Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage

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> This language is beginning to invent
> another me.
>
> —Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*

It may not have been Elie Wiesel's *Night* that first sounded the note of silence or elicited it from its readers. *Night*, though, is its purest, most powerful expression, as a work and in the literature that has arisen around it. The theme of silence, in its theological, existential, and linguistic dimensions, dominates the commentary on *Night* (this commentary cannot be called criticism, in the usual sense): the mystery of God's silence in the face of evil; the muteness of the dead; and the incommensurability of language and the events of the Holocaust—the naming of these enormities, in other words, as unnameable, unsayable.[1] To these one might add a fourth silence, the proper awed stance of the reader and spectator in the face of Holocaust testimony. The only thing more predictable than this injunction to silence is the regularity with which it is broken. And even this has been said before.

Let me be clear: the interpretation of the Holocaust as a religious-theological event is not a tendentious imposition on *Night* but rather a careful reading of the work. In the description of the first night Eliezer spends in the concentration camp, silence signals the turn from the immediate terrors to a larger cosmic drama, from stunned realism to theology. In the felt absence of divine justice or compassion, silence becomes the agency of an immense, murderous power that permanently transforms the narrator:

> Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.[2]

This famous and powerful passage describes a loss of faith, but faith can be lost in many ways. In Wiesel's description, the murder of God does not collapse eternity or strip it of religious mystery. Where the eternal God once reigned, henceforth shall live the eternal memory of the witness. In the aftermath of God's abdication, the site and occasion of this abdication—"the Holocaust"—takes on theological significance, and the witness becomes both priest and prophet of this new religion. "Auschwitz," Wiesel has said, "is as important as Sinai."[3] The near-religious silence that pervades *Night* also appears in Wiesel's accounts of its composition. Wiesel begins the essay "An Interview Unlike Any Other" by explaining not so much why he became a writer, but rather why he did not write his Holocaust memoir sooner:

> I knew the role of the survivor was to testify. Only I did not know how. I lacked experience, I lacked a framework. I mistrusted the tools, the procedures. Should one say it all or hold it all back? Should one shout or whisper? Place the emphasis on those who were gone or on their heirs? How does one describe the indescribable? How does one use restraint in re-creating the fall of mankind and the eclipse of the gods? And then, how can one be sure that the words, once uttered, will not betray, distort the message they bear?
>
> So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essential for at least ten years. Long enough to see clearly. Long enough to learn to listen to the voices crying inside my own. Long enough to regain possession of my memory. Long enough to unite the language of man with the silence of the dead.[4]

Night was written, then, only after Wiesel's decade-long, self- imposed moratorium on speech had elapsed. But it was also written, as the essay goes on to explain, at the insistence of the French Catholic writer and Nobel Laureate François Mauriac, who was its first reader and shepherded its publication. When, at the end of their first fateful meeting, Mauriac asked why Wiesel had not written about "those events," the young journalist replied that he had taken a vow not to speak. But Mauriac would not relent. Escorting Wiesel to the elevator, he spoke again: "I think you are wrong. You are wrong not to speak. . . . Listen to the old man that I am: one must speak out—one must *also* speak

out." Wiesel continues: "One year later I sent him the manuscript of *Night*, written under the seal of memory and silence."[5]

This image of the former concentration-camp inmate, speaking haltingly and reluctantly from within "the silence of the dead," unites Wiesel's account of how *Night* came to be written with the final passages of that text. For *Night*, we should remember, depicts not only a witness to the Holocaust but also a survivor—one might say *the* survivor. In the final lines of *Night* when the recently liberated Eliezer gazes at his own face in a mirror, the reader is presented with the survivor as both subject and object, through his inner experience and through the outward image of what he has become. And while the emaciated boy who sees a corpse in the mirror may have changed, the man he becomes has never forgotten this deathly reflection (in the original French, the sense that this gaze of the corpse remains within the survivor is even stronger). Precisely because the image of the corpse in the mirror is so unfamiliar, so unassimilable to the living consciousness of the survivor, that image must live on; the survivor will always be, in some sense, a corpse:

> One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging from the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto.
>
> From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me.
>
> The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me [*Son regard dans mes yeux ne me quitte plus*].[6]

Read together, the text of *Night* and Wiesel's account of its composition form a single portrait of the artist as a young survivor, haunted by a cosmic, deathly silence he can break only at the urging of another. This portrait has come to stand for the ineradicable effects of the Holocaust on the psyche of those who experienced its horrors.[7] Because *Night* has nearly always been received as an unmediated autobiographical account, the complexity of Wiesel's interpretive craft, his *writing*, in other words, has been very nearly invisible. It is a measure of the profundity of the influence of *Night* on the discourse of Holocaust literature that its distinctive tone and approach has come to seem simply inevitable, the only response imaginable.

