

# Elie Wiesel: Second Degree Witness

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## I. WIESEL THE ACTIVIST

Throughout his novels, stories, essays, dialogues, interviews, and speeches, Elie Wiesel has proclaimed himself, above all, *un témoin*, a Jewish writer whose moral obligation is to testify.<sup>1</sup> In his more than thirty books Wiesel bears witness to the *Shoah*, to biblical and hasidic traditions, to the Jewish condition, to history. Although he claims that his works are not autobiographical except for *Night* (1960) (Cargas 62), he has revealed much of his life in his writing. His two volumes of memoirs translated from French, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (1995) and *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969– (1999)*, are also a form of testimony in which Wiesel is the witness to himself. He defines his project as “a kind of commentary” (*All* 17). In French, he adds “un témoignage modeste, au second degré”

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this article appeared in French as “Elie Wiesel: un témoignage au second degré” in *Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah, le monde juif* in

(a modest testimony in the second degree), an expression which curiously is omitted in the English translation.<sup>2</sup>

This classification raises certain questions: what does “second degree witness” mean, and how does it differ from first-hand witness; what is Wiesel’s intention in revisiting his life and his works; and do the contents of his memoirs change or add to knowledge of the author as depicted in his writing?

Early in the first volume of his memoirs Wiesel shares with the reader his motivation for embarking on this endeavor. In the late twentieth century there was a proliferation of memoirs by people in all walks of life. Wiesel recognizes that he is part of this generation, dedicated to celebrating memory and its transmission: “I belong to a generation obsessed by a thirst to retain and transmit everything. For no other has the command, ‘Zachor’—Remember!—had such meaning,” he says (16). Wiesel seems to be referring here especially to the Holocaust survivor’s compulsion to testify in “the era of the witness,” as the French historian, Annette Wieviorka, has called it in *L’Ère du témoin* (1998).

Underlying “zachor”—the imperative to remember—which structures Wiesel’s entire literary universe is the fear of forgetting. In a dialogue with the survivor-writer, Jorge Semprun, he admits: “I have always been afraid of losing my memory. I know that memory is vulnerable. It falls apart” (Semprun and Wiesel 17).<sup>3</sup> In order to combat the forgetfulness of fragmented memory and to ensure a permanent record before it is too late, Wiesel aspires to draw a balance sheet of his life. By evoking faces and events in his memoirs, he hopes to recapture the past, relive loves and friendships imbued with “the anguish and exaltation” of his younger years (*All* 16).

<sup>2</sup>This expression, “témoignage au second degré” can be translated as “second degree witness.” Both the English and French expressions will be used in this article. The phrase, “un témoignage modeste, au second degré,” appears in *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer* (1994), the original title of Wiesel’s first memoir (28).

<sup>3</sup>At the end of *And the Sea Is Never Full*, Wiesel reiterates this fear that haunts him, referring to one of his own characters: “Like Elhanan in *The Forgotten*, I

However, Wiesel also points to some of the limitations in writing this “témoignage au second degré.” He has been told that to write one’s memoirs is “to make a commitment, to conclude a special pact with the reader. It implies a promise to reveal all, to hide nothing” (16). The use of the word “pact” suggests that Wiesel is acquainted with Philippe Lejeune’s work elaborating the concept of “le pacte autobiographique,” a special contract between the writer and reader who is allowed to enter an intimate world endowed with autobiographical authenticity. In his book *Moi aussi* (1986), Lejeune speaks about some of the problems that this pact raises, evidenced, for example, by the skeptical attitude of those in other disciplines such as psychology and psychoanalysis. Autobiographical authenticity is questioned, that is to say, whether the truth is really being disclosed:

[W]hat an illusion to believe that one can speak the truth, and can believe that one has an individual and autonomous existence! . . . How can one think that in an autobiography it is the lived life that creates the text, while it really is the text that creates the life! (*Moi* 22, 29)<sup>4</sup>

Wiesel’s own clarification of intention points to some of the same issues and seems to echo Lejeune’s concerns:

I mean to recount not the story of my life, but my stories. . . . Some see their work as a commentary on their life; for others it is the other way around. I count myself among the latter. Consider this account, then, as a kind of commentary. (*All* 17)

A commentary is an interpretation, an explanation. By commenting on his own stories, both real and invented, Wiesel is testifying from another perspective, that of a sixty-six- and sixty-eight-year-old man looking back. The “second degree witness” is one degree removed from the primary source; he becomes witness to his own witness. Afraid that in this process memory may prove to be intrusive, Wiesel warns the reader

that he will not uncover everything about his private life, that he will not write a confession.<sup>5</sup> He says he will omit incidents that might cause embarrassment to his friends or hurt the Jewish people. In effect, his memory is selective, elusive, and protective—of others and of himself. “You yourself have written that some experiences are incommunicable, that some events cannot be conveyed in words. . . . How can you hope to transmit truths that you yourself have said lie beyond human understanding and always will?” he asks (*All* 16).

