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### Memory and Faith as Reconciliation from the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's *Night*

Before reading Elie Wiesel's 1960 memoir, *Night*, it might be difficult to believe that over six million Jews were systematically murdered in industrial factories of death during an age of unprecedented economic and technological advancement. Only when one has seen the photographs, read the personal accounts, and witnessed the sheer scope of the atrocity can they begin to grasp the grim reality that was the Holocaust. It is first crucial to understand the nature of antisemitism in Germany during WWII. Antisemitism has been present in human culture for centuries with negative stereotypes of Jews as exploiters of gentiles (non-Jewish persons) and enemies of religion remaining fairly constant, while antisemitism's ideological hostility toward Jews with the power to harm them is hardly constant at all, coinciding with pagan, Christian, secular rationalist, and modern racist forms. (Niewyk and Nicosia 67) Just prior to the Holocaust, the interaction of almost two thousand years of European antisemitism and Jewish particularism put the Jews in a vulnerable political and social position as the Nazis rose to power. Jewish people had comparatively high income as lawyers, merchants, or moneylenders which, combined with their support for liberals and communists, garnered immense hostility from the political right. (Niewyk and Nicosia 61) When Adolf Hitler rose to power in 1933, the brutal culmination of antisemitism, racism, eugenics, and extreme nationalism created an ideologically flawed society where Jews were scapegoated by the public and persecuted by an effective police system. (Niewyk and Nicosia 57) Beyond the rampant antisemitism in Germany, the Nazi party's creation of their concentration camps represent the pinnacle of human cruelty and the systematic erasure of human life at an unprecedented scale. While detainment camps were not unheard of

before WWII, the pre-war German camps were mostly used for political intimidation of left wing opponents and social outsiders. (Goeschel and Wachsmann 527) When WWII began, the Nazis conceptualized their “Final Solution” to eradicate the Jews in a process of mass murder at the concentration camps. Through the use of existing ideas and structures, the Nazi concentration camps didn’t “appear like a complete break with German traditions.” (Goeschel and Wachsmann 532) There was no blueprint for the implementation of their hateful ideology, nor for the establishment of the camps. Ultimately, the Nazis blurred the lines between normal and abnormal from the eyes of the German people, and as the camps expanded, so did the death rates. Overcrowding, deprivation, and extreme abuse was exerted on prisoners, only a hint at the horrors to come as millions of Jews would be sent there to die. (Goeschel and Wachsmann 532) While immeasurable innocent people lost their lives to Nazi violence, there were some individuals who survived and reconciled their experience through sharing their stories with the world.

Elie Wiesel survived Auschwitz and lived on to write an honest recounting of his personal experience. He lost his mother, father, and sister to the violence of the camp, but had the willingness and strength to process his memories and share them with the world. Through reading his story, audiences have been able to contemplate and understand his process of reconciliation with the unimaginable suffering he endured. Elie Wiesel reconciles the genocide of his people in the Nazi concentration camps by demonstrating the importance of memory, maintaining his faith, and serving as historical witness to the atrocities so many have chosen to ignore. He illuminates the vital significance of his memory and the legacy of pain he’s endured with:

Never shall I forget that night, the first in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never. (34)

In this passage, Wiesel transitions from narration in the past tense to the present tense, establishing a sense of permanence. While the rest of the book is written in the past tense, Wiesel's use of the present tense illustrates the enduring legacy of the Holocaust and the resilience of his own Jewish heritage. Through the use of repetition, Wiesel emphasizes the importance of memory and reconciliation. By echoing the phrase "never shall I forget" seven times, Wiesel expresses how his memory will endure through time and serve as a monument for those lost to the Holocaust. Furthermore, the precise implementation of seven repetitions in combination with the use of "seven times sealed" is a call to Wiesel's Jewish heritage where seven is the number of days the universe was created in, the number of blessings said at a wedding, as well as the days of mourning following someone's death. This excerpt presents a tribute to the Jewish faith as a whole through a direct reference to Psalm 150 from the Hebrew Bible (Praise the Lord.) Psalm 150 represents a climactic call for everyone to praise God everywhere. Wiesel inverts this piece to describe his own loss of faith at the camps, a place where his God died. At the same time, Wiesel effectively demonizes the "nocturnal silence" as a force that deprived him of "the will to live," referencing the quiet complicity of bystanders throughout WWII as the concentration camps continued to operate. Wiesel has lived through the dangers of silence and makes sure to describe it as a malicious force in *Night*. Through the

simple process of remembering his time at Auschwitz, Wiesel achieves a form of reconciliation against the systematic erasure of his heritage and religion.

In studying the ethical considerations of reading *Night*, Daniel Schwarz of Cornell University identifies Wiesel's biblical style of writing as a tribute to "a Talmudic tradition by which parabolic anecdotes are used to illustrate important themes." (Schwarz 229) In this particular passage, Wiesel describes his struggle with faith "as an epiphanic moment," rather than a "gradual change." This narrative decision gives *Night* the feeling of a biblical text, a further homage to his Jewish lineage, forever silenced by Nazi hatred. As Wiesel constructs his memoir in the style of his people's religion, he clings to their memory in an act of reconciliation. Schwarz also considers the reasons behind Wiesel's writing. Beyond the purposes of "self therapy," and "bearing witness," Schwarz suggests the book represents an "act of homage" (Schwarz 226) as evidenced by Wiesel's dedication "In memory of my parents, and my little sister Tzipora." Wiesel remembers his lost family and immortalizes them through the writing of *Night*, another manifestation of his memory as a reconciliatory process.

Elie Wiesel conveys the reconciliatory power of enduring faith and the collective experience of others with:

[Rabbi Eliahou's son] had felt that his father was growing weak, he had believed that the end was near and had sought this separation in order to get rid of the burden, to free himself from an encumbrance which could lessen his own chances of survival. I had done well to forget that. And I was glad that Rabbi Eliahou should continue to look for his beloved son. And, in spite of myself, a prayer rose in my heart, to that God in whom I no longer believed. My God, Lord of the Universe, give me strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahou's son has done. (91)

In this passage, Wiesel depicts the degeneration of a father-son bond, one of the core themes that tracked his own experience through the camps. He is so affected by the brutal truth of this situation that he is drawn back to faith, despite admitting he could no longer believe in God. In the first sentence, Wiesel demonstrates how survival in the camps forced people to

dissolve their relationships with loved ones, to look out for only themselves. Interestingly, Wiesel's inclusion of "done well to forget that" provides a reversal of his reconciliatory process through memory: he reconciled this dark moment of his experience by willfully forgetting something. His prayer at the end of this passage proves the resilience of his faith in the midst of inhumane cruelty beyond measure. He still chooses to pray for his humanity, despite being entirely deprived of it. By sharing the story of another father-son bond under the torture of the concentration camps, Wiesel expands his reconciliatory retelling to include the perspectives of others who endured the same trauma.

Terence Des Pres, in his work for the journal *Social Research*, reveals how *Night* serves as a "group portrait" for those millions of individuals subjected to the cruelty of the camps. He writes "Survival is a collective act, and so is bearing witness...both expose the illusion of separateness...the survivor's identity includes the dead." (Des Pres 677) Elie Wiesel shares the intricacies of not just his own human experience, but also of those around him who he witnessed perish. In writing *Night*, he achieves his own reconciliation but also makes an attempt to align himself with others' experiences. Through the inclusion of Rabbi Eliahou's abandonment by his son, Wiesel provides a unifying flaw between victims and reconciles his own trauma related to his relationship with his father.

In the chilling conclusion to *Night*, Elie Wiesel reckons with the overwhelming moral death he experienced in the camps and suggests his responsibility to provide testimony of his ordeal so the world can remember and understand. He writes:

One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on 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. (115)

In this final passage from *Night*, Elie Wiesel alludes to his confrontation with himself following his plight and the ultimate resolution to bear witness to the events and share his experience with the world. Mirrors are symbols of self reflection and as Wiesel commits himself to this process he has to come to terms with the incalculable lives taken at Auschwitz. The elimination of his family and heritage is visually personified as his own deathly reflection with his observation of “a corpse gazed back.” This also creates separation between himself and his past. Wiesel achieves reconciliation through distancing himself from the events when he identifies his reflection as an entity outside of himself. Wiesel also switches tenses again from past to present when he implements “has never left me,” another reference to the perpetual nature of his trauma and the responsibility he bears to always remember the ordeal when so many didn’t survive. This passage is perhaps more meaