

“The past became the present”: Reenactments of Trauma

Victoria Aarons
Trinity University

There is a scene to which some always return when they think about Elie Wiesel’s work, and that is a moment in his novel *The Gates of the Forest* (1966) in which a Jewish boy in hiding from the Nazis is forced to assume the role of Judas in a town play. It is a stunning moment in the novel when all other action fades into the background, and the specific conditions and instance of the play seem to become the novel’s reason for existing. This strategy of condensation speaks to an impulse in virtually all of Wiesel’s work: a distillation of events and experience in which the actions that have shaped the narrative’s unfolding fall away and become the backdrop for the isolated, circumscribed scene that is now at center stage, a theatrical act that crystallizes a particular instant and anticipates events that will follow. In *The Gates of the Forest* this singular focused moment is, in fact, a staged scene that exists in and of itself, a play within a play.

When the child, Gregor, walks onto the stage upon which he is to assume the role of Judas, the conditions are established for the kind of doubling of personae that will govern the action on the stage. Here, Wiesel crafts a set of conditions that are so overpowering that they create the illusion of spatial immediacy—a kind of myopic centrality, not

unlike a telescopic lens blocking out everything that is outside the framed, bracketed experience of the play. These are very visual scenes in which one's field of vision, like that of the characters themselves, is limited to the stage upon which the action that one can only apprehensively anticipate will erupt. Wiesel creates a pinpoint of narrative visualization in which one is trapped, encased in the horror of the experience that will take place and that will take one back in time. Such scenes exist outside of the already established narrative space, where developing, unfolding time is arrested, narrative movement frozen, and proximate conditions encased in a history so overshadowing that they eclipse, at least within the frame of the scene, all other motivations, conceits, and characterizations. In the play within a play in *The Gates of the Forest*, there is a reordering, a restructuring of time in which "the past became the present" (58). The present no longer unfolds from the past but regresses into its motivational depths. This particular and powerful moment, which can be taken as paradigmatic of Wiesel's fiction, constitutes less a circling back in time than the production of a kind of stasis that transforms time, place, and identity as it reenacts past trauma.

The Gates of the Forest is the story of Gregor, a young Hungarian Jew in hiding from the Nazis. He takes refuge in the forests, finally seeking shelter at the home of his old family servant Maria, a gentile who risks her life to save him. In order to protect him from the presumptive and accurate knowledge among the villagers that he is a Jew, she introduces Gregor as her deaf and mute nephew, the son of her sister Ileana, who long before left the village in disgrace. Gregor is provided with a new identity, "a home, a past, a story" (64). In this remote village in Romania, where Gregor is something of a curiosity, the villagers are smug and self-satisfied, living in isolation from cultural life beyond the confines of the village. To these peasants, "a deaf-mute was not dangerous" (70). Indeed, Gregor's feigned condition gives them surprising license to confide in him their secret desires and their transgressions. Gregor is their confessor but a priest who can give neither penance nor absolution since he can neither hear nor speak. He is silenced by the war, in hiding and in disguise. It is a village out of time, save for

existing against the backdrop of Nazi occupation and death camps. As Wiesel puts it, “somewhere, in the distance, there was a war” (95).

When Gregor is cast as Judas in the annual school play, the “timely subject” of which is “the Jews, or more precisely, hatred of the Jews and its justification,” an idea inspired by the teacher’s “overflowing enthusiasm and imagination” (88), the war is pushed to center stage. It is an ancient war against the Jews, inflamed by “an ancient hate, suddenly reawakened,” and Gregor knows, just as surely as he believes his own death is upon him, that “at a single word these people would have marched backwards through time to add another cross to those of Golgotha” (103). It is significant that Gregor not only plays the role of Judas, but that he is also a silent and undefended Judas. And here, Gregor as Judas functions as a metonym for the Holocaust; the entire scene, in fact, is a metonymic representation of the massacre of Jews with the villagers as all-too-willing persecutors.