Wiesel thus acknowledges in his memoirs what he has reiterated in many texts—the inadequacy of language. A zone of silence envelops his words. For certain subjects he retreats into the sanctuary of the unsaid. “The unsaid carries more weight than what is said,” he notes in *Silences et mémoire d’hommes* (1989) (18). In a key essay, “Changer,” in the collection *Paroles d’étranger* (1982), he also says, “I exist by what I say as much as by what is silenced” (187).<sup>6</sup> Wiesel explains in this essay that to convey the shattering cries of the night truly, he would have to publish a book with the pages left blank.

That is why he seeks to explore other subjects—biblical, talmudic, hasidic, and contemporary Jewish issues—in order to protect the silent universe he carries within. Certain boundaries will not be transgressed, for the experience is too painful to confront. The author engages readers but at the same time holds them at a distance. The whole story or the whole truth will not be conveyed.

While the memoirs, like the essays, afford readers a glimpse into intimate aspects of Wiesel’s multilayered universe, they nonetheless are marked by a similar reluctance to divulge inner feelings completely. Yet details are disclosed that do not manifest themselves in Wiesel’s other writings. For example, one learns more about his childhood and child-

<sup>5</sup>In *Moi aussi* Lejeune attempts to distinguish between autobiography and memoir, citing the definition in the 1866 edition of *Larousse*: “oppose l’autobiographie, qui est une espèce de confession, aux Mémoires, qui racontent des faits qui peuvent être étrangers au narrateur” (opposes the autobiography which is a kind of confession, to the Memoir that relates facts distinct from the narrator).

<sup>6</sup>The phrase in French is “j’existe par ce que je dis autant que par ce que je tais.” See also Wiesel’s essay “To Believe or Not to Believe.”

hood friends, his closeness to his mother, his special relationship with his youngest sister, Tzipora, as well as his visit to his older sister, Bea, in the displaced persons camps after the war. Although Wiesel occasionally lays bare some of his doubts, phobias, inhibitions, and weaknesses, much of his deeply emotional life remains hidden from the reader. For the most part restrained and controlled, the narrative in the two volumes is at times self-reflective and introspective, but only within limits. One has the impression of reportage in which the author chronologically records events and his impressions of those events, both historical and personal, in the form of journalistic notes compiled from day to day. The author is above all a witness and a journalist. In *And the Sea Is Never Full*, he does admit that his intention is not merely to give a comprehensive account of his life but to scrutinize it, but once again he erects walls to protect his privacy: "I shall omit things that are too private, too personal" (6).

While this discretion permeates both volumes, the books are rendered in different modes. Wiesel himself points to the distinction. In *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, a narrative of his formative years, his purpose is "to narrate mostly that which I see within myself" (*And* 6). He shows how his life has unfolded from a shy yeshiva bochur, growing up in the Transylvanian town of Sighet where he was born in 1928, to a writer and public figure of international renown. The first volume of memoirs ends in 1969 when, at the age of forty, he was married in Jerusalem.

Much of what one reads in the volume has been told before in Wiesel's work. His mother was a highly cultured and educated woman, the daughter of a fervent Hasid, a disciple and loyal follower of Rabbi Israel of Wizhnitz whom Wiesel as an eight-year-old boy once met. Wiesel's grandfather, Dovid (Dodye) Feig, a farmer while at the same time a cultured and erudite man, played a key role in the boy's spiritual formation, transmitting Jewish tales, parables, and songs to his grandson. Wiesel acknowledges that "[i]t is to him I owe everything I have written on Hasidic literature" (*All* 42).<sup>7</sup> Wiesel was encouraged by his mother to study the Torah, Talmud, Kabbalah, and

teachings of the Hasidic masters, while his father, a middle-class shopkeeper devoted to working for the Jewish community, instilled humanist values in his only son.

