen Maimonidean Articles of Faith: "I believe in the coming of the Messiah." The cantata portrays the complaint to God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in behalf of the Holocaust victims. When their plea is answered only by God's silence, the patriarchs turn away from God to share the fate of the victims. *Ani Maamin* becomes not the affirmation of the pious Jews who went to their deaths singing these words as a hymn, but a defiant "I believe" in spite of what man has done and God has allowed to be done. In this statement of faith, which is the culmination of Wiesel's struggle with the Holocaust, there is neither superficial piety nor facile atheism. Instead there is the vigorous determination of a "survivor of the holocaust who does not put up with faceless fate but struggles for

⁹*Ibid.*, p.86.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.3.

¹¹*Night*, p.44.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.76.

redemption *with* and *against* our 'cruel and kind Lord' whose revelation in our times is only a deepening of his hiddenness."¹³

Story: The Witness as Writer

Elie Wiesel is a witness, a teller of tales, and a writer, in that order. Each of these roles is determined by the Holocaust. As a survivor, Wiesel has no choice but to tell all who will listen what the silenced victims would tell if they could speak. He is a self-appointed witness in their behalf.

I remember; during those years, when we were dreamless old children in a kingdom called Night, we had but one wish left but it was a burning desire: to bear witness.¹⁴

To that painful task of witness-bearing Wiesel is giving his life. His books, all of them, point to the Holocaust, and even the works of fiction are "not novels but pages of testimony."¹⁵

Wiesel has become the "spiritual archivist of the Holocaust"¹⁶ for profound reasons. As we have seen, he believes he owes this work to the victims. Their dying wish was that at least one of their number might live to tell how they died — and Wiesel senses an awesome responsibility to testify for them. But also, he has said, "I write in order to understand as much as to be understood."¹⁷ His testimony has been a means of coming to terms with the events themselves. And most fundamentally, he cherishes the hope that his witness may diminish the amount of suffering in the world. He can say bluntly of himself and other witnesses who carry the same burden, "We didn't write for any accepted purpose except for the extraordinary purpose of saving mankind."¹⁸

Wiesel's witness as survivor is twofold. There is a witness he must bear, certainly, to the non-Jew, the "executioner." But, as well, he must witness to the Jew, the "victim." In each case the testimony pricks the conscience.

Mainly, my position in the Jewish community is really the position of a witness from within and a defender from without. This goes, of course, along with my ideas about the duties and the privileges of a storyteller — of a writer. From the inside, from within the community, I am critical. If Jews are criticized or attacked from the outside, then I try to defend them. What I try to

¹³Maurice Friedman, "Elie Wiesel: The Job of Auschwitz," *Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, XXI (Summer, 1974), p.25.

¹⁴"To Remain Human in Face of Inhumanity," condensed from an address, *The Jewish Digest*, XVII (September, 1972), p.40.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Curt Leviant, "Elie Wiesel: A Soul on Fire," *Saturday Review*, January 31, 1970, p.25.

¹⁷David Greenstein, "On Elie Wiesel," *Jewish Frontier*, October, 1974, p.19.

¹⁸Harry James Cargas, *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, p.4.

do (it's very hard) is to reconcile the two attitudes: not to be too strong, too sharp, too critical when I am inside and not to be a liar on the outside.¹⁹

Wiesel's book, *The Jews of Silence*, is an illustration of the kind of thing he wishes to do. In testifying to the plight of Soviet Jewry, a situation with many parallels to the German Holocaust, Wiesel hotly denounces the non-Jewish community for its injustice in this affair, but he also has sharp words for the world-wide Jewish community and its indifference to the problem. When evils of such magnitude are occurring, no one is completely innocent – and Wiesel has taken it upon himself to witness in such a way that our guilt can never sink into unconscious forgetfulness.

But Wiesel is more than a bearer of testimony. He is an artist – a storyteller, a writer. True to his Hasidic roots, he believes in the power of the tale.

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

God made man because he loves stories.²⁰

In the Kabbalah, there is the story of *shvirat hakelim*, "the breaking of the vessels." This is the story of what went wrong at the Creation, the cosmic cataclysm. Wiesel says that his tale, and it is the same tale in one form or another, is of another cataclysm which took place a generation ago in the Holocaust. In a time when *this* tale can and must be told, all other stories become insignificant.

