

The Absent Presence in Elie Wiesel's Autoethnographies

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A writer cannot detach himself from his story: He is responsible for it to the end. (Wiesel *And* 82)

To date Elie Wiesel has published fifty-nine books—novels, story collections, essays, a play, dialogues, biblical exegeses, cantatas, a children's book, and several autobiographical texts—beginning with *Night* (1960). But Wiesel's literary works constitute only part of his influence. It is his person, his life-experiences as a *Tzaddik*, a Just Man, that drew the Nobel committee to consider him for the Peace Prize. In *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (1995) and *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969–* (1999), Wiesel contextualizes these experiences that have caused many people to seek his wisdom. These two texts along with the late works of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas and Jewish critical theorist Jacques Derrida attempt to name the absent presence that announces the possibility of overcoming injustice—the possibility of a future to come. But identifying the “absent presence” in Wiesel's “memoirs” is a task of theoretical complexity involving genre designations (truth claims), questions of ethnic identity, the possibility of a fu-

ture in an era of terrorism and violence, and the psychological, political, philosophical, and theological difficulties concomitant to surviving the Holocaust.

All Rivers Run to the Sea and *And the Sea Is Never Full* belong to an emerging genre that commences from the perspective of an individual living in pluralistic complexity to address the ethical dilemmas facing human beings in the past hundred years—the age of war. Even though their titles designate them as memoirs, they are, strictly speaking, neither memoir nor autobiography. Students of literary criticism are taught that “[m]emoirs differ from autobiography . . . in that they are usually concerned with personalities and actions other than those of the writer, whereas autobiography stresses the inner and private life of its subject” (Harmon and Holman 305). Wiesel’s self-life writings thus seem to be neither of these. Instead, they are literary autoethnographies.

Literary autoethnographies in this context are conscious expressions of how ethnic affiliation, religion, ancestry, gender, life stages, education, profession, geographical locale, and historical moment influence identity. Furthermore, autoethnographies demonstrate that identity is a dynamic process—especially in “times of crisis” (Schick 19). In such texts authors become anthropologists of their own experiences—and those experiences are invariably lived “in relation to collective social units or groupings” (Krupat 212). Authors of such works also attempt to reclaim ethnic identity out of the ashes of oppression, despair, ethnocide, and often genocide.

Autoethnography has a long history, since first contact between Europeans and Native Americans. Mary Louise Pratt defines an autoethnographic work as “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (“Arts” 585). Wiesel claims that he is answering in his two works the question God posed to Adam: “*Ayekha*, where are you?” For Wiesel, this leads to the “fundamental questions that every human being must confront sooner or later”: “Where do you stand in this world? What is your place in history? What have you done with your life?” (*And* 3). In *And the Sea is Never Full*, however, Wiesel moves from

descriptions of his “almost reclusive life” as “a young Talmudist-turned-writer when he returned from the death camps” to a more aggressive stance (4): “I shall take a stand against some of my adversaries, those who have, in my estimation, transgressed the limits of dialogue, having chosen obfuscation as their weapon and ‘demonization’ as their goal” (6). Pratt calls such a position “the contact zone,” a space in which “peoples . . . come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (*Imperial* 6). Demonizers in Wiesel’s case are more than anti-Semitic outsiders; they are Jewish detractors who publicly contest Wiesel’s politics and renown as a means of denigrating Judaism.

In Wiesel’s case autoethnography is not an attempt to retreat into radical Zionist politics or traditional Judaism or Judeocentrism (*And* 125–30), but, rather, an attempt to use Jewish systems of thought—Midrash, legends, biblical references—to establish peace beyond ethnic particularism and yet be seen from a particular genealogical, historical past. In the words of Derrida, such aspirations turn “on a hope and faith . . . in something radically pluralistic, plurivocal, multi-cultural, heteromorphic, heterological, and heteronomic, something that outstrips what we today call nation and national citizenship” (qtd. in Caputo 174).

Wiesel contends that the years described in his two narratives were “feverish, convulsive” ones that unfolded “under the dual sign of change on a practical level and loyalty on the level of memory” (*And* 5). To the question, “What is the goal of a writer?” he answers, “To testify” (8). Of this goal Garret Hongo says,

I don’t know myself what makes someone feel that kind of need to have a story they’ve lived through be deposited somewhere, but I can guess. . . . A character, almost a *topoi* [archetype] he occurs so often, is frequently the agonistic who gives personal testimony about an event the rest of his community cannot even imagine. (344)

Certainly, Wiesel was the first to define the deaths of Jews during WWII as a Holocaust—"an offering that has been totally consumed" (*Messengers* 71)—not that Nazi soldiers were making any kind of spiritual offering, but that the deaths of Jewish men, women, and children can be given meaning by being interpreted as an agonistic sacrifice—a holiness. On the contrary, Wiesel attests, "Precisely because an event seems devoid of meaning, we must give it one. Precisely because the future eludes us, we must create it" (*All* 17).