Wiesel's two older sisters, Hilda and Bea, survived the camps; his cherished younger sister, Judith (called by her Jewish name, Tzipora), perished along with his parents. In the first volume of his memoirs, Wiesel recounts his journey to Auschwitz and Buchenwald, sustained by the presence of his father and then devastated by his loss; his return to the world of the living, the time spent after the war in the Jewish children's homes, Ecouis in Normandy and Taverny outside of Paris; the crisis of faith during his poverty-stricken existence in post-war France; his career as a journalist, first translating articles from Hebrew for a Yiddish underground newspaper connected to the Irgun, then for an Israeli newspaper in Paris, and finally as a United Nations correspondent in New York where a serious accident led to his remaining in the United States and becoming an American citizen. He depicts encounters that have shaped his life: his interview and conversations with François Mauriac that helped launch his career as a serious writer; his meeting with Golda Meir; his friendship with Primo Levi; his brief encounter with Samuel Beckett; the masters such as Shushani and Saul Lieberman who have molded his religious thought.

In the second volume, Wiesel states that his focus will not be directed to the story of himself but his relationship with others. The introvert becomes the activist, speaking out for Jewish causes such as the plight of Soviet Jews and world causes such as the genocide of Cambodians and atrocities committed in Bosnia. Even more importantly, he breaks his vow of being protective of others and engages in polemics by responding to his critics, although one should note that in the first volume he does not refrain from citing those who have virulently attacked him in public, as for example the American literary critic, Alfred Kazin. In general, however, the tone of the second volume is more confrontational than that of the first. Wiesel takes stands of moral certitude. He publicly denounces President Reagan's trip to the cemetery of Bitburg, containing SS graves—a courageous and forceful position that helped Wiesel earn the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1986.<sup>8</sup> He

speaks of breaking off his friendship with French president François Mitterrand when he learns of Mitterrand's participation in the Vichy government and his longtime friendship with René Bousquet, the French chief of police under the Vichy government who organized the deportation of French Jews.

Wiesel does not hesitate to voice his disapproval of certain works that he feels falsify the Holocaust, such as the film series *Holocaust* made for American television in 1978, the film version of *Sophie's Choice* (1979) by William Stryon, and the play about the Vilna ghetto called *Ghetto* (1984) by the Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol (*And* 117-23). He makes it clear that he prefers documentaries and that a film or "docu-drama" mixing fiction with facts results in confusion and poor taste. He believes that the scenes depicting the gas chambers in *Holocaust* are trespassing on grounds that are "morally objectionable" (120).

According to Wiesel, Jewish tradition "considers death a private event whose secret is to be respected. . . . Auschwitz cannot be depicted; the veil covering this dark universe cannot be lifted" (122-23). Here again, he calls for the same stipulation for secrecy stated with regard to the writing of his memoirs, a recurring Wieselean motif: certain things cannot be revealed and must be left unsaid. Wiesel responds to non-survivor writers who feel this attitude is too "purist." They accuse him of arrogance, of claiming for himself and other survivors exclusive territorial rights to the *Shoah*. He maintains that anyone has the right to treat the subject, but respect must be paid to the memory of the dead. For those who do write about the event, Wiesel says, "I plead for humility, for more prudence, more reserve in both behavior and language" (123).

Yet Wiesel is hardly reserved in answering the critics who charge that he is among those who enhance their literary careers financially by writing about the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup> He is also criticized for being "Judeo-centric," thinking only of Jews. He defends his position by paraphras-

<sup>8</sup>In the second volume Wiesel devotes an entire chapter to "The Bitburg Affair."

<sup>9</sup>Wiesel is especially angry at these profiteering charges directed at those who write about the *Shoah* (*And* 124-25).

ing what he said in his Nobel acceptance speech: “Jewish destiny is my priority, but that priority is not exclusive” (*And* 125). Wiesel’s tone grows spirited and even angry when he calls to mind racist anti-Semites on the reactionary right as well as leftist intellectuals who judge him severely.

He devotes a whole chapter to his views on hate, pointing out that since 1988, his organization, the Foundation for Humanity, has been mounting international conferences on the “Anatomy of Hate” which have brought together important figures from different countries to explore and combat the religious, racial, national, social, ethical, and ideological effects of hate’s poison. As a public figure, Wiesel has clearly left the sheltered space of the *shtetl* to leap upon the stage of the world’s conscience, as is made clear in both of the volumes that comprise the history of his memory.