For when Gregor enters at center stage, “a silent Judas,” the perfect casting for “a Judas struck dumb by God,” the villagers readily and eagerly forget that he is the deaf-mute nephew of their neighbor, Maria (89). Significantly, the village is located in a remote landscape, far from the immediate dangers of the cities where Nazis are rounding up and deporting Jews. But the dangers are equally great in this isolated village, for its very seclusion, its inaccessibility, and its obscurity take it out of time. The village becomes a mythic place and, as such, accountable to no outside, intrusive influences nor structures; it is, then, only accountable to its own, thus making it accountable to none. But, although the novel has aspects of fantasy, this is not a fairy tale, for in “real time” the war against Jews, the destruction and obliteration of Eastern European Jewry by the Nazi regime, locates this village in the immediacy of reality. While the remoteness of the village might have created a covering for shelter, instead, the villagers recreate within the canopy of the village their own microcosmic war of retaliation against Jews. It is an attack bred of the re-invocation of an originating myth of Jewish faithlessness, its reemergence authorized by contemporary hatred and annihilation, and it is here that the imaginary and the real intersect. The villagers’ assault on Gregor, the young Jew, is for Wiesel

part of an uninterrupted, continuous revenge unmediated by time. Gregor's suffering, as an embodiment of the historical and immediate suffering of Jews, has its origins in myth, which reinforces the repetitive endlessness of suffering, since such conditions live on in mythic time. The hatred and fear of the villagers transform Gregor into the legendary figure of Judas, who stands before them at this particular moment in time, the Nazi war fading backstage. The villagers are unable to separate their own hideous self-deception from the reality of the situation: a child on a stage. They believe, because they so desperately want to, that Gregor is, indeed, Judas, whose betrayal is responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Further, they must believe this, for it justifies anything that they have done and intend to do.

But Gregor's participation in the play, as Wiesel ironically suggests, remains a matter of representation and interpretation, of fictional construction of character and motivation. Gregor, stepping into the role of Judas, like any seasoned actor (for, after all, he's been donning different masks, trying to circumvent the danger of a fixed identity, all along), attempts to decipher the character of Judas and so better to enact the role. But any such analysis of character and plot makes no sense to Gregor, for the presumed actions of Judas make for a thin plot, lacking in adequate motivation and believability with a Judas who himself acts, as it were, out of character. In trying to decode the playtext, Gregor discovers a fundamental flaw in the design of the legend:

Who was he? Christ's best disciple and closest friend. From one day to the next, and for no apparent reason, his loyalty was shattered and Judas became a traitor. . . . Why this sudden change? According to the Gospels there was an obscure story of money. Thirty pieces of silver. Absurd and inconceivable: The money adds to the mystery rather than explaining it. Christ's companions had no interest in terrestrial things—these had nothing to do with their aspirations. There had to be other reasons, more hidden than these. If the disciple abandoned his Master for thirty miserable pieces of silver, it meant that both men were more vul-

nerable than they knew. (94)

Wiesel's Gregor here takes the legend on as text, that is, as an opening for dialogue and contention.

In Wiesel's midrashic retelling of the Judas story, the motivation for the unfolding of the central act of betrayal, the act that will set in motion the irreparable events that follow, becomes the point at which the story reveals its flaws. Motivation must be seen as the real human factor in any story, since it provides an answer to the central question, "why," and thus to the origins of actions. Plausible motivation, the impetus that drives and impels affect and action, hopes to resolve the ambiguities of character and plot. But here, the authorizing source of the story of Judas's betrayal of his Master and friend gives an unsatisfying and insufficient answer to the question. The proposed answer, monetary gain, is much too rote, too commonplace and conventional, to have any epistemological or psychological reliability. Money, especially in this instance, is far too banal a rationale to explain the fantastic events that it portends. What makes motivation so interesting, so central to the unfolding of narrative, is the exposure of unconscious and thus uncontrollable drives. And here, Wiesel returns readers to a time before the event, a defining moment where motivation might be established. But, as Gregor contends, the explanation of money only "adds to the mystery" (94). The story is, however, the script that Gregor is given. Improvising, then, Gregor rejects the narrative for one of his own. The story of the money can only level the playing field. No longer Master and disciple, both Christ and Judas show their weaknesses and thus are made "more vulnerable than they knew" (94). This mutual vulnerability sets the stage for a reversal of identities: "Judas . . . the saint. . . He is the victim; not Jesus; he is the crucified; not the Christ" (109). In demanding that Judas be acknowledged as the crucified, Gregor rewrites "history"; he revises myth in order to demand that there be a future, that, in fact, myth will not revisit itself in an endless replay of a scene rewound to the place of its origin.