Wiesel's work renders the tale of the Holocaust into literary art. But because of the subject, the art is more than art. Since Auschwitz, literature can no longer be a mere diversion. The writer must write as witness.

We are witnesses in the cruelest and strongest sense of the word. And we cannot stop. We must speak. This is what I am trying to do in my writing. I don't believe the aim of literature is to entertain, to distract, to amuse. It used to be. I don't believe in it anymore.²¹

When asked what it means to be a writer today, Wiesel has consistently said that it means to correct injustices, to alleviate suffering, to create hope. Precisely for this reason, the

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p.33.

²⁰Prologue to *The Gates of the Forest*.

²¹Morton A. Reichek, "Elie Wiesel: Out of the Night," p.45.

witness/storyteller/writer's work is disheartening. It so rarely accomplishes what it must accomplish.

All this will tell you why a person of my time who has to be a witness for himself (and I try to do it in my writing as much as I can), literally feels despair. I think that never before has Judaism reached such a spiritual low. There is no idealism anymore. There is no awareness.²²

Wiesel's role as witness so thoroughly governs his role as writer that he must continue to write whether his testimony meets with any response or not.

One must write out of one's own experience, out of one's own identity. One must cater to no one; one must remain truthful. If one is read, it's good; if one is not read, it's too bad. But that should not influence the writer.²³

And, most important, the witness' work as writer demands that he write as a moral man. The literary artist can no longer be excused if he writes one way and lives another. Life and story must blend in ethical harmony. The writer is bound in a moral commitment by the very tale he tells. The making and reading of literature is no frivolous business.

True writers want to tell the story simply because they believe they can do something with it — their lives are not fruitless and are not spent in vain. True listeners want to listen to stories to enrich their own lives and to understand them. What is happening to me happens to you. Both the listener and the reader are participants in the same story and both *make* it the story it is. I speak only of true writers and true readers and true listeners. As for the others, they are entertainers and their work doesn't really matter. I don't want to go into names but there are very few great storytellers and great writers today. Actually, I believe that today literature has changed its purpose and its dimension. Once upon a time it was possible to write *l'art pour l'art*, art for art's sake. People were looking only for beauty. Now we know that beauty without an ethical dimension cannot exist. We have seen what they did with culture in Germany during the war; what they called culture did not have any ethical purpose or motivation. I believe in the ethical thrust, in the ethical function, in the human adventure in science or in culture or in writing.²⁴

The witness begins with his testimony. In Wiesel's case this testimony concerns the Holocaust. He becomes a true writer when his testimony is a tale, a story. The art of the witness, then, is a rendering of testimony into story. The difficulty of this lies in the attempt to juxtapose past event with present situation in a story which is truly artistic: that is, not merely beautiful, but ethically significant. Wiesel is cut off from the victims whose tale he tells (he survived), and he is cut off from his readers (they have not seen what he has seen). The monumental task which Wiesel has attempted has been to bring together in his tales the disparate worlds of the Holocaust victims in the past and of his post-Holocaust readers in the present. Wiesel lives in both worlds, yet hardly belongs to either. His effort has been to force into an imaginative form, a story, these disjunctive worlds. The result has been something of a literary anomaly: "autobiographical" novels.

²²"Words from a Witness," condensed from an address, *Conservative Judaism*, XXI (Spring, 1967), p.44.

²³Harry James Cargas, *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, p.34.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp.86-87.

The survivor's alienation from both past and present and its implications for the witness as writer are best seen in Wiesel's use of the concept of "madness." The witness as writer is in the position of Moshe the Beadle in *Night*. Able to return to Sighet as a survivor from an early deportation, Moshe was disbelieved and considered mad when he tried to tell the tale of those who did *not* escape. Moshe the Madman appears in nearly all of Wiesel's work, and he even becomes the main character in one novel, *The Oath*. As a "messenger of the dead among the living," who attempts with his tales to save the living but is regarded as insane, Moshe is a paradigm for Wiesel of the madman as witness.

Wiesel is qualified to speak of madness. During his three years at the Sorbonne, he specialized in clinical psychology, and the New York Society of Clinical Psychologists has honored him for his perceptive treatment of madness in his writing.²⁵ This work, his concentration camp experiences, and his Hasidic background unite to make madness one of the leading motifs in his books.