Yet an alternative to this image of the survivor, this set of responses to Jewish catastrophe, exists in Wiesel's own writing. The reluctant young journalist whom Mauriac had to implore to speak ten years after his liberation had already written a Holocaust memoir called *Un di velt hot geshvign* (And the World Kept Silent). According to the Wiesel's 1994 memoir, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, the Yiddish memoir was composed

and submitted for publication in 1954, several months before his fateful interview with Mauriac; Mark Turkov, the Buenos Aires–based Yiddish editor and publisher, accepted *Un di velt* for inclusion in his series *Dos poylishe yidntum* (Polish Jewry) not long afterward. *Un di velt* was written, Wiesel recounts, on board a ship to Brazil, where he had been assigned to cover Christian missionary activity among poor Jews: "I spent most of the voyage in my cabin working. I was writing my account of the concentration camp years—in Yiddish. I wrote feverishly, breathlessly, without rereading. I wrote to testify, to stop the dead from dying, to justify my own survival."[8]

Night emerged on the scene of European writing in 1958 as a work that stood alone. By contrast, when *Un di velt* had been published in 1956, it was volume 117 of Turkov's series, which included more than a few Holocaust memoirs. The first pages of the Yiddish book provide a list of previous volumes (a remarkable number of them marked "Sold out"), and the book concludes with an advertisement/review for volumes 95–96 of the series, Jonas Turkov's *Extinguished Stars*. In praising this memoir, the reviewer implicitly provides us with a glimpse of the conventions of the growing genre of Yiddish Holocaust memoir. Among the virtues of Turkov's work, the reviewer writes, is its comprehensiveness, the thoroughness of its documentation not only of the genocide but also of its victims:

> At the end of the second volume is an index that includes 800 names of actors, writers, poets, and various other artists, not all of whom are well known, demonstrating that the writer collected a mass of details and names he mentions and remembers. Not only has he erected a monument on the graves of these wandering stars, but he has also included much useful historical material that can serve as a primary resource for historians of Yiddish theater from the beginning of the Second World War until its tragic destruction.[9]

For the Yiddish reader, Eliezer (as he is called here) Wiesel's memoir was one among many, valuable for its contributing an account of what was certainly an unusual circumstance among East European Jews: their ignorance, as late as the spring of 1944, of the scale and nature of the Germans' genocidal intentions. The experiences of the Jews of Transylvania may have been illuminating, but certainly none among the readers of Turkov's series on Polish Jewry would have taken it as representative. As the review makes clear, the value of survivor testimony was in its specificity and comprehensiveness; Turkov's series was not alone in its preference. Yiddish Holocaust memoirs often modeled themselves on

the local chronical (*pinkes*) or memorial book (*yizker-bukh*) in which catalogs of names, addresses, and occupations served as form and motivation. It is within this literary context, against this set of generic conventions, that Wiesel published the first of his Holocaust memoirs.

Although the English translation closely follows the original French version of *Night*, the relationship between the published Yiddish and French texts is more complex. *Un di velt* has been variously referred to as the original Yiddish version of *Night* and described as more than four times as long: actually, it is 245 pages to the French 158 pages.[10] What distinguishes the Yiddish from the French is not so much length as attention to detail, an adherence to that principle of comprehensiveness so valued by the editors and reviewers of the Polish Jewry series. Thus, whereas the first page of *Night* succintly and picturesquely describes Sighet as "that little town in Transylvania where I spent my childhood," *Un di velt* introduces Sighet as "the most important city [*shtot*] and the one with the largest Jewish population in the province of Marmarosh."[11] The Yiddish goes on to provide a historical account of the region: "Until the First World War, Sighet belonged to Austro-Hungary. Then it became part of Romania. In 1940, Hungary acquired it again."[12] And while the French memoir is dedicated "in memory of my parents and of my little sister, Tsipora," the Yiddish names both victims and perpetrators: "This book is dedicated to the eternal memory of my mother Sarah, my father Shlomo, and my little sister Tsipora—who were killed by the German murderers." [13]

The Yiddish text may have been only lightly edited in the transition to French, but the effect of this editing was to position the memoir within a different literary genre. Even the title *Un di velt hot geshvign* signifies a kind of silence very distant from the mystical silence at the heart of *Night*. The Yiddish title indicts the world that did nothing to stop the Holocaust and allows its perpetrators to carry on normal lives; *La Nuit* names no human or even divine agents in the events it describes.[14] From the historical and political specificities of Yiddish documentary testimony, Wiesel and his French publishing house fashioned something closer to mythopoetic narrative.[15]

But even more radically transformed in the move to French than "the most important city in Marmorosh" was the image of the survivor. In both the Yiddish and the French, the narrator criticizes the other survivors for thinking of nothing but food, and "not of revenge." The following passage is taken from the Yiddish, but the French is similar:

> The first gesture of freedom: the starved men made an effort to get something to eat.