Characteristically for Wiesel, a changing of roles takes place: "Judas the crucified; not the Christ." Roles played are exactly that, actors taking on different parts as they vie for center stage, and so victimizer be-

comes victim, and executioner, the condemned. But for Wiesel, this exchange of identities is less a matter of stepping out of one persona and into another than of taking on a real identity. Although Gregor will in his performative act on the stage assume the role of Judas, this is not really a matter of play-acting; it is less a matter of representation than a reenactment of events. Gregor here replaces Judas, just as Judas, “resurrected” for the moment of the play, replaces Gregor. Neither figure stands in for the other, but, rather, in a chiasmic move the one becomes the other, just as, later, Judas/Gregor in his suffering will become Christ. Judas, arisen out of myth, and Gregor become interchangeable, a structural and figural conceit that one finds elsewhere in the novel. At the novel’s opening, for example, Gregor by mysterious design meets Gavriel, a Jewish boy who saves him and becomes his double, the boy whose “name . . . went away one day, without reason, without excuse. . . . In time of war millions of men live under false names; there is a divorce between man and his name. Sometimes the name has had enough and goes away” (9). In a cryptic interchange marked by ambiguous pronoun reference, the boys merge identities: “He had no name, so he gave him his own” (3). The one boy will become indistinguishable from the other and in doing so suggest the way in which the traumatic event of the one boy’s death may be sublimated by the other. Gregor’s interconnectedness with Gavriel transforms the other boy’s trauma into his own, unmediated by a separation of identities insisted upon by the individuality of names. Gregor in taking Gavriel’s name does not represent Gavriel but, rather, brings him back to life by making his life his own and in doing so bears witness to the suffering of others, which, for Wiesel, is the obligation of the survivor. The exchange of names gives voice to the other, and thus Gregor can reemerge as Gavriel later in the novel, just as he can emerge as Judas, the legend as unmediated text.

For the villagers in *The Gates of the Forest*, whom Wiesel characterizes as “the crowd delirious with an ancient hate,” there is no ambiguity (103). For them it is not Gregor but Judas who stands before them on the stage of their loathing. For the villagers this is not a matter of representation; it is no longer a play but, rather, *the* place of betrayal and crucifixion and thus the justification for the acting out of their

vengeance. The play is less a suspension of disbelief than it is the aggressive promotion of belief. Myth and ritual provide a justification for belief and action. In attacking Gregor, the villagers, to their own thinking, in an act of pathological self-righteousness elevate themselves by participating in a tradition of revenge legitimized long before them: "Neither the blood nor the face were his. They belonged to someone else, 2000 years dead, but kept cruelly alive to expiate the crimes committed by others" (104). Their brutality stems from a guilty projection of their own sins, inadequacies, and failures onto Gregor, for whom all moorings disappear.

No longer are there stable markers of place and identity, no familiar cultural landmarks but, instead, an evisceration of cultural location and legitimacy that characterizes Holocaust narratives. For Gregor, "everything became confused with everything else: beings lost their identity, objects their proper weight" (58). Gregor finds himself back in time, in mythic time, where there is no mediating distance between trauma and identity. He is unable to repress or turn away from the site of traumatic origin. Judas is not "remembered," not even as a manifestation of the collective unconscious, but becomes, rather, a part of an event realized in the present through myth. The past erupts into the present, and mythic time becomes real time. In psychoanalytic terms trauma is the symbolic eruption of the past into the present, a repetitive replaying of a traumatic event (and this is made emphatic in virtually all of Wiesel's Holocaust writing). Cathy Caruth recalls Freud's explanation of the recurring traumatic dream as one in which the event literally returns "against the will of the one it inhabits . . . an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event" ("Trauma" 5). If one likens the play to a dream, then Gregor is, indeed, caught in the literal moment of Judas's betrayal of Christ and the catastrophic events that "inevitably, inexorably" follow (*Gates* 100). The difference here, of course, lies between the conscious recognition on Gregor's part that the play is, indeed, a play and the unconscious "dream" in which the dreamer returns to that which happened unexpectedly and violently in the past.

This return to the past is complicated in Gregor's case by the fact

that the recurring traumatic event did not literally happen to him. For Gregor, it is an imagined event, since the traumatic experience is happening in the present but is motivated by and has its roots in a past not his own. So there are really two traumatic episodes here: the event that exists in legend and the newly felt but historically repetitive trauma that Gregor experiences. But if mythic time is conceived here at least for this moment as real time, and if Gregor, in the kind of chiasmic interchange so characteristic of Wiesel's work, has become Judas for this essential moment in the novel, then the stage upon which Gregor plays the role of Judas is the primal scene of an anti-Semitic fantasy to which he is forced to return. It is a replay of events that begins at a point of origin, Judas condemned for the alleged betrayal of Christ. Rachel Bowlby suggests that it is in the "return to the point of origination" through "repetition and re-reaction" that the "past, present, and future interfere with one another and reconnect; a painful 'return' of or to a past, resurrected and relived" (vii). Such a process is thought to be therapeutic, to bring an end to suffering. But in Gregor's case Wiesel makes the suffering intensify and the trauma continue. Ironically, it is not Christ who is resurrected but Judas. It is an unwelcome resurrection, to be sure. Judas is resurrected not in Christlike sanctification but in an attempt to revisit his condemnation, to revalidate his guilt—Judas not blessed but cursed. It is through the conceit of the play that the immediacy of the event is realized, since the stage eclipses all other dramatic action and creates a sense of urgency that begs for resolution.

Similarly, in other moments in the novel the unfolding action is abruptly arrested, and the play-scene intrudes. The illusion of theatrical unreality is destabilized by the narrative's eruption into the performative language of theater. The silence that abruptly descends upon the forest after Gavriel's capture and death, the loss of one Jewish boy that brings the other to his knees in the isolated grief of one stunned by his own survival, closes in on itself. The horror of this solitary death is only a brief interlude, made all the more horrible by its seeming insignificance—after all, it is a "mere" intermission. Gavriel's death and the impossible articulation of Gregor's anguish are pushed off-stage, for the play seems to have no end:

Intermission was over. The play began again. The actors were

back on the stage and officers in dazzling uniforms stood in front of the firing squads, raising their arms and calling out, 'Fire, fire, fire!' And soldiers bored, fired their machine guns, indifferent, thinking of nothing, not even of death. (*Gates* 60)

The actors, bored by and indifferent to what are surely ritualized, repetitive, too often rehearsed scenes, act in a prescribed manner.

So, too, this scene comes to its inevitable and inescapable close, "the Messiah himself, a thousand times, a thousand, thousand times multiplied, [falling] into the ditch" (60), the curtain falling, only to open again, the accumulation of atrocity upon atrocity. There is no deviation, no improvisation nor rewriting of lines already scripted. For Wiesel, there is no mistaking reality for fiction by explicit references to actors upon a stage. Rather, the interspersions of the play into the narrative makes more emphatic the obscenities of the Holocaust not *acted* but *enacted* upon its victims. The abruptness with which the play sequences are introduced into the narrative and the fragmentation and cutting off of one scene only to be reopened with another create a bombardment of images. The stage isolates and thus focuses its attention on a particular decisive scene, amplified by its upstaging of anything else, as if the entire novel is reduced exactly to this particular place and point in time. There is, for Wiesel, no way off stage, no way to escape the savage endlessness of the Holocaust that extends well beyond the end of the war and the liberation of the camps, the scenery forever "peopled with ghosts and murderers" (212).

While Gregor on stage as Judas is trapped in the physical, theatrical, and public space of the stage, the psychic space of the projected, delusional hatred of the audience creates a kind of double consciousness in which Gregor is carried to another place and time through the villagers' primitive response to his performative act. The scene, here, is frozen, as is the audience. While the setting of the stage seems to be circumscribed, its isolation is only an illusion created by stagecraft. For here, the psychic evanescence of spatial relations breaks down, and Gregor is no longer separated spatially from the audience of villagers, who advance menacingly upon him with cries of "No pity! Let justice be done! Vengeance," their blows executed by a "blood thirstiness" (105). Temporal space, too, is transgressed. Thus, myth carries with it

the possibility of scapegoating in the future, of justifying the Holocaust. The villagers, as they militantly advance upon Gregor, are, indeed, no longer solely an unruly following of lawless peasants responding in hysterical outrage but, rather, “soldiers preparing to assault invisible barricades” (112). They are, like Nazi troops, going into battle as part of the machinery of the Third Reich, sanctioned by law. They are no longer taking their vengeance out on a singular Jewish boy but participating in the war against all Jews, urged on by sanctimonious self-interest, “executioners . . . about to invade . . . and avenge their honor in blood” (113). Past and present hatred escalate, gain in momentum, and converge at this particular point in time, no longer mythic time but the immediate and exact moment of the Holocaust.