## II. WIESEL THE WRITER

In general, the narrative style in Wiesel’s memoirs is rather straightforward as he documents his life. This style is offset by dreams preceding many of the chapters and rendered in a poetic, pensive tone reminiscent of his early literary voice. The dreams reveal his inner self, the self that is hidden in much of the rest of the memoirs. While Wiesel’s mother, little sister, grandfather, grandmother, and familiar figures from his childhood such as the beggars of his town flow in and out of his dreams, it is the dreams of his father that frame and punctuate the two volumes.

Appearing in most of the dreams, his father is a constant presence, just as is the father-figure, guide, teacher, or mentor who manifests himself throughout Wiesel’s fiction. In the dream that opens the first volume, initiating the reader into Wiesel’s journey homeward, his father’s unshaven face and lips move with unuttered sounds that seem to convey a foreboding. Wiesel awakens, anguished, with the thought that “he had come for me” (*All* 3). The father draws his son back to his roots, to his origins, to his family heritage, and accompanies him on his journey to the past. “He had come for me” also suggests the author’s awareness

of his own mortality.

In his memoirs Wiesel often refers to his own books and the circumstances in which they were published. He comments on his works and at times repeats what he has already written, incorporating his speeches, interviews, articles, and stories into the larger picture that forms the mosaic of his life story. He also describes some of the same events and characters on which his stories are based. His memoirs are thus both a continuation of his fiction and a commentary on it.

At times, the stories closely follow the actual situation as it took place, the difference between life and art being barely perceptible. Often, only a slightly modified detail distinguishes the imagined from the real, enhancing the drama of the narrative. A comparison of the real-life incidents as narrated in the memoirs and then transposed into fiction gives insight into the author's literary craft.

Wiesel considers himself above all a teller of tales, a storyteller. When asked what "story" means to him, he responds,

Story to me is what remains of the event. The substance and substrate is the story. . . . The Bible is a story and story to me is the repository of humanity that one generation leaves for another. And sometimes the same story goes through ten generations and always adds another layer. . . . So when we tell stories, really we do not tell stories, we retell stories. (Cargas 129–30)

In both volumes of his memoirs, Wiesel retells his own stories. A close reading of selected examples from the short stories viewed through the lens of the memoirs reveals how he transforms an event into story, sometimes reaching even beyond that to become a legend.

For example, consider the description of his two visits to the Rabbi(s) of Wizhnitz. The first visit occurs in Sighet where the eight-year-old Wiesel, accompanied by his mother, goes to receive the blessing of the legendary hasidic Rabbi Israel of Wizhnitz. Wiesel recounts how during the visit the Rebbe asked his mother to leave the room and put the young boy on his lap; they talked about Wiesel's studies—a Torah portion, a Rashi commentary, a chapter of the Talmud. He then left, and

his mother entered to speak to the Rabbi alone. When she came out, she was sobbing. Despite his persistent questioning for days concerning her tears, she refused to tell him (*All* 12).

It was years later in New York that a relative, Anshel Feig, seriously ill in the hospital, told him why: the Rabbi said, “‘Sarah, know that your son will become a *gadol b’Israel*, a great man in Israel, but neither you nor I will live to see the day’” (13). By placing this quotation early in the memoirs, Wiesel suggests that he is proud of the observation and that the bearded old Rebbe’s prophecy has been fulfilled.

The second visit is to the son of Rabbi Israel of Wizhnitz, called by Wiesel the “young” Rebbe, who in 1944 was able to escape to Antwerp and subsequently to Israel. Wiesel always had love, respect, and a deep sense of devotion for Rabbi Israel and his son, both of whom were a vital part of his past. In Israel he pays a visit to the “young” Rebbe, now an older man living in Bnei Brak, a religious suburb of Tel Aviv. However, the tone of his exchange with the son is very different from that of his awesome meeting with the father years earlier in Sighet.

The “young” Rebbe (who is never called by name) does not hide his disapproval of the Wiesel persona he sees before him. The secular has replaced the sacred: “I look at you and wonder who you are. I know who you were but not who you are. . . . And if your grandfather, may he rest in peace, could see you, what would he say?” (273–74). When the Rebbe asks Wiesel about his work and whether the stories he writes about in his books are true, the pious boy-turned-writer answers, “‘In literature, Rebbe, certain things are true though they didn’t happen, while others are not, even if they did.’” The encounter ends with Wiesel’s wistful comment, “I would have loved to receive his blessing” (275).