They only thought about food. Not about revenge. Not about their parents. Only about bread. And even when they had satisfied their hunger—they still did not think about revenge.[16]

[6]

Jewish Social Studies

But the Yiddish continues: "Early the next day Jewish boys ran off to Weimar to steal clothing and potatoes. And to rape German girls [*un tsu fargvaldikn daytshe shikses*]. The historical commandment of revenge was not fulfilled."[17] In French this passage reads: "Le lendemain, quelques jeunes gens coururent à Weimar ramasser des pommes de terre et des habits—et coucher avec des filles. Mais de vengeance, pas trace."[18] Or, in Stella Rodway's English rendition: "On the following morning, some of the young men went to Weimar to get some potatoes and clothes—and to sleep with girls. But of revenge, not a sign."[19]

To describe the differences between these versions as a stylistic reworking is to miss the extent of what is suppressed in the French. *Un di velt* depicts a post-Holocaust landscape in which Jewish boys "run off" to steal provisions and rape German girls; *Night* extracts from this scene of lawless retribution a far more innocent picture of the aftermath of the war, with young men going off to the nearest city to look for clothes and sex. In the Yiddish, the survivors are explicitly described as Jews and their victims (or intended victims) as German; in the French, they are just young men and women. The narrator of both versions decries the Jewish failure to take revenge against the Germans, but this failure means something different when it is emblematized, as it is in Yiddish, with the rape of German women. The implication, in the Yiddish, is that rape is a frivolous dereliction of the obligation to fulfill the "historical commandment of revenge"; presumably fulfillment of this obligation would involve a concerted and public act of retribution with a clearly defined target. *Un di velt* does not spell out what form this retribution might take, only that it is sanctioned—even commanded—by Jewish history and tradition.

If the two versions characterize the larger group of survivors differently, they also present different views of the recently liberated Eliezer. *Un di velt* presents us with the writer gazing at his deathly reflection, but it does not end there as *Night* does; the last few paragraphs of *Un di velt* follow the young survivor out of the camp and into the larger world of postwar Europe:

> Three days after liberation I became very ill; food-poisoning. They took me to the hospital and the doctors said that I was gone.
>
> For two weeks I lay in the hospital between life and death. My situation grew worse from day to day.

One fine day I got up—with the last of my energy—and went over to the mirror that was hanging on the wall.

I wanted to see myself. I had not seen myself since the ghetto.

From the mirror a skeleton gazed out.

Skin and bones.

I saw the image of myself after my death. It was at that instant that the will to live was awakened.

Without knowing why, I raised a balled-up fist and smashed the mirror, breaking the image that lived within it.

And then—I fainted.

From that moment on my health began to improve.

I stayed in bed for a few more days, in the course of which I wrote the outline of the book you are holding in your hand, dear reader.

But—

Now, ten years after Buchenwald, I see that the world is forgetting. Germany is a sovereign state, the German army has been reborn. The bestial sadist of Buchenwald, Ilsa Koch, is happily raising her children. War criminals stroll in the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past has been erased. Forgotten.

Germans and anti-Semites persuade the world that the story of the six million Jewish martyrs is a fantasy, and the naive world will probably believe them, if not today, then tomorrow or the next day.

So I thought it would be a good idea to publish a book based on the notes I wrote in Buchenwald.

I am not so naive to believe that this book will change history or shake people's beliefs. Books no longer have the power they once had. Those who were silent yesterday will also be silent tomorrow. I often ask myself, now, ten years after Buchenwald:

Was it worth breaking that mirror? Was it worth it?[20]

By stopping when it does, *Night* provides an entirely different account of the experience of the survivor. *Night* and the stories about its composition depict the survivor as a witness and as an expression of silence and death, projecting the recently liberated Eliezer's death-haunted face into the postwar years when Wiesel would become a familiar figure. By contrast, the Yiddish survivor shatters that image as soon as he sees it, destroying the deathly existence the Nazis willed on him. The Yiddish survivor is filled with rage and the desire to live, to take revenge, to write. Indeed, according to the Yiddish memoir, Eliezer began to write not ten years after the events of the Holocaust but immediately upon liberation, as the first expression of his mental and physical recovery. In the Yiddish we meet a survivor who, ten years

after liberation, is furious with the world's disinterest in his history, frustrated with the failure of the Jews to fulfill "the historical commandment of revenge," depressed by the apparent pointlessness of writing a book.

There are two survivors, then, a Yiddish and a French—or perhaps we should say one survivor who speaks to a Jewish audience and one whose first reader is a French Catholic. The survivor who met with Mauriac labors under the self-imposed seal and burden of silence, the silence of his association with the dead. The Yiddish survivor is alive with a vengeance and eager to break the wall of indifference he feels surrounds him. The question of how he can hope to break through the world's apathy by writing, to his "dear reader," in Yiddish is one Wiesel never raises in *Un di velt* nor explicitly answers anywhere else. But the answer is implicit in the gap between volume 117 of the Polish Jewry series and that "slim volume of terrifying power," as the blurb on my copy of *Night* puts it. Wiesel found the audience he told his Yiddish readers he wanted. But only, as it turns out, by suppressing the very existence of this desire, by foregrounding the reticent and mournful Jew who will speak only when at the urging of the older Catholic writer. Wiesel began by preaching to the Jewish converted, but soon enough, one might say, the preacher himself underwent a kind of conversion. By the time Wiesel was negotiating with his French publishers, the survivor who pointed an accusatory finger at Ilsa Koch, then raising her children in the new postwar Germany, had been supplanted by the survivor haunted by metaphysics and silence. It is this second version of how *Night* came to be written that has attained mythical status, most directly because it appears in Mauriac's foreword to the work (included in each new edition and translation) but also because of Wiesel's own accounts of the interview. And the myriad works of commentary on Wiesel have seized upon this theme, producing endless volumes on the existential and theological silences of his work, on the question of what has been called "the limits of representation." What remains outside this proliferating discourse on the unsayable is not what cannot be spoken but what cannot be spoken *in French.* And this is not the "silence of the dead" but rather the scandal of the living, the scandal of Jewish rage and unwillingness to embody suffering and victimization. The image that dominates the end of *Night*—the look, as Mauriac describes it, "as of a Lazarus risen from the dead, yet still a prisoner within the grim confines where he had strayed, stumbling among shameful corpses"—is precisely the image that Wiesel shatters at the end of his Yiddish work.[21] And resurrects to end the French one.