As the violence increases, Gregor, bloodied and wounded, transcends the experience, the scene having the “unreal, oppressive quality of a nightmare” (106). He momentarily withdraws from the physical sensation of pain, ironically a self-protective reflex, a response to the trauma of the nightmare from which he does not want to awaken, for to wake from the dream is to experience the pain from which he desires relief. If one understands “nightmare” here metaphorically, then Gregor in the midst of the nightmare/trauma temporarily dissociates himself from the present traumatic experience.¹ He removes himself, as it were, from the experience, distancing himself by withdrawing further into himself. As long as Gregor is enclosed in the parameters of the nightmare, he is not really “living” the experience. But he does awaken; he regains “consciousness” and does so because he wills himself to, “seized by a burning desire to take part in the show and direct it” (106). If he cannot prevent the hostility and sadistic violence that drive the villagers to kill him, then he can, at the very least, direct the

¹Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart discuss trauma victims' responses to the overwhelming nature of a traumatic episode in terms of dissociation, as being “automatically . . . removed from the scene; they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether.” Interestingly, they make an important distinction in this regard between dissociation and repression, the latter a process of pushing the traumatic memory away, while dissociation seems to be more a

action, assume some agency in his own undoing, not unlike Sol Nazer-man, the pawnbroker in Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961), who at the moment of his impending death ironically assumes the posture of a "commander of his own firing squad" (268). Curiously, the savagery of the villagers' attack strangely frees Gregor, causing him to step back into his own character and, thereby, to direct the final act of the play.

No longer willing to accept the hostility and hypocrisy of the villagers, Gregor on stage finally breaks his silence and speaks. Indeed, his disorientation and terror continue to escalate until he erupts into speech. This is a decisive moment, for speaking, after all, is an expression of autonomous self-presentation and survival. The irony here is that Gregor's loss of voice is necessary, at least initially, for survival. As long as he does not speak, he can disguise his Jewish identity. However, at the moment in which he becomes Judas in the eyes of the villagers, his silence no longer can protect him. In fact, for the villagers Gregor's silence is proof of his guilt. Gregor-now-Judas has been to the villagers' delight rendered mute by God as punishment for his betrayal of Christ. Silence here, as elsewhere in the literature of the Holocaust, represents a loss of identity, both figuratively and literally.

The descent into silence is a central and recurring feature of Holocaust narratives. The deeply traumatized child in Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* (1965), for example, loses his voice as a response to the trauma he experiences; the last sound that he makes before his loss of speech is a cry of pain. Speech is useless to the young boy since there is no one to whom he can cry out for help. His voice only imperils him, since any sound he would make in hiding would expose him, making him all the more vulnerable. Silence is viewed here as a splitting of the self, his voice escaping while he cannot. It is only at the close of the novel that the child regains his voice and, in an incessant outpouring of words, "enraptured by the sounds that were heavy with meaning" (234), is able, if only guardedly and distrustfully, to move back into the world. Voice is the articulation of the self, and it is through speech that one may insist upon self-invention and self-determination. To return to the metaphor of the nightmare, a dream-state in which the outcome of

the violent experience is delayed, Gregor thus awakens into speech, into conscious articulation of the pain as he endures it. In choosing to speak, Gregor momentarily empowers himself. It is he who chooses not only *to* speak at this particular juncture but *what* to speak. The words are generated by and belong to him, and even if speech hastens his death by further enraging the peasants, then his death, too, will be his own.

Gregor, his speech regained, “testifies” and thus bears witness to his suffering and, metonymically, to the suffering of others. In psychoanalytic terms, the hope is that narrating the traumatic events or reliving them through narrating the experience will bring relief. Thus in regaining speech, Gregor by way of his eruption into speech regains agency, thereby reestablishing his identity and history: “I’m not Judas. . . . I can’t act in his name. . . . I am a Jew and my name is a Jewish name, Gavriel” (*Gates* 111). Having been mute for so long, his voice, once heard, is deafening. In this moment Wiesel creates a kind of still, an arresting of all action, the stage moving outward, encompassing the audience as part of the set, and here the villagers, perfectly cast, play themselves:

[T]hey froze, incredulous, as if death had surprised them in the midst of battle. Projected out of time they were like wax figures, grotesque and idiotic, without destiny or soul, clay creatures, damned in the service of the devil. Their upraised arms hung in the air, their mouths were half open with tongues protruding and features swollen; the slightest breath would have knocked them over and returned them to dust. All breathing ceased. (107)²