Wiesel also declares, "I cling to the notion that in the beginning there was the word; and that the word is the story of man; and that man is the story of God" (5). Herein lies the complexity of his ethnographies: if "the word is the story of man; and . . . man is the story of God," both narratives have deeply tragic substrata—especially in the face of the Holocaust and its traumatic aftermath. Alan L. Berger maintains that "[t]he millennial struggle between covenantal claim and historical counterclaim in its twentieth-century expression nearly resulted in the theological and physical destruction of Judaism" (16). For Wiesel, "Auschwitz may well represent a double tragedy, of the believer and his Creator alike. . . . Auschwitz is conceivable neither with God nor without Him. Perhaps I may someday come to understand man's role in the mystery Auschwitz represents, but never God's" (*All* 84).

Despite such spiritual anguish Wiesel still believes in the possibility of justice: "In all my lectures on Jewish themes, I emphasize Judaism's ethics, which, by definition, decry racism. A Jew must not be racist; Jews are committed to fighting any system that sees in the other an inferior being" (*And* 146). When Wiesel won the Nobel Peace Prize, Egil Aarvik introduced him as "a messenger to mankind" whose message is not one of "hate and revenge, but . . . of brotherhood and atonement. . . . In him we see a man who has gone from utter humiliation to become one of our most important spiritual leaders and guides" (4). And yet, Wiesel asks,

Does this mean that I have made peace with God? I continue to protest His apparent indifference to the injustices that savage His creation. And the Messiah? He should have arrived earlier, much

earlier. Perhaps Kafka was right: The Redeemer will come not on the last day but on the day after. (70)

Wiesel's dreams are full of anguish and loss. For example, in one dream he looks "for a familiar face," but "[a]ll the faces are veiled, lifeless. I am panic-stricken," he explains (5). In another, he sees ghosts emerge from shelters and "urges" that he and his father follow them into a "brightly lit synagogue." Once they are in the light, a stranger snuffs the candles, and they are thrust into darkness. Wiesel asks, "Father . . . where are you?" Wiesel can "no longer" see his father's face. "Yet, while I still know who he is," writes Wiesel, "I no longer know who I am" (87). Simone Weil explains the nature of such a condition:

Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself. (70)

In Wiesel's case this wanting to love generates his capacity to survive in the face of abhorrent memories.

Such survival, however, must necessarily involve others—especially as it speaks to the notions of futurity, intimacy, and the unacknowledged power of the feminine. In the documentary *Derrida*, Amy Ziering Kofman interviews the philosopher. At one point she asks him, "If you were to watch a documentary about a philosopher—Heidegger, Kant, or Hegel—what would you like to see in it?" In partial jest Derrida answers, "Their sex lives. If you want a quick answer. I would like to hear them speak about their sexual lives." "Why?" Kofman inquires, to which Derrida retorts,

You don't want the quick answer; you want a justification of the answer. Because it's something they don't talk about. . . . Why do

these philosophers present themselves asexually in their work? Why have they erased their private life from their work? Or never talked about anything personal. There is nothing more important in their private life than love.

Wiesel does speak of his private life—grandparents, parents, siblings, and friends. Yet his two autoethnographies contain few references to his wife, Marion Rose Wiesel. This assertion does not in any way imply that Wiesel is a stereotypical Jewish patriarch who views women as inferior or subservient and, therefore, not worth writing about. In *All Rivers Run to the Sea* he speaks of his childhood in Sighet, Romania. He writes fondly and often about his grandmothers, mother, and sisters—especially Tsiporah, his youngest sister. Of his Grandmother Nissel, for example, he asserts,

If Grandma had a grave, I would go to the ends of the earth to visit it. But as you know, she doesn't. Did you know she expected that? Did you know, Grandpa, that Grandma Nissel was the only one in the family, almost the only one in the whole community who guessed it all? (9)

Of his mother he says, “Smile all you want, Dr. Freud, but I was attached to my mother, maybe too attached. When she left me to help out at the store, I would tremble under my blanket. When she was away, however briefly, I felt rejected, exiled, imperiled” (10). When Sarah, Wiesel’s mother, is told by Rabbi Israel of Wizhnitz, that her son will become a “*gadol b’Israel*, a great man in Israel, but neither you nor I will live to see the day,” she weeps with both joy and sadness. “My mother was my sole ally and support,” says Wiesel, because “[s]he alone understood me” (13). Of Tsiporah, Wiesel recalls, “There were times when I quarreled with my older sisters, but never with her. We all loved her madly.” Everyone in the family spoiled her. “Perhaps we sensed that time was short, that we had to shower her with all the love and all the joys and favors of which she would soon be deprived” (15). Tsiporah’s death became a symbol for Wiesel of the suffering of innocence—a keen and personal witness to the unparalleled loss of the

1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered during the Holocaust.