The Interview: Mauriac Remembers

If we have two memoirs, the Yiddish and the French, we also have two stories about how the French version came to be. Both Mauriac and Wiesel have written accounts of the fateful 1954 interview that resulted in the publication of the French memoir. The two versions, from different perspectives, describe a meeting that began uncomfortably and ended with a strong friendship, but only after the young East European journalist and the older French Catholic writer had overcome the reticences native to the situation and painfully confronted both what united and what separated them. Of the two versions, it is Mauriac's that serves as the foreword, and something of a frame text, to *Night.* The foreword begins with a description of his unease at the prospect of being interviewed by a foreign journalist: "I dread their visits," Mauriac confesses to us, "being torn between a desire to reveal everything in my mind and a fear of putting weapons in the hands of an interviewer when I know nothing about his own attitude toward France. I am always careful during encounters of this kind."[22] Mauriac, apparently speaking as a spokesperson for France, a sort of minister of its defense, does not explain why he should be worried about a foreign journalist's opinion of his country; in the next passage, however, he goes on to talk about the Occupation years, although the transition from his mistrust of journalists (particularly those writing for Israeli papers?) and his decision to confide in this one is left unexplained:

> I confided to my young visitor that nothing I had seen during those somber years had left so deep a mark upon me as those trainloads of Jewish children standing at Austerlitz station. Yet I did not even see them myself! My wife described them to me, her voice still filled with horror. At that time we knew nothing of Nazi methods of extermination. And who could have imagined them! Yet the way these lambs had been torn from their mothers in itself exceeded anything we had so far thought possible. I believe that on that day I touched for the first time upon the mystery of iniquity whose revelation was to mark the end of one era and the beginning of another. The dream which Western man conceived in the eighteenth century, whose dawn he thought he saw in 1789, and which, until August 2, 1914, had grown stronger with the progress of enlightenment and the discoveries of science—this dream vanished finally for me before those trainloads of little children. And yet I was still thousands of miles away from thinking that they were to be fuel for the gas chamber and the crematory.

> This, then, was what I had to tell the young journalist. And when I said, with a sigh, "How often I've thought about those children," he replied, "I was one of them."[23]

Having identified himself as a survivor, the young journalist tells Mauriac of his experiences and, more particularly, of his loss of faith in God. There is no evidence from the interview that Wiesel, who raged against non-Jewish indifference in the Yiddish memoir he had so recently completed, implied by word or gesture that the French writer need examine his own actions as a witness to the Jewish deportations (though, as Mauriac makes clear, hardly a witness at all, except second-hand, and one who was "thousands of miles away" from even the thought that these Jewish children were to be murdered) or those of France, whose national honor Mauriac is inclined to defend. The introduction does speak of passivity, of the failure to act, in the next passage, in which Mauriac recommends the book he is introducing because it is speaks of "the fate of the Jews of the little Transylvanian town called Sighet, their blindness in the face of a destiny from which they would still have had time to flee; the inconceivable passivity with which they gave themselves up to it, deaf to the warnings and pleas of a witness who had himself escaped from the massacre, and who brought them news of what he had seen with his own eyes; their refusal to believe him, taking him for a madman."[24] With that, the vexed question of political responses to Nazi terror is left squarely in the Jewish court.

What interests Mauriac even more profoundly than the blindness of the Transylvanian Jews, their "inconceivable passivity," is the innocence of the story's protagonist and narrator, whom Mauriac refers to throughout as a "child":

> The child who tells us this story here was one of God's elect. From the time when his conscience first awoke, he had lived only for God and had been reared on the Talmud, aspiring to initiation into the cabbala, dedicated to the Eternal. Have we ever thought about the consequences of a horror that, though less apparent, less striking than the other outrages, is yet the worst of all to those of us who have faith: the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly discovers absolute evil.[25]

With this passage, Mauriac lays out an implicit hierarchy of Holocaust horrors; for people of faith what was "worst of all" about the murder of six million Jews was "the death of God in the soul of a child."[26] The foreword ends with Mauriac's reaction to the story Wiesel tells about how he lost his faith:

> And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that the conformity between the Cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished? Zion, however, has risen up again from the crematories and the charnel houses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among its thousands of dead. It is through them that it lives again. We do not know the worth of a single drop of blood, one single tear. If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each of us belongs to Him. This is what I should have told this Jewish child. But I could only embrace him, weeping.[27]