Ironically, this unfulfilled wish had been realized in Wiesel’s first account of the meeting with the Rebbe which serves as the introductory piece of *Legends of Our Time* (1968). In many respects the details of Wiesel’s encounter with the “young” Rebbe are the same there as in *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. Asked by the Rebbe what he does, Wiesel answers that he writes. “‘Is that all?’” the Rebbe asks disparagingly, curious as

to what Wiesel writes about. When Wiesel explains that he writes about “‘things that happened or could have happened,’” that were sometimes invented from beginning to end, the Rebbe reprimands him for masking reality and writing lies. Wiesel replies that “[s]ome events do take place but are not true; others are—although they never occurred’” (*Legends* viii). This declaration of literary intent is extremely significant and is probably why Wiesel chooses to repeat it, almost word for word, in his first memoir.

Wiesel’s utterance recalls that of another Auschwitz survivor, the Resistance fighter Charlotte Delbo, who at the beginning of *None of Us Will Return* (1968) admits, “I am no longer sure that what I have written is true but I am sure that it happened” (128). Such pronouncements reflect survivors’ inability to believe in their own life histories. Their stories are so terrifying and extreme that the truth often appears as fiction, even to themselves. Yet, contrary to the Rabbi’s misapprehensions, Wiesel does not mask reality but transforms it. Breaking down traditional boundaries, fusing autobiography with fiction, blurring the real and the legendary, Wiesel’s works, like those of many Holocaust survivors, defy categorization.

What is striking at the end of the introduction of *Legends of Our Time* is that the Rebbe finishes by saying to Wiesel, “‘Come and I shall give you my blessing’” (viii). His intention is to bless Wiesel, the grandson of Dodye Feig, not Wiesel, the author. Ironically, it is Wiesel, the writer, who through his literary imagination is able to endow himself with the blessing he reveals in his memoir he did not receive.

Other stories by Wiesel, viewed through the lens of his memoirs, also provide insight into the author’s narrative technique. The modification of one significant detail transforms the real-life event into literature. The first is the theme of the journey homeward which recurs throughout Wiesel’s writing, notably in his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1964) and in stories such as “The Last Return” and “The Watch.” The pilgrimage to the past is both nurturing and disillusioning. On the one hand, the return to Sighet, nestled in the Carpathian mountains, rekindles memories of a happy life, of family and community where the author-narrator once felt secure. On the other hand,

he feels like a stranger in the town that expelled him. Returning in 1964, two decades after he had been uprooted in April 1944, he gazes upon familiar landmarks—his grandmother’s home, his teacher’s house, his father’s store, the Jewish cemetery.

The dramatic thrust in both of the stories centers around a nocturnal visit to his own house, now inhabited by strangers. In “The Last Return” he opens the gate to the courtyard, preparing to penetrate the interior, but a dog’s bark frightens him, and he takes flight, never completing his exploration. Similarly, in “The Watch,” the narrator does not enter the house but remains in the yard, digging up an ancient relic, the gold watch he had received for his bar mitzvah. He finishes by reburying this symbol of time past, of the town itself, that cannot be resurrected.

In *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Wiesel continues to speak of being obsessed with the return to his native town (72). He describes its inhabitants, his family, and his relatives, offering many more concrete details than he does in the fiction. However, in contrast to the survivor’s inability to enter the forbidden territory which ultimately furnishes the tension of the fictional stories, he notes in his memoir that “[s]trangers were living in my house. They had never heard my name. Inside, nothing had changed” (72). While the furniture and objects are the same, however, there is one striking alteration—the absence of the photo of his beloved master, the old Rebbe Israel of Wizhnitz, that had hung above his bed; it has been replaced by a cross. In reality, then, as seen in the memoir, Wiesel did eventually gain entrance to the other side. The word “inside,” therefore, gives the reader an entirely different perspective from that of the stories.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>In his memoir Wiesel reminisces about his successive returns to Sighet: first in 1964, using his own fictional characters as his guides, he had imagined the return in *The Town Beyond the Wall*; in 1972 he goes back with his wife Marion and an NBC television crew (*All* 361–64); in 1984 he is invited by the Romanian Jewish community (“Sighet” 127); in July 1995 Wiesel shows his town to his son Elisha and his nephew Steve, the son of his sister Bea (*And* 407–08); finally, in 2002 he accompanies the Romanian president, Ion Iliescu, whose government is struggling to face up to its history during WWII, and this time his older sister, Hilda Kudler, also comes with him.