The scene is frozen in a kind of suspended animation, broken only by the villagers’ cries for mercy that will forever exist just beyond their reach, for they are beyond redemption. Gregor, momentarily having

²This description is strangely reminiscent of I. L. Peretz’s 1915 short story “Ne’ilah in Gehenna,” where the fiends of Hell “stationed at the caldrons,” arrested by the cries of the dead, stand “bewildered, abashed . . . faces twisted . . . mouths agape . . . tongues lolling . . . eyes bulging from the sockets” (218).

taken control of what was meant to be the final act of the play, demands acknowledgment of their deceit, their duplicity, and their barbarous treachery. He also demands from them acknowledgment of his identity, the very identity that was at the root of their hatred and fear. In defining himself as a Jew and in taking on the “borrowed” name of Gavriel, Gregor resurrects himself as well as the dead boy and thus bears witness not only to his own suffering and agency but also to that of others, those victims whose voices have been lost forever. Gregor on the stage stands before the villagers as a prophet. Not only does he foresee the future, but he also is the future, a future imperiled by the ignorant villagers’ reenactment of a mythic past.

The sense of relief and power that Gregor feels in testifying, however, does not bring with it the hoped-for reprieve from trauma, for it is ongoing. As the scene draws to a close, the war, which is temporarily the backdrop against which the play takes place, now regains center stage in the novel, its historical trauma the context for the individual trauma of the Jewish boy, Gregor. Wiesel here contextualizes the individual trauma and replays it endlessly in the wider trauma of the Holocaust. The future cannot be a part of the narrative because of the continuing threat of the Holocaust, and so the isolated frame of the stage upon which Gregor is encased holds him in a particular moment in time and exposes his absolute certainty of the inevitability, if not of his own death, then of the deaths of countless others.

This is a history larger than any one individual. As the play draws to a close, the peasants move toward Gregor “like soldiers. . . . At the same moment, in the crimson fields of Galicia, smartly turned-out officers were shouting the order: ‘Fire! Fire!’ A hundred Jews, ten thousand Jews were tumbling into the ditches” (112–13). Here, Wiesel links Gregor’s fate to that of European Jewry and in doing so reveals Gregor’s individual trauma as part of the trauma of history. The young boy’s desolation—hiding in the forests, surviving his father’s death, and witnessing the death of Gavriel—his humiliation and suffering endured at the hands of the villagers, and his subsequent pain and loss that carry him to the novel’s close are not merely symbolic representations of the Holocaust. To be sure, the play in which Gregor assumes the role of Judas

and the villagers' brutal assault upon him function, in large part, metonymically: the myth of Judas's responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ makes all Jews culpable in their sinister fantasy, thus justifying the Holocaust. While Judas comes to represent all Jews, so does Gregor, not only in his role as Judas but, implicitly, as one of many Jews persecuted and hunted by the Nazis. He does not, as Wiesel makes clear, suffer alone. Moreover, the villagers' response to Gregor, their persecution and vicious attack, metonymically represents those who turned on the Jews in complicity with the Nazis. Individual suffering is not only parallel to the suffering of all Jews during the Holocaust but intersects it in deeply disturbing ways.

The complexities in such intersection of the personal and the historical intensify the problems inherent in testifying and bearing witness and create in Holocaust narratives an overlapping or layering of stories. "My father bleeds history," Art Spiegelman writes in *MAUS* (1986), the comic-book memoir of his father's experiences in the Holocaust (7). With this epigraph Spiegelman introduces a layering of narratives, characteristic of second-generation Holocaust writing: the history of the Jews in the Holocaust, the father's individual "history," and the ways in which the father's experiences have shaped the life of his son. Neither father nor son can be separated from history, specifically the history of the Holocaust, which has come to define them both. *MAUS* is the story of one man's Holocaust experience, but it is, necessarily and inescapably, the story of the history of the Jews. To "bleed" here is to embody and to suffer the wounds of history. In responding to the implications of compensatory fantasy central to Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Caruth suggests that "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (*Unclaimed* 24). Thus, individual trauma, as it figures in the literature of the Holocaust, is a part of the larger trauma of history, inasmuch as history, the specific history of Jews, is the collective experience of trauma and the defining weight of Jewish identity.