Mauriac describes Wiesel as his "young questioner," but from Mauriac's own recounting, Wiesel questions neither God nor the person to whom he relates his story. On the contrary, Mauriac quotes Wiesel's description of Rosh Hashanah in the camp: "That day, I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, and God the accused." It is Mauriac who responds to this story as if he had been asked for counsel. With Wiesel's implicit invitation to theological meditation in hand, Mauriac explains how the Jewish boy's loss of faith is an impetus to his own, that the contradiction Wiesel feels between the suffering of the Jews and God's love for them is only an illusory one. But presumably because he respects Wiesel's right to interpret his own experience, the Catholic writer weeps and keeps silent. The story of the Holocaust, after all, is a Jewish one to tell.

Or is it? Mauriac, in a paradoxical assertion, claims for himself the virtue of silence, presents a Christian perspective while framing it as tactfully and respectfully withheld—despite an implicit Jewish invitation to express it. The foreword begins by acknowledging the position of European non-Jews as witnesses to the deportation of Jewish children, but only to divert the implicit indictment of such witnesses, in two distinct ways. Mauriac describes the scene his wife witnessed at Austerlitz station as the end and antithesis of everything France and enlightened Europe stand for. But he also speaks of that day as the beginning of a new era, with a new kind of knowledge: even as Mauriac insists that he was far from imagining the fate of the Jewish "lambs" at Austerlitz, that day was a "revelation" of "the mystery of iniquity." By contrast, Mauriac couches the Transylvanian Jews' response to evidence of Nazi intentions in the language of deafness, blindness, refusal to

believe (the same language, not coincidentally, of the Jewish rejection of Christ's divinity). His own disbelief points to his innocence—he cannot even imagine the possibility of such evil—while his dawning comprehension gains its significance only as a philosophical and theological event. Whether as French humanist or Catholic initiate, Mauriac distances himself from the charge of having been a cowardly bystander of the Nazi genocide. And by drawing attention to the narrative of the protagonist's loss of faith, Mauriac frames the Jewish catastrophe within existentialist religion, and then reasserts his own authority as a religious thinker. The effect of all these moves is to place the Jews in the position of those who do not know and assert Mauriac's own privileged access to the knowledge they lack.

The meeting between Mauriac and Wiesel was strained, but it would probably have been far more strained if the French writer had not opened a theological channel for Jewish-Christian communication. If the survivor's complaints were primarily directed against God, all of Europe might breathe easier. Moreover, as Mauriac makes clear, Christian faith need not be troubled by Jewish doubts, since "the stumbling block of [Wiesel's] faith was the cornerstone of mine."

I do not mean to imply that Mauriac is undisturbed by the Holocaust because he believes the Jews to be guilty of crucifying Jesus. For Mauriac, Jewish suffering is theologically meaningful in the same way as the suffering of "that other Jew." Mauriac responds to Wiesel's story by constructing a reverse typology: the fate of Elie's father, for instance, is described as "his martyrdom, his agony, and his death."[28] Neither is the resurrection missing, in the rise of Zion from the ashes of the Holocaust. Mauriac, in his Christological reframing of the Jewish Holocaust, never touches on the question of Jewish guilt for Christ's crucifixion; but what also vanishes in his reading of Jewish catastrophe is the other half of that story—the historical animosity of Christian against Jew.[29]

The Interview: Wiesel Remembers

Wiesel published his own account of the interview, although not until 1978, twenty-four years after it took place. He also confessed to an unease before the interview began, for reasons different from the ones Mauriac implies. Wiesel was far from wanting to acquire anti-French ammunition from Mauriac; he writes, in fact, that the request for a meeting with the writer was no more than a journalist's ploy—what Wiesel wanted from the well-connected writer was an introduction to the Jewish prime minister of France, Pierre Mendes-France, whom the journalist very much

wanted to interview. Wiesel describes how he reproached himself for manipulating the old man: "Impostor, I thought, I am an impostor."[30] But his guilt dissipated, Wiesel writes, when he realized that "the Jewish statesman had ceased to interest me, the Christian writer fascinated me."[31] The friendship between the older Christian and younger Jew began, then, with Wiesel relinquishing his aim of manipulating Mauriac for Jewish purposes and turning, in all sincerity, to the man himself. With this psychological shift, Wiesel began his transformation from Hebrew journalist and (still unpublished) Yiddish memoirist to European, or French, writer.