Another example of a modified detail relates to the last Passover Seder that Wiesel celebrated in German-occupied Hungary in the spring of 1944. This final holiday at home before the family's deportation to Auschwitz resonates in Wiesel's memory and is evoked in his story "The Evening Guest," in *Legends of Our Time*, in his essay "Passover," and in other references in his work.

In Jewish tradition a guest is invited to the Seder table. In "The Evening Guest" he is a poor Jewish refugee from Poland whom the narrator's father has met on the street. According to Jewish lore, the prophet Elijah visits every Jewish family at Passover, manifesting himself in various disguises—a poor person, a beggar, a student, an old person, a messenger, etc. "Each generation begets a prophet in its own image," Wiesel reports (27). At the Seder in Sighet Elijah appears as the stranger at the table, the Polish Jew who continually interrupts the Passover ceremony to warn of impending disaster. How can they celebrate the festival of freedom when Jews are being butchered around them, he asks, as he describes the massacres taking place in Poland. "'Pharaoh is not dead,'" he cries, "'open your eyes and look—he is destroying our people. . . . He is alive, he's on his way, soon he'll be at the gates of this city, at the doors of this house'" (26).

The evening guest is the prototype of Wiesel's unheeded witness, a messenger whose futile warnings foretell the fate of the entire Jewish community and who appears in much of his writing beginning with Moshe, the beadle in *Night*. For Wiesel's young narrator in this story, the stranger at the table is Elijah in disguise, but unlike the traditional Elijah, the harbinger of the Messiah, whose role is to reassure, resolve disputes, help people in need, and protect people from harm in the future, this modern-day prophet disturbs and provokes. When it is time to open the door for Elijah—an essential part of the Passover ritual that marks a sign of confidence that no harm will befall those present—the stranger runs toward it, opens it, and shouts, "'Look! There's no one there! No one! Do you hear me?'" ("Evening" 28). He then mysteriously disappears into the night. Clearly, this dramatic gesture is an attempt to alert others that there will be no biblical deliverer to rescue them from the catastrophe.

There seems to be a doubling of Elijahs here—the visible one who manifests himself at the Seder as a messenger and the invisible one

who will not come to save the family. At the end of the story, however, the two have merged when, a few weeks after the Seder, the young narrator glimpses the stranger once again, this time marching in the first convoy leaving the ghetto:

Today I know what I did not know then: at the end of a long trip that was to last four days and three nights he got out in a small railway station, near a peaceful little town, somewhere in Silesia, where his fiery chariot was waiting to carry him up to the heavens: is that not proof enough that he was the prophet Elijah? (30)

The fiery ascension of the Bible has been transfigured or rather disfigured into a dark metaphor for the crematoria and Elijah into a Holocaust victim.

This last family Seder is also depicted in the first volume of Wiesel's memoirs. At this event the stranger at the table is Moshe the beadle or "little Moishale," as Wiesel affectionately calls him (*All* 59). Moshe was a foreign Jew, among the first to be deported from Hungary to Polish Galicia, but he miraculously escaped from a mass grave and returned to tell the tale. No one in Sighet believed his tormented stories, which angered and frustrated him. Thus, he becomes a messenger from the dead who ultimately is not listened to (81).

Like the stranger at the table in "The Evening Guest," Moshe in the memoirs is compelled to interrupt the traditional ceremony, obliged to warn the others: "I would like to tell you what is in store for you. I owe you that, he says'" (60). However, what is surprising in this real-life event is that despite his insistence he is silenced by Wiesel's father. "Not now," the father tells Moishale; "'Your stories are sad and the law forbids sadness on the night of Passover.' We finished the meal in silence," Wiesel notes (60). This is a powerful commentary or rather confession, for Wiesel reveals how the refusal to

<sup>11</sup>Wiesel's father obtained American visas for the entire family but chose to wait, giving away the visas to relatives, Samuel Wiesel and his wife, who emigrated to the United States and lodged Wiesel when he arrived in New York

listen began with his own family.<sup>11</sup> But through the fictional “The Evening Guest” Wiesel was able to rectify the situation by allowing the witness to speak out.