According to Wiesel, there are several kinds of madness. First, there is clinical insanity. Wiesel cautions, however, that what is often considered madness in this sense may not be insanity at all, but merely dissent from the "collective neurosis" of society. In a society gone "mad," the sane person will be judged mad, even though it is society and not he that suffers from skewed vision. Just as a sane inmate in an insane asylum would be judged mad by the other inmates, so anyone whose vision is threatening or disturbing to "normal" society is considered mad. Wiesel tells a Hasidic tale to make the point.

Once upon a time there was a king who knew that the next harvest would be cursed. Whosoever would eat from it would go mad. And so he ordered an enormous granary built and stored there all that remained from the last crop. He entrusted the key to his friend and this is what he told him: "When my subjects and their king have been struck with madness, you alone will have the right to enter the storehouse and eat uncontaminated food. Thus you will escape the malediction. But in exchange, your mission will be to cover the earth, going from country to country, from town to town, from one street to the other, from one man to the other, telling tales, ours – and you will shout, you will shout with all your might: 'Good people, do not forget! What is at stake is your life, your survival! Do not forget, do not forget!'"²⁶

Of course the plan was unsuccessful. The man's tale was disbelieved and *he* was dismissed as a madman. This is the position the Holocaust witness finds himself in when he tells his tale.

This madness of the witness is a "prophetic" madness. It is the madness of an individual who has seen things inaccessible to others, and is therefore separated from other men by the very fact of his closeness to God. Wiesel views this type of madman as a messenger of God and says, "God loves madmen. They're the only ones he allows near him."²⁷ The strangeness of his tale renders the prophet an anti-social misfit, a madman, in the eyes of his contemporaries. Thus, prophecy has long been considered a species of madness.²⁸ Like Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor,

²⁵Morton A. Reichek, "Elie Wiesel: Out of the Night," pp.42,43.

²⁶*Souls on Fire* (New York: Random House, 1972), p.202.

²⁷*The Town Beyond the Wall* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p.19.

²⁸Plato writes in the *Phaedrus* (244), "There is also a madness which is a divine gift and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men. For prophecy is a madness." Jewish

the prophetic madman is a lonely figure, separated from the world by the witness he bears and yet compelled to live in the world as a man among men.

There is still another type of madness: moral madness. Thomas Merton has written that “the whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is itself meaningless.”²⁹ When hate and indifference are the norm in society, one must become morally mad to protest against society’s inhumanity. In the Germany of 1943, one had to choose moral madness to avoid being swallowed up by the prevailing “sanity.” In such a context, moral indifference is the type of insanity against which moral madness must protest. This moral madness, a voluntary, deliberate thing,³⁰ is no easy “out” or surrender. It is a courageous identification with the sufferers, a true loving and caring. It is the willing assumption of moral responsibility in a society whose conscience is asleep. Not to accept moral madness is to opt for true insanity. Wiesel says,

I believe that reality disappointed us so much that I seek something in another reality. So what is the other reality? Madness. I believe that anyone who was in the camps came out deranged. There is the basis of madness in every person who survived. When you have seen what they have seen, how can you not keep some madness? This in itself would be mad – to remain normal.³¹

It is as Kahlil Gibran has put it.

The human heart cries out for help; the human soul implores us for deliverance; but we do not heed their cries, for we neither hear nor understand. But the man who hears and understands we call mad, and flee from him.³²

In his books, Elie Wiesel attempts to hear and understand, and to diminish the suffering.

Silence: Transcendence in the Work of Elie Wiesel

Following the destruction of the second Temple, the Jewish people were faced with two options: to end their suffering by denying their faith and assimilating into society, or to go on and rebuild on the ashes. Wiesel suggests that the Talmud was the “temple” constructed when the Jewish people chose the second option. He says that “the Talmud was conceived and written as an act of defiance.”³³ It was as if the Sages wished to tell God they *refused* to concede and quit believing. This defiance of theirs confirmed the ancient message of Judaism that, while man cannot begin (only God can do that), it is man’s duty not to accept an imposed end. “To

prophets in the biblical period were often considered mad by the citizenry: “The prophet is a fool; the man of spirit is mad” (Hosea 9:7).

²⁹Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.47.

³⁰Wiesel quotes Dostoevski at the beginning of *The Town Beyond the Wall*: “I have a plan – to go mad.”

³¹Morton A. Reichek, “Elie Wiesel: Out of the Night,” p.43.

³²Kahlil Gibran, *Voice of the Master* (New York: Citadel, 1958), p.44.