Mauriac's interest in Jews is just as strongly subjective, if less obviously manipulative, as Wiesel's initial interest in him. As Wiesel describes it, Mauriac spoke at length about the chosen and martyred people of Israel, but only as that suffering echoed the martyrdom and divinity of the Jew Jesus. Mauriac's "impassioned, fascinating monologue," Wiesel recalls, "was on a single theme: the son of man and the son of God, who, unable to save Israel, ended up saving mankind. Every reference led back to him."[32]

Mauriac, by his account, began by speaking of Jewish children and tactfully refrained from mentioning Jesus, whereas by Wiesel's account Mauriac began by speaking of Christ, not mentioning the suffering of Jewish children until the Jewish journalist demanded that he do so. What Mauriac claims to have thought, but not said, in response to Wiesel's story becomes, in this version, what he said, apparently unprovoked by anything the interviewer asked. And Wiesel remembers Mauriac as at least hinting at the adversarial relationship between the Jew Jesus and Israel, whom he was "unable to save," a tension Mauriac only implies by his reticence in speaking to a Jew. After listening to Mauriac with growing annoyance, Wiesel writes, he responded with anger and "bad manners":

> "Sir," I said, "you speak of Christ. Christians love to speak of him. The passion of Christ, the agony of Christ, the death of Christ. In your religion, that is all you speak of. Well, I want you to know that ten years ago, not very far from here, I knew Jewish children every one of whom suffered a thousand times more, six million times more, than Christ on the cross. And we don't speak of them. Can you understand that, sir? We don't speak of them."[33]

After Wiesel's outburst, Mauriac questions the emotional and apologetic journalist about his experiences, and he responds, "I cannot, I cannot speak of it, please, don't insist." It was then that Mauriac implored him to write; Wiesel's acquiescence, though always qualified by silence, is implied in the final sentence of the essay: "One year later I

sent him the manuscript of *Night*, written under the seal of memory and silence."[34]

In this version of the interview between the two men, the burden of silence is shouldered by the Jew, not the Christian. Where Mauriac writes that he suppressed his religious reaction to the survivor's story, Wiesel describes his unwillingness to tell his story to the older man. And both men tell their stories from within a paradoxical affirmation of silence; the two essays end with nearly parallel descriptions of stifled or qualified expression. But where Mauriac's foreword is "silent" on the Christian reading of Jewish martyrdom, Wiesel's essay presents the genocide itself as unspoken by both Christian and Jew, only belatedly reminding the pontificating Christian of the Jewish children of whom "we"—the referent is ambiguous—"don't speak." That Mauriac or the French may have been implicated in the genocide or in the silence that accompanied and followed the genocide of the Jews remains outside this narrative, just as it is pushed below the surface of Mauriac's—except for the mild accusation implied in the phrase "not very far from here." Mauriac's measure of the gap between French civilian and the murder of Jewish children vacillates between the proximity of Austerlitz station and the distance of "a thousand miles." And even the accusation is softened by the journalist including himself among those who have been silent on the fate of the Jews: "We don't speak of them." In the passive-aggressive logic of the Jewish-Christian post-Holocaust encounter, every utterance must be introduced and framed by a declaration of silence, and only by proclaiming a reluctance to speak can the speaker—Jewish or Christian—hope to heard. The Jewish survivor's desire for an audience he also mistrusts and hates cannot, it seems, be uttered in earshot of that audience. Of all the silences inherent to "Holocaust representation," that one has been least often broached.

Negotiating Memory

The French reworking of *Un di velt hot geshvign* and Mauriac's framing of this text together suggest that *La Nuit*—read so consistently as authentically Jewish, autobiographical, direct—represents a compromise between Jewish expression and the capacities and desires of non-Jewish readers, Mauriac first among them. I do not mean to suggest that this compromise, these negotiations, were either calculated or hypocritical; any conversation is a balancing act between two speakers, any text a reflection of its audience as much as its writers. That Wiesel wrote his Yiddish memoir first and to a Jewish audience makes it no more "au-

thentic" than his better-known French work; the Yiddish genre in which Wiesel participated imposed its own set of cultural conventions. If I choose to focus on these operations, this cultural translation of Jewish into Catholic idioms, in the encounter between Wiesel and Mauriac, it is because what happened between the two men has turned out to have the farthest-ranging of repercussions.

The question I would put to the 1954 interview, then, is this one: What happened between these two men to explain the tranformation of *Un di velt hot geshvign* into *La Nuit*, the survivor's political rage into his existentialist doubt? The encounter, it seems to me, could be described as a series of delicate negotiations, in which the survivor's first concession was to relinquish all talk (if not thought) of Jewish revenge—and why not?[35] As an author whose audience crossed ethnic borders, it made sense for Wiesel to suppress an impossible fantasy whose clearest effect would be to alienate Christians. It is only in later writings that Wiesel makes the further move of seeing this failure to take revenge as a sign of Jewish moral triumph—a nearly Christian turning of the other cheek—rather than the unfortunate result of cowardice or realism. In an open letter "To a Young Palestinian Arab," Wiesel compares the Jewish response to their victimization with that of the Palestinians:

> We [survivors] consistently evoked our trials only to remind man of his need to be human—not of his right to punish. On behalf of the dead, we sought consolation, not retribution.
>
> In truth, the lack of violence among these survivors warrants examination. Why deny it? There were numerous victims who, before dying, ordered him or her who would survive to avenge their death. [. . .] And yet . . . with rare exceptions, the survivors forced themselves to sublimate their mandate for revenge.
>
> Whereas you . . .[36]

There is something disingenuous, it seems to me, about Wiesel's description of the Jews as having "sublimate[d] their mandate for revenge." This sublimation, after all, was Wiesel's ticket into the literature of non-Jewish Europe.[37]

Wiesel's second concession was to narrow the target of his hatred to avoid accusing Mauriac or his countrymen of the crimes of complicity or silence. Even more significantly, the survivor redirected his complaints against the Jewish God—while the Christian God remained unscathed. With these moves, Wiesel established channels of communication between Jewish survivor and Christian theologian while ren-

dering the Holocaust harmless for Catholic pieties and French loyalties. The survivor is no longer the enraged seeker of revenge but rather a religiously potent emblem of martyrdom, and Jewish martyrdom in particular.