Derrida's insistence that the love life of philosophers is central to the formation of their ideas is a radical position—one that challenges the objectivity of philosophical thought. It also suggests that thought is gendered and that intimacy between a man and a woman, when taken into the consciousness of authors, will force them to reconfigure their thinking. In this context Wiesel's limited references to his wife throughout his life-writings are telling. He speaks of being fearful of marriage because he feared "losing" his "freedom," asking, "Why did I wait so long to create a home? True, I worried about not being able to support a family, but was there a deeper reason, a general lack of confidence in the future?" (*And* 12). Earlier, he recounts,

In the first volume of my memoirs, I tried to describe the secret, almost reclusive life of a young Talmudist-turned-writer when he returned from the death camps. My peaceful childhood, my turbulent adolescence, the uncertainties of my formative years. Full stops and shaky beginnings. . . . Years marked by messianic dreams and challenges, ecstasy and mourning, separations and reunions. A little girl with golden hair, a wise and loving mother. An ailing and defenseless father. Moshe the Madman, Kalman the Kabbalist. Shushani and his mysteries. Saul Lieberman. . . . Sighet, Auschwitz, Paris, New York: each place a world unto itself. My journal ended on April 2, 1969, in Jerusalem when my life took another turn, this time toward hope. Toward Marion. I got married. (4)

This "turn" towards "hope" is orchestrated by his marriage. His claim justifies readers in expecting a fuller discussion of such a dramatic life change, yet, following the claim, references to Marion are brief.

Wiesel does acknowledge Marion's presence during various post-1969 episodes in his life, but she is often merely a figure in different settings. He spends a few pages describing their courtship—but only a few. In several instances he admits to Marion's influence in his life. For example, he notes, "The failure of my father and of all he symbolized long

made me fear having a child. I was convinced that a cruel and indifferent world did not deserve our children.” It was Marion who “persuaded me otherwise,” he says. Marion advised, “It was wrong to give the killers one more victory. The long line from which I sprang must not end with me. . . . She was right,” he confesses (43).

A discussion of the sacred marriage rite—partially narrated in the Song of Songs—is central to an understanding of the “absence” or “lack” in Wiesel’s personal narratives. Harold Fisch calls Song of Solomon the “Allegorical Imperative” of which the witness is “espousal” and “gives us access to the mystery of divine love because it is itself an incarnate mystery, a testimony to a transforming encounter, a means of transcending the merely natural” (102); Rabbi Akiba calls the Song of Songs the “holy of Holies” (qtd. in Francis 13); and Phyllis Tribble contends that Song of Songs—the sacred marriage—can redeem creation and individuals from apocalyptic events (74). The Song is a lyric testimony to the belief that “love is strong as death” (8:6). Lévinas explains in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) how such redemption is possible.¹ In the chapter entitled “Phenomenology of Eros” Lévinas dances with the idea of the feminine, which he calls *voluptuousity*. This love of the Other, a woman, “is not reducible to the repetition of this *non* [closed, non-public, society], but to positive traits by which the future and what is *not yet* (and is not simply an existent that remains at the status of the possible) is, so to speak, determined” (265). He explains further that “love seeks what does not have the structure of an existent, the infinitely future, what is to be engendered,” contending that “[i]f to love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself” (266). Such love also engenders a relationship with the future or “fecundity.” In the chapter on “Fecundity” he explains that

[t]ranscendence, the for the Other, the goodness correlative of the

¹Wiesel and Lévinas were both students of Mordechai Rosenbaum—Shushani—whom Wiesel terms “a master,” “a holy man in disguise, a kabalist wandering the earth to gather ‘divine sparks,’” and a man whose “words banished distance and obstacles.” It was as if Shushani could explain “to the Creator Himself the triumphs and defeats of His creation,” notes Wiesel (*All* 124–25).

face, founds a more profound relation: the goodness of goodness. Fecundity engendering fecundity accomplishes goodness: above and beyond the sacrifice that imposes a gift, the gift of the power of giving, the conception of the child. (269)

Moreover, he contends that “the encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects” (267). The verb “engender” can also be read as “in gender”; that is, within the loving relationship established between a man and woman, a “good” future becomes possible through the birth of a child—a birth that witnesses to the ongoing power of Creation. For Elie and Marion Wiesel, that futurity came with the birth of their son, Elisha.