³³“To Remain Human in Face of Inhumanity,” p.38.

begin is not in the realm of possibilities; only to begin again, over and over again – and therein lies [man's] strength. And his glory, too."³⁴

Defiance as a means of transcending despair, and even as a means of survival, is characteristic of the Jewish tradition. Wiesel stands in that tradition when he argues that the Jew can only retain his humanity if he boldly takes issue with God and his apparent indifference to the Jews' suffering, and insists on believing no matter what. Man, Wiesel says, must not give in too quickly and allow himself to be crushed spiritually by the grinding forces of inhumanity. One of his Hasidic stories illustrates this dogged determination to believe:

A story is narrated in Shevet Yehuda about Jews who fled their village, their country. They boarded a ship which eventually they had to abandon. They landed on a desert. Hunger, thirst, disease befell them; many died. Amongst them was a pious man whose wife had died of hunger. He continued his march, hoping to reach a Jewish settlement. His two children were too weak, so he carried them. They, too, died and he went on carrying them. When he finally realized that he was the last survivor, the pain was so sharp he fainted. When he came to, he looked around first, and then he looked up to the sky and addressed God: "Master of the Universe, I know what you want; you want me to stop believing in you – but you won't succeed, you hear me, you won't succeed!"³⁵

Man thus defies God and becomes his accuser.

Man taking issue with the Master does not seem such an outrage when the concept is viewed against its Hasidic background. Hasidism traces the tradition of "Jewish protestantism" to the Book of Genesis, where Abraham asked, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Gen. 18:25), and to the prophets, such as Habakkuk, who accused God of indifference to the suffering of the righteous (Hab. 1:1-3). In this tradition, man struggles with God and asserts his moral equality with him. But the protest is not a disbelieving blasphemy. It is rather a loving plea. If it is anything negative, it is an expression of concerned disappointment that the Master of the Universe has apparently not lived up to his own standards of justice.³⁶

Wiesel has, along with other survivors, chosen this as a response to the Holocaust. These survivors

... had every reason in the world to deny God, to deny anything sacred, to oppose all promises and abort all signs of hope; they had every reason in the world to become ferocious nihilists, anarchists, carriers of fear and nightmare.³⁷

But what, in fact, did the Jewish survivors of the death camps do as soon as they were liberated?

Believe it or not; they held services. To give thanks to God? No, to defy him! To tell him, listen, as mere mortals, as members of the human society, we know we should seize weapons and use

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, p.39.

³⁶See Byron L. Sherwin, "Elie Wiesel and Jewish Theology," *Judaism XVII* (Winter, 1969), pp.40-41.

³⁷"To Remain Human in Face of Inhumanity," p.42.

them in every place and in every way and never stop – because it is our right. But we are Jews and as such we renounce that right; we choose – yes, choose to remain human. And generous.³⁸

To remain human even in the face of absurd inhumanity: this, Wiesel suggests, is the real message of Jewish tradition.

Man's defiance of God, in Wiesel's work, is met only by God's silence. Certainly this silence often bears a sinister aspect, as in *Night*, when the other Jews in the camps are fasting on Yom Kippur and Wiesel says,

I did not fast . . . I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my bowl of soup, I saw in the gesture an act of rebellion and protest against Him.³⁹

Of all the major motifs Wiesel uses, the concept of silence is the most intimately involved with the notion of transcendence in his work. And his denouncement of God's silence is most often cited as evidence for a lack of any true faith in the transcendent on Wiesel's part. But this is not to do justice to Wiesel. For him, silence is often not only not opposed to the transcendent, but is the most radical expression of it.

Mystic that he is, Wiesel believes in the profound importance of silence. What is *not* said is frequently as weighty as what *is* said. For example, God not only gave the words of the Torah, he left spaces between the words, the silence of which is pregnant with meaning. Wiesel so respects the significance of silence that he fears the overuse of words. Asked what are his feelings when he completes a book, he responds, "Naturally the anguish comes: whether I have not said too much – it's never too little but too much."⁴⁰ His books tend to be short and his sentences clipped. His subject, the horror of the Holocaust, can only be vulgarized if one attempts to say too much about it. For this reason, he actually writes *around* the Holocaust, not directly *about* it. He maintains,

The Holocaust cannot be described, it cannot be communicated, it is unexplainable. To me it is a mystical event. I have the feeling almost of sin when I speak about it.⁴¹

And again,

I say certain things not to say other things, I write a page and the absence of the Holocaust in it is so strong that the absence becomes a presence.⁴²

So it is with God, as well. God's silence is a more powerful presence than his words. Ideally, one should not speak *about* God, but only *to* him, and this, again, in silence.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Night*, p.80.