What Mauriac gave Wiesel in return for this tranformation was the weight of his moral authority and the power of his literary status. Mauriac found Wiesel a publisher, wrote his first and most glowing reviews, even dedicated his *Life of Jesus* to him, the "crucified Jewish child" (!); in short, Mauriac found and secured Wiesel the larger audience he wanted. And in conversation with Mauriac, Wiesel developed a language to talk about the Jewish genocide that could hold the attention of Jews and Christians, a considerable achievement indeed.

A final question, and one that echoes and reverses the question that ends *Un di velt hot geshvign*: Was it worth it? Was it worth translating the Holocaust out of the language of the largest portion of its victims and into the language of those who were, at best, absent, and at worst, complicitous in the genocide? Was it worth "unshattering" the mirror the Yiddish Elie breaks, reviving the image of the Jew as the Nazis wished him to be, as the Christian is prepared to accept him, the emblem of suffering silence rather than living rage? In the complex negotiations that resulted in the manuscript of *Night*, did the astonishing gains make good the tremendous losses? It is over this unspoken question that the culture of Holocaust discourse has arisen and taken shape.

Notes

This paper was helped along its course by many conversations with David Biale and Peter Eli Gordon, both of whom read and commented on early drafts. Karen Adler supplied the French version of Wiesel's work for me.

1 The critical works that examine the theme of silence, generally theologically defined, are numerous. Among the best known of these are André Neher, "Le Silence et l'être: Elie Wiesel," in *L'Exil de la Parole: Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz* (Paris, 1970), 228–45, and Myriam Cohen, *Elie Wiesel: Variations sur le silence* (La Rochelle, 1988).

2 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), 32; originally published as *La Nuit* (Paris, 1958).

3 A. M. Dalbray, "Les Juifs des Silence," *Amif* (November 1967): 1771, quoted in Ellen Fine, *The Legacy of Night* (Albany, N.Y., 1982), 30.

4 Wiesel, "An Interview Unlike Any Other," in *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York, 1979), 15.

5 "An Interview," 19.

6 *Night*, 109.

7 The most common variation on the themes I have outlined above is the banal misreading of *Night* as also presenting a message of "hope."

8 Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York, 1995), 239.

9 Y. Palatitzky, review of Jonas Turkow's *Extinguished Stars* in *Dos Neye Vort* (Buenos Aires, 1955); reprinted in Eliezer Vizel, *Un di velt hot geshvign* (Buenos Aires, 1956), 253 (translation mine).

10 Wiesel writes in *All Rivers*, "I had cut down the original manuscript from 862 pages to the 245 of the published Yiddish edition. [French publisher Jerome] Lindon edited *La Nuit* down to 178" (319). But his earlier description of writing the Yiddish manuscript implies that no revisions were made of the pages he had frantically scribbled "without rereading" (239) before handing them over to the publisher. Wiesel also complains that the original manuscipt of *Un di velt* was never returned to him. These confusing and possibly contradictory reports on the various versions of *Night* have generated a chain of similarly confusing critical comments. Thus, Ellen Fine reports (*Legacy of Night*, 7) that the Yiddish version of *Night* is more than 800 pages long, whereas David Roskies states in *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 301, that "the original Yiddish version is not only four times longer and less unified than its French (and later English) version, but has a different message." It is not clear to me whether Roskies is mistaken about the length or is speaking of the unpublished manuscript, which Wiesel implies was lost. Roskies' very brief summation of the difference between the French and Yiddish contents remains the only comment, to my knowledge, on the editing of the writer's "appeal to fight the Germans and anti-Semites who would consign the Holocaust to oblivion." As Roskies puts it, "Since no one in the literary establishment of the 1950s was ready to be preached to by a Holocaust survivor, existentialist doubt became the better part of valor" (ibid.).

11 *Un di velt*, 7. The critics faithfully echo this description, virtually always referring to Sighet as a "*shtetl*" (see Fine, *Legacy of Night*, 8). Mauriac also calls Sighet "a little Transylvanian town" in his introduction to *Night*, viii.

12 *Un di velt*, 7. Wiesel describes his French publisher's objections to his documentary approach in *All Rivers*: "Lindon was unhappy with my probably too abstract manner of introducing the subject. Nor was he enamored of two pages which sought to describe the premises and early phases of the tragedy. Testimony from survivors tends to begin with these sorts of descriptions, evoking loved ones as well as one's hometown before the annihilation, as if breathing life into them one last time" (319).

13 *Un di velt*, n.p.