For Wiesel, as for other writers of Holocaust narratives, individual trauma is embedded in the all-encompassing trauma of the Holocaust. There exists, to be sure, a chiasmic crossing but also a synecdochal rela-

tion between the individual and history, central both to *The Gates of the Forest* and to the obligation to bear witness, a topos of Holocaust literature. For example, in Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* the incapacitating and unbearable experiences and recent memories of the Holocaust for one man carry with them the weight of all those who suffered. Sol Nazerman, the pawnbroker, "with blue, cryptic numbers on his arm" (268), becomes a willing "heir" to suffering, just as Gregor, at the close of *The Gates of the Forest*, comes to recognize and accept the indelible condition of his life: the future "mortgaged" to the past. So, too, the nameless child in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and the grotesquely fablesque experiences he barely survives speak to the monstrous scope and shape of the Holocaust.

In this way *The Gates of the Forest* through the experience of one boy opens up the historical dimensions of trauma. Similarly, in the short story, "An Old Acquaintance," Wiesel constructs a haunting narrative of a single man's repetitive nightmare of his previous life in the concentration camps, but one that opens itself to the far-reaching consequences of the Holocaust as they extend beyond individualized experience. It does so in large part because his individual experience was also a collective experience, shared, as Wiesel makes clear in *The Gates of the Forest*, by others. In this disturbingly cryptic story, a survivor's phobic response to individual trauma, to his own anguish and displacement, gives way to the larger, more generalized issues of identity, of judgment, of expiation, and of the nature of survival: "Can one die in Auschwitz, after Auschwitz?" (121).

"An Old Acquaintance" begins with the deceptive ordinariness of a bus on the streets of Tel Aviv long after the end of the war. The bus will become, like the stage upon which Gregor plays Judas in *The Gates of the Forest*, the theatrical playhouse in which recurring trauma is played out. The quotidian very soon gives way to a distortion of place and event. Normal objects are transformed into conveyances of suffocating anxiety, as the bus symbolically brings the narrator, like the cattle cars of another time, back to the camps. The very ordinariness of the opening scene makes the events that very quickly follow all the more disturbing, for readers' expectations deceive them. Also, as in the stage setting in *The*

Gates of the Forest, the conditions that drive the unfolding of the story are contained within the frame of the bus.

It is a bus taken out of narrative time, where all spatial relations give way to a scene from the past, the site of the origin of overwhelming events that are revisited upon the narrator, events that the narrator uncontrollably revisits upon himself in his unconscious and repressed fear of them. As the landscape shifts, there is no mediating distance of time or authorial intrusion. Although the bus is slowly moving, Wiesel creates the illusion of stasis, a narrative sleight of hand that directs the interior of the bus onto center stage. The stage set is only the bus, for everything else—the traffic on the boulevard, the city with its lights and its sounds—turns aside, disappearing into the “heavy stagnant heat which insinuates itself into every pore, weighs on every gesture and breath, blurs every image” (116, 112). For the narrator of the story the bus is a place of isolation and entrapment, and, like the stage upon which Gregor in *The Gates of the Forest* is forced to perform, neither passenger can get off.

Riding on the bus, the narrator is transported to another place and time. The sensation of not moving ironically creates the conditions for a different kind of transport in which “the time changes pace, country. The present is in the grip of all the years black and buried” (113). The stifling myopia of the scene focuses on two men alone, the narrator and his imagined interlocutor, all other passengers diminished to the point of obscurity. It must, for readers are taken inside the unraveling of the narrator’s psyche in which is played out a dialogue between two men, the narrator and the man from Auschwitz, a Jew, “one of those who knew neither hunger nor weariness nor sickness . . . head of a barracks . . . barracks fifty-seven . . . right in the center of the camp, two steps away from the gallows” (114–16). The dialogue between the two quickly dissolves into an internal monologue, however, an imagined dialogue that takes place in the mind of the narrator, for the barracks-chief, accused by the narrator of crimes of complicity and cowardice, may not exist outside the narrator’s ruptured consciousness. The man he singles out on the bus, “middle-aged . . . with a lost look. . . . Easy to classify. Office worker, government

clerk, foreman. The anonymous type . . . tak[ing] orders only to transmit them,” is the catalyst for his unconscious return to the place of torment and fear (112).