In the chapter, “I and Dependence,” Lévinas sets forth the proposition that

[t]he welcoming of the face is peaceable from the first, for it answers to the unquenchable Desire for Infinity. . . . This peaceable welcome is produced primordially in the gentleness of the feminine face, in which the separated being can recollect itself, because of which it *inhabits*, and in its dwelling accomplishes separation. (150–51)

Further on, he suggests that

in founding the intimacy of the home the idea of infinity provokes separation not by some force of opposition and dialectical evocation, but by the feminine grace of its radiance. The force of opposition and of dialectical evocation would, in integrating it into a synthesis, destroy transcendence. (151)

In other words, Lévinas asserts that the face of the woman cannot be possessed or reduced. This is not the reduction of the other to the same—the conjoining of bodies into some oblivion of two selves. Rather, marriage and home are the possibility of the future—of the child. Such a gift is a grace—the presence of what was conceived of as being absent. Although Marion Wiesel’s voice is seldom heard in

Wiesel's writing, she is the presence of his texts. She translates them from the French. Her English words over Wiesel's French words are "word-cloth," an image of fabric draped over language—much like sacred clothing over flawed bodies. Her voice embraces his and makes it present in those English translations. She is the absent presence. It is her voice heard in every word like a conduit connecting Wiesel's life stories with the world. "Marion, my wife, my ally, my confidante, it is she," Wiesel admits, "who often prevents me from making mistakes. It is to her that I owe the wisdom that enables me to follow a certain path" (*And* 406). Yet Wiesel is generally silent about exactly how Marion is his "helpmeet," his *ezer kenegdo*, equal to him, the one who helped him overcome his aloneness, nor does he speak of how the sacred marriage rite recreates holiness after the manner discussed by Fisch, Tribble, Rabbi Akiba, and Lévinas.

Towards the end of *And the Sea Is Never Full*, Wiesel, having turned seventy, contends,

The century I have lived through has been more violent and more promising than any other. Mankind has never before proved to be as vulnerable or as generous. Man lives in expectation. Expectation of what? The Jew in me is waiting for Redemption. (404)

Elisha (Wiesel's son) and Steve (his sister Bea's son) accompany Wiesel on a trip back to Sighet, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Buchenwald. In the midst of Wiesel's memories and mourning—over the deaths of his sister Tsipouka, grandmother Nissel, grandfather Dodye, mother Sarah, father Shlomo, among others—he reflects, "Did I say it out loud to my two companions whom I love with all my soul? Ours is the tree of an old Jewish family whose roots touch those of Rashi and King David. And look: Its branches refuse to wither" (*And* 408).

When he laments the possibility that he will not be able to fulfill the work still to be done—"the secrets to discover" as well as the questions "to be answered"—"the door opens," and he hears from another room, "or is it the other side of night, a sweet voice" that "breaks into [his] daydream: 'Did you call me, Father?'" Wiesel answers, "Yes, my son. I called you" (410). Is this final dialogue an allusion to 1 Samuel 3:4 where the Lord calls Samuel and Samuel answers "Here am I"? Is it also

an allusion to the “I AM THAT I AM” in Exodus 3:14, the “I am” that came “down to deliver them out of” Egypt (Ex. 3:8)?

From an analysis of the absent presence in Wiesel’s life-writings, the desire comes for another volume to be added to his autoethnographies, one which would answer the question, are not Wiesel’s wife and son a presence, a promise of the future, a grace from the God whom Wiesel finds absent?² Derrida distinguishes between “the future and ‘*l’avenir*.’” The future is that which “is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable.” *L’avenir*, however, “refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me,” says Derrida, “that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable” (*Derrida*). Wiesel, Lévinas, Derrida—in their Jewishness—speak of futurity. For Derrida,

Deconstruction situates itself in the gap between all existing democracies, which are not democratic, and the democracy to come, and this precisely in order to keep alive with prophetic fervor a messianic faith in the unforeseeable and incalculable figure of the Just One, of the democracy, to come. (Qtd. in Caputo 175)

John D. Caputo suggests that

[i]n this messianic aspiration, the hegemonic rule of the most powerful nations, who dominate the so-called ‘United Nations,’ would be delimited in a new International, one that is attuned to the gratuitous sufferings that ensue from what Lévinas called the hatred of the other. (174)

All three—Wiesel, Lévinas, Derrida—recognize injustice in the world and desire a peace that is messianic, that is yet to come. The possibility of such peace, of futurity in the gift of the beloved and a child, is yet to be a fully articulated presence. The realization of the feminine is likewise yet to come. Yet the bridegroom, bride, and child might be the promise, the Song of Songs that reclaims the loss of God in Eden and

²This article was completed prior to the publication of Wiesel’s *The Time of the Uprooted* (2005).

Auschwitz, the answer to the question, "Where are you?" Perhaps this non-patriarchal stance is the absence made present—the forerunner to the messianic.

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