The difference between life and literature in Wiesel’s universe, as seen, is often blurred, as another example of interrelated life and art indicates. Published five years after the Eichmann trial in 1961, “An Old Acquaintance” depicts a confrontation between victim and victimizer and the interchangeability of their roles, an underlying theme in Wiesel’s novels, stories, and essays, and raises important issues about collaboration, collective guilt, and collective innocence, about judging and revenge.<sup>12</sup>

The story takes place on a bus in Tel Aviv where the first-person narrator passes time by playing a game, imagining himself in the place of another, in this case a passenger sitting across from him. When he realizes that the middle-aged bald man looks familiar, the game turns into a trial. Prodding him with questions, first timidly and then more aggressively, the narrator asks the man where he was during the war. With clenched teeth, impassively hiding behind “a mask of indifference, a state of non-being” (43), the passenger refuses to acknowledge that they have met before and says he wants to be left alone. As the tale unfolds, readers understand that the narrator has recognized the former Jewish kapo from his barracks in Auschwitz.

On the moving bus the narrator recalls arguments of the prosecution and the defense from trials he has attended of Jews “accused of having survived by choosing cowardice”—ghetto policemen, members of the Judenrat, kapos (46). He remembers how the prosecution contended that not to condemn the cowards is to abandon those whom

<sup>12</sup>For a study of revenge, see Naomi Seidman’s article which compares the notion of vengeance in Wiesel’s original Yiddish memoir, *Un di velt hot geshvign* (1956), with the condensed French version, *La Nuit* (1958), arguing that these two books, one written for Jewish readers and the other for a European non-Jewish public, characterize the survivor differently. The Yiddish survivor portrayed by the narrator, Eliezer, sees his death-like image in a mirror in the camp hospital after the liberation of Buchenwald, wants to take revenge, and

they have wronged, while the defense claimed that the accused were also victims.<sup>13</sup>

At the trials, the narrator experiences both shame and pity for the accused, “gray” persons being judged. He feels relieved that he is witness and not judge (47).<sup>14</sup> However, on the bus in Israel he recognizes he must take on all roles—witness, judge, attorney for the defense. Acting out a trial in his mind, the narrator relives the camp life and the actions of this barracks-chief, how he beat up the old and the sick, whipped the emaciated, gave out food with one hand and struck bodies with the other.

The silence is broken when the two are obliged to leave the bus at the last stop. The kapo returns to his former brutal self, shouting obscenities and threats in German. The narrator, who had thought of himself as the accuser and the kapo as the accused, feels once again like a victim; the oppressor and oppressed roles are reversed. The man whom he had considered his prisoner lets him escape. The powerless one is thus imbued with power: “He let me go. He granted me freedom” (53), the narrator says.

This story clearly contains autobiographical elements, confirmed in an interview with Wiesel by Bob Costas in which the author recounts how he recognized and confronted a kapo on a bus going from Tel

<sup>13</sup>Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988), provides a detailed description of these “functionary-prisoners,” ready to compromise and collaborate with the enemy and assuming positions of privilege which gave them the power to humiliate those beneath them in the camp hierarchy. As Levi observes, “It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge” (41–42). Levi claims that in the network of ambiguous camp relations, good and evil could not always be determined.

<sup>14</sup>In “Une visite en Allemagne” Wiesel says, “je ne crois ni en la culpabilité ni en l’innocence collective; en général je ne considère comme témoin, non comme juge” (119). (I believe neither in collective guilt nor collective innocence. . . . [I]n general, I consider myself a witness, not a judge.) Levi, in speaking of the Sonderkommando, those prisoners selected to extract the corpses from the gas chambers and transport them to the crematoria, expresses a similar sentiment: “I believe that no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did

Aviv to Jerusalem. "For a few seconds," he says, "I became his judge. . . . And then I decided, I am not a judge; I am a witness. I let him go" (154). In the fiction an important transformation has occurred. The subject is changed into an object: he (the author-narrator) is the one who is let go, providing insight into Wiesel's literary imagination.

In many of his tales there is a twist at the conclusion, an unforeseen ending that endows the narrative with a sense of surprise and compels readers to participate in answering some unanswered questions. In the case of "An Old Acquaintance," readers must decide for themselves what taking to flight truly signifies for the narrator and the author. What kind of freedom is being granted and for whom? Is it freedom from having to condemn the barracks head, to act like a judge and hand him over to the police? Is it freedom from being corrupted by evil and becoming like the oppressor? Is it freedom from the weight of the past? Is avoiding making a decision courageous, or is it a defeat? Readers are suspended in ambiguity.

"An Old Acquaintance" comes into play once again as source and guide in *All Rivers Run to the Sea* when Wiesel uses his own story as a point of reference. He recounts how two brothers, young attorneys from Brooklyn, come to see him in his office at Boston University to ask his advice. They think they have discovered that a respected Hasid who attends synagogue with Wiesel is the kapo who beat their father in the camps. Their father had had the courage to call attention to the kapo's Jewishness, condemning his cruelty for hitting the prisoners while distributing soup, an action similar to the block chief's on the bus in Israel. "'Have you no shame? Have you forgotten you are a Jew?'" their father dared tell the kapo (88). Because of this defiant act, that night the kapo and his aids wrapped the father in a blanket and beat him savagely. One day, in Brooklyn, about forty years after his return from the camps, the father recognized the voice of the kapo.

The sons are seeking justice and retribution. Like the role played by the narrator on the bus when he conducted an imaginary trial, Wiesel now interrogates the two brothers, attempting to determine with absolute certainty that the kapo is the man they say attends his synagogue. If the father was wrapped in a blanket, how could he have

heard the person's voice, and could he remember it after all these years, Wiesel asks the sons, trying to cast doubt upon their intense need for revenge.

At the end of this account which in effect is inconclusive, the second degree witness becomes self-referential. In order to persuade them not to report this man to the police and Israeli authorities, Wiesel cites his own story, "An Old Acquaintance," which the brothers had in fact read. At the beginning of his memoirs, Wiesel states that his life is a commentary on his work, and here is evidence of that: "You know how I acted in virtually similar circumstances. I let him get away" (89), he reminds the brothers, managing to convince them to investigate with caution in order to avoid making false accusations. Making it clear that he does not want to be implicated in the matter, he even refuses to be told the man's name.

One might have hoped for the second degree witness to disclose his reasons for being unable to pass judgment, first in the fiction and then in the memoirs. Evasive, he keeps his explanations sealed and only uncovers his feelings through self-interrogation at the end of the incident. Consistent with the stance he takes throughout his work, he believes that all Jews were victims and does not want to pit Jew against Jew: "Why did I refuse to hear the kapo's name? Again, only the victims interest me. Are we to be victims of one another?" (89).

Later, Wiesel admits something even more astonishing. He says that he sometimes asks himself "whether I would have been like them had I been appointed a kapo or *Vorarbeiter*. To this day I feel that no one has the right to draw comparisons. Ultimately, the only power to which man should aspire is that which he exercises over himself" (311).

Colin Davis criticizes Wiesel's lack of moral clarity in "An Old Acquaintance." (The memoirs had not yet been published when his study was completed.) Davis believes that the narrator of the story is "paralyzed when confronted with the prospect of making choices" (8) and wants to avoid the responsibility of making decisions. According to Davis, Wiesel's fiction in general contains elements of ethical uncertainty, while in contrast his nonfiction assumes definite positions that

convey a sense of moral authority (12–13). He cites, for example, the essay “A Plea for the Dead” as well as “The Guilt We Share,” an essay in which Wiesel asserts, “All of us must take responsibility for what happened in Europe. . . . We belong to a generation at once lost and guilty, and our collective conscience lies under a weight of humiliation” (163).

But one could disagree with Davis’s notion of “ethical uncertainty” and argue that in “An Old Acquaintance” Wiesel is consistent with the stance he takes throughout his work. He does not excuse nor accept the behavior of the kapo but believes that all Jews were victims. He feels he does not have the right to blame or judge a victim. This may account for what Davis calls “paralysis” and “ethical uncertainty” in the context of the story. But refusing to act as a judge does not in any way connote a lack of moral or ethical certitude either in Wiesel’s fiction or nonfiction. Moreover, Wiesel strives to eliminate any variance between word and act. In his conversations with Cargas he reveals, “I cannot go on writing and acting one way and behaving another. . . . Today I demand from a writer a moral commitment as well, a human commitment” (67).

In conclusion, as witness to his own witness, Wiesel grants readers insight into his own contradictions. Humanitarian, voice of conscience, morally *engagé*, Wiesel does not hesitate to take a stand against indifference, injustice, evil, and hatred in all of their manifestations. He writes to correct injustice, to bear witness again and again, to comment on his own witness. He writes to combat forgetfulness. He writes to remember. On a more personal level he holds back from passing judgment, especially on Jews. In effect, this holding back is also evident for the second degree witness who writes his memoirs but is reluctant to reveal himself completely. Elusive at times, illuminating at others, the memoirs mark Wiesel’s permanent place in the history of his memory and of the modern epoch.

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