Neither the bus, the other passengers, nor the driver exists for him. The increased internalization of the narrator’s fear, which rapidly becomes panic, increases the overpowering sense of oppressiveness, so much so that his own identity is ambiguous, and the one man merges with the invented other. Just as the narrator at the close of Wiesel’s *Night* (1960) splits himself from his own reflection in the mirror—“a corpse . . . his eyes . . . stared into mine” (109)—so the narrator on the bus, which is the stage of his undoing, sees himself in the other man, re-configured, conjured up anew. The ambiguity of the reality of the man on the bus suggests the confusion of the narrator’s own identity. Is there a man on the bus whom the narrator recognizes from the camp? Is he the narrator’s tormentor, a barracks-chief? Victim? Victimizer? Is the man a guilty projection of the narrator’s unconscious and irrational fears? All referents blur; the confusion carries the narrator back in time, back to a traumatic past, back to the site of its origin. The past for the narrator is occurring as if the years separating the trauma of the Holocaust and the bus ride on the streets of Tel Aviv never intervened—“twenty years ago, a tin plate in my hand, before this all-powerful master who was distributing the evening soup to a pack of starved corpses” (“Old” 114). And while the specifics of survivors’ individual histories may differ as may the individual expression of remembered events, such characters carry the Holocaust with them; they cannot view themselves outside of the history—distant, mythic, or proximate—that has shaped them. In this way, then, the truth of traumatic experience, as Caruth has described it, is the pathology of history, and for victims of the Holocaust “the traumatized . . . carry an impossible history within them” (“Trauma” 5). The history of the Holocaust is in large part a collective experience and carries with it the equally impossible weight of bearing witness.

The enormousness of history introduces in Holocaust narratives the problems inherent in knowing, in articulating, and in transmitting the events of the Holocaust to someone outside of that experience,

that is, someone who did not witness it first-hand. While Wiesel has at times suggested that there are no words that can give voice to the atrocities experienced by Holocaust victims, bearing witness is for him the most central moral imperative that emerges in all his Holocaust writing. In “Why I Write: Making No Become Yes,” he suggests that language is insufficient, that words can never hope to transmit the experience of the Holocaust. Silence, then, would seem to be the only honest response to that unreachable place that exists somewhere beyond words. But for Wiesel, like Gregor, isolated in his silence, words erupt, since, as Wiesel puts it, “not to transmit an experience is to betray it” (14). Paradoxically, however, to keep such stories alive through their telling is to keep alive the unspeakable. In describing stories of deep trauma, Caruth suggests that such narratives reveal “a kind of double-telling . . . the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*Unclaimed* 7). It is through such “double-telling” or double-voicing that survival for Wiesel is made possible. The loss of identity, the retreat into silence, the absence of voice, the erasure of history, the ambiguity of names, the distortion of time, fragmented shards of experience, and such fractured moments as in *The Gates of the Forest* are all characteristics of Holocaust narratives. Ultimately, what emerges from such unspeakable realities for Wiesel is an ethic of storytelling, an obligation to construct narratives of meaning. As Gregor insists, “if speech has been restored to me it is in order that I may use it” (*Gates* 111). *The Gates of the Forest* is, indeed, a story of survival made provisionally and precariously bearable by the assertion of the self through narrative, a survival that depends upon bearing witness to the past, as all of Wiesel’s works finally do.

WORKS CITED

- Bowlby, Rachel. Introduction. *Studies in Hysteria*. 1893. By Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer. Trans. Nicola Luckhurst. New York: Penguin Books, 2004. vii-xxiv.

- Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 3-12.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Moses and Monotheism*. Trans. Katherine Jones. New York: Random House, 1939.
- Kosinski, Jerzy. *The Painted Bird*. 1965. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.
- Peretz, I. L. "Ne'ilah in Gehenna." *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*. Ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. New York: Schocken Books, 1973. 213-19.
- Spiegelman, Art. *MAUS: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel A., and Onno Van der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 158-82.
- Wallant, Edward Lewis. *The Pawnbroker*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961.
- Wiesel, Elie. "An Old Acquaintance." *Truth and Lamentation: Stories and Poems on the Holocaust*. Ed. Milton Teichman and Sharon Leder. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994. 112-21.
- . *The Gates of the Forest*. 1966. Trans. Frances Frenaye. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.
- . *Night*. 1960. Trans. Stella Rodway. New York: Bantam Books, 1982.
- . "Why I Write: Making No Become Yes." *New York Times Book Review* 14 Apr. 1985: 13-14.