⁴⁰Harry James Cargas, *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, p.91.

⁴¹Morton A. Reichek, "Elie Wiesel: Out of the Night," p.42.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p.44.

If I could communicate what I have to say through not publishing, I would do it. If I could, to use a poetic image, communicate a Silence through silence I would do so. But I cannot. Perhaps I am not strong enough or wise enough.⁴³

Silence, far from calling into question the existence of one or both parties to a dialogue, is in reality the most significant level at which the dialogue may occur.

Between author and reader there must be a dialogue. When man speaks to God there is a dialogue. The creative process is a strange one: it comes from solitude, it goes to solitude and yet it's a meeting between two solitudes. It is just like man's solitude faced with God's solitude. Once you have this confrontation, you have art and religion and more.⁴⁴

Too many words may interfere with art and religion. Man is ill-advised to speak too profusely about God; and God's own silence is the most revealing communication he may make of himself to man. If the silence with which God responds to man's suffering seems to be an invitation for man to give in to the suffering, Wiesel would say that a refusal to *accept* God's silence as an excuse for unbelief is the only responsible way out of the dilemma. To affirm and preserve the human (by eating the bowl of soup on Yom Kippur, for example?) in the face of inhumanity often requires that man argue with the divine silence, and affirm the transcendent in the universe by taking issue with its apparent absence. In a roundabout way, man's indignant protest against God's silence would be deprived of meaning if there were no Presence back of the Silence.

Consequently, Elie Wiesel's defiance of God, his refusal to accept God's indifference to man's suffering, and his denial of God are in essence an affirmation of the transcendent, just because they take the form of an affirmation of the human in the face of inhumanity. The most human protest against the apparent meaninglessness of existence is not via the absurd, but via the transcendent. The armchair atheist can afford to allow suffering to continue – Wiesel cannot. He believes suffering must be diminished, and that every act of protest, against God *or* man, in which suffering is even minutely alleviated is a redemptive act.

Because he holds onto the transcendent, and is prepared to wrestle with it if need be (just as Jacob wrestled with the angel), he can say that

... to flee to a sort of Nirvana is to oppose humanity in the most absurd, useless and comfortable manner possible. A man is a man only when he is among men. It's harder to remain human than to try to leap beyond humanity.⁴⁵

And he can even ask for the strength to defy God in this way!

Oh God, give me the strength to sin against you, to oppose your will! Give me the strength to deny you, reject you, imprison you, ridicule you!⁴⁶

Man denies God by affirming humanity – and this he *must* do. But in affirming humanity, man makes an affirmation of God which transcends his denial of God.

⁴³Harry James Cargas, *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, p.5.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p.6.

⁴⁵*The Town Beyond the Wall*, p.177.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p.48.

This circular process is illuminated by the way Wiesel identifies God with man. He sometimes seems to say that God *is* man, but what he means is that God may be approached only *through* man. In *The Town Beyond the Wall*, he has Pedro say,

The way is no less important than the goal. He who thinks about God, forgetting man, runs the risk of mistaking his goal: God may be your next-door neighbor.⁴⁷

Man, God, and self are so closely identified that what man does to his fellow, he does to God and to himself. In *Dawn*, when Elisha pulls the trigger to kill the British hostage, he cries, "It's done. I've killed. I've killed Elisha."⁴⁸ And in *Night*, when the child is hung, Wiesel can say that it is God who hangs on the gallows. But it is not God himself who dies, any more than a man really dies himself when he kills another man. It is, perhaps Wiesel would say, the *image* of God upon man that is destroyed when man inflicts suffering on his fellow man. In this sense, the incident of God "dying" on the gallows with the executed child bears a striking resemblance to a parable in the Talmud.

Rabbi Meir said: A parable was stated: To what is the matter comparable? To two twin brothers who lived in one city. One was appointed king and the other took to highway robbery. At the king's command they hanged him. But all who saw him explained: The king is hanged!⁴⁹

Because of his intimate identification of God with man, Wiesel can retain the transcendent even while he defies God. His protest is against the inhumanity which constitutes an eradication of the transcendent. In this protest, both God and man are indicted for the same thing: indifference to suffering.

When the suffering and injustice of the Holocaust is met with apathy, indifference, and unconcern, man has relinquished his humanity, and in doing so has murdered his God.

To be indifferent — for whatever reason — is to deny not only the validity of existence, but also its beauty. Betray, and you are a man; torture your neighbor, you're still a man. Evil is human, weakness is human; indifference is not.⁵⁰

The injustice perpetrated in an unknown land concerns me; I am responsible. He who is not among the victims is with the executioners. This was the meaning of the holocaust; it implicated not only Abraham or his son, but their God as well.⁵¹

The work of Elie Wiesel is a courageous, sustained protest against indifference. It has overcome the Holocaust by defying it, by refusing to give up the human and the transcendent. His witness to the Holocaust, by its very defiance, has broken the stranglehold of despair on him. And, whatever may be its impact on mankind, it has allowed Elie Wiesel himself to remain human.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p.115.

⁴⁸*Dawn* (New York: Avon, 1961), p.126.

⁴⁹*Sanhedrin* 46b. Cf. Byron L. Sherwin, "Elie Wiesel and Jewish Theology," pp.50-51.

⁵⁰*The Town Beyond the Wall*, p.177.

⁵¹*The Gates of the Forest*, p.166.

One day a Tzadik came to Sodom; He knew what Sodom was, so he came to save it from sin, from destruction. He preached to the people. "Please do not be murderers, do not be thieves. Do not be silent and do not be indifferent." He went on preaching day after day, maybe even picketing. But no one listened. He was not discouraged. He went on preaching for years. Finally someone asked him, "Rabbi, why do you do that? Don't you see it is no use?" He said, "I know it is of no use, but I must. And I will tell you why: in the beginning I thought I had to protest and to shout in order to change *them*. I have given up this hope. Now I know I must picket and scream and shout so that they should not change me."⁵²

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⁵²"Words from a Witness," p.48.

Appendix

A surprising parallel in Christian theology to Elie Wiesel's outlook is found in the following extract from the writings of C. S. Lewis.

There is, to be sure, one glaringly obvious ground for denying that any moral purpose at all is operative in the universe: namely, the actual course of events in all its wasteful cruelty and apparent indifference, or hostility, to life. But then, as I maintain, that is precisely the ground which we cannot use. Unless we judge this waste and cruelty to be real evils we cannot of course condemn the universe for exhibiting them. Unless we take our own standard of goodness to be valid in principle (however fallible our particular applications of it) we cannot mean anything by calling waste and cruelty evils. And unless we take our own standard to be something more than ours, to be in fact an objective principle to which we are responding, we cannot regard that standard as valid. In a word, unless we allow ultimate reality to be moral, we cannot morally condemn it. The more seriously we take our own charge of futility the more we are committed to the implication that reality in the last resort is not futile at all. The defiance of the good atheist hurled at an apparently ruthless and idiotic cosmos is really an unconscious homage to something in or behind that cosmos which he recognizes as infinitely valuable and authoritative: for if mercy and justice were really only private whims of his own with no objective and impersonal roots, and if he realized this, he could not go on being indignant. The fact that he arraigns heaven itself for disregarding them means that at some level of his mind he knows they are enthroned in a higher heaven still. I cannot and never could persuade myself that such defiance is displeasing to the supreme mind. There is something holier about the atheism of a Shelley than about the theism of a Paley. That is the lesson of the Book of Job. No explanation of the problem of unjust, suffering is there given: that is not the point of the poem. The point is that the man who accepts our ordinary standard of good and by it hotly criticizes divine justice receives the divine approval: the orthodox, pious people who palter with that standard in the attempt to justify God are condemned. Apparently the way to advance from our imperfect apprehension of justice to the absolute justice is *not* to throw our imperfect apprehensions aside but boldly to go on applying them. Just as the pupil advances to more perfect arithmetic not by throwing his multiplication table away but by working it for all it is worth.

From "*De Futilitate*," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), pp.69-70.

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The literature on Elie Wiesel is extensive, but many of the materials, especially the periodicals, are hard to get. Only those sources which were actually used in the preparation of this essay are listed here. The available literature, however, ranges much more widely. In the case of Wiesel's own books, most are now available in both hardcover and paperback. I have indicated where I used paperback editions, since the pagination in these will differ from the hardcover editions.

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