14 Wiesel ascribes the choice of the title *La Nuit* to Lindon's editing (see *All Rivers*, 319). Wiesel, however, has so embraced the theologi-

cal and existential principles underlying the change that his original Yiddish title seems strangely uncharacteristic. Thus, one critic mentions the Yiddish title only to suggest that a theological variation of this title, *Un Got hot geshvign*, would have been a more appropriate title for Wiesel's *Twilight* (third volume of the *Night* series).

15 The double way of looking at the book, as literature or memoir, is reflected in the schizophrenic handling of the text by libraries. For example, the University of California at Berkeley library has the English version but not the French or the Yiddish, though it continues to list the Yiddish as the original version of *Night*—an unread ghost haunting the French and English. The Jewish Theological Seminary library responds to the double generic affiliations of the books by shelving *Night* among its other French Jewish literature and *Un di velt* with its Holocaust memoirs and *Yizker Bikher*.

16 *Un di velt*, 244. The French and English versions are nearly identical.

17 Ibid.

18 *La Nuit*, 178.

19 *Night*, 109.

20 *Un di velt*, 244–45. This passage is also partially reproduced, in a somewhat different translation, in *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 320.

21 Mauriac's foreword in *Night*, ix.

22 Ibid., vi.

23 Ibid., vii-viii. In a rather literal-minded comment on Mauriac's account, Wiesel denies his having said that he was at Austerlitz: "[H]aving never been at the Austerlitz station during the Occupation, I could not have said that I was on that train packed with Jewish children. I probably remarked that I had been in a camp with Jewish children" (*All Rivers*, 271). The account and its denial speak volumes for the difference between Mauriac's approach to Jewish history and Wiesel's. For a man who prefers not to distinguish the suffering of Jewish children from the agonies of Christ, the difference between a Transylvanian and a French Jewish child would presumably seem minor indeed.

24 *Night*, viii.

25 Ibid., ix. The insistence that Wiesel is a "child" serves to underline his innocence in both senses, as one who does not deserve the treatment the Nazis accord him (as if adults are less clearly victims!) and as a pure soul whose fall from religious grace Mauriac mourns. It is interesting to me that Elie's age is the basis of his first exchange in the camp, when another prisoner advises him to lie about it: "'Here, kid, how old are you?' It was one of the prisoners who asked me this. I could not see his face, but his voice was tense and weary. 'I'm not quite fifteen yet.' 'No. Eighteen.' 'But I'm not,' I said. 'Fifteen.' 'Fool. Listen to what *I* say'" (*Night*, 28). It also seems significant to me that Wiesel, who was born in September 1928, should have represented his narrator Elie as younger than himself by nearly a year (Wiesel was deported in the spring of 1944) while describing him as exaggerating his age by three years to Dr. Mengele. It is clear what was at stake in seeming older during the selections;

Mauriac's impulse (and perhaps Wiesel's, as well) to see the Jewish victim as a child is rather more complex in its motivations.

26 Mauriac's hierarchy of outrages, in which the loss of faith ranks as worse than the extinguishing of life, appears in similar form among other theologians of the Holocaust. As Amos Funkenstein points out in "Theological Responses to the Holocaust" (in *Perceptions of Jewish History* [Berkeley, 1993], 335), the privileging of religious-theological concerns over the importance of human life, any human life, historically has been both dangerous and unethical. Commenting on post-Holocaust theologians' Heideggerian interest in what he calls "a chimera of the authentic self," Funkenstein writes: "A commitment to higher values above the sanctity of the individual not only distracts from the study of man, but can and did lead to abuses and crimes of much greater extent than selfish self-interest ever perpetrated. Granted, this is not a necessary consequence of commitments to absolutes, but it has often enough been so. Now it matters little whether the higher values were transcendental or immanent, God, fatherland, race, or the ideal society of the future. In the name of all of them crusades were fought, genocides committed, persons degraded" (335).

27 *Night*, x-xi.

28 Ibid., viii.

29 It would also be wrong to ignore the contribution of Wiesel's own narrative to Mauriac's Christological framing. Wiesel enables, if not invites, such a reading, in at least one passage in *Night*—the one Mauriac quotes most fully. Three Jews are being hanged, the middle victim a child who dies agonizingly slowly: "Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is. He is hanging here on this gallows'" (62). Without denying the Christian echoes in this passage, I would argue that the narrator's words here must be read ironically, as a rebuttal to the concept of the religious (Jewish as well as Christian) significance of suffering. To read the strangling child as Christ is to turn the dying child into God, rather than signal that God has died alongside him.

30 "An Interview," 16.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 17.

33 Ibid., 18.

34 Ibid., 19.

35 For a fascinating discussion of post-Holocaust Jewish revenge (and its absense or sublimation), see Berel Lang, "Holocaust Memory and Revenge: The Presence of the Past," *Jewish Social Studies* 2, no. 2 (1996): 1–20.

36 Wiesel, "To a Young Palestinian Arab," in *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York, 1979), 126–27.

37 In some sense, the intifada was a similarly shrewd move on the part of the Palestinians; by throwing stones at soldiers instead of hijacking airplanes or attacking schoolchildren, the Palestinians won a sympathethic audience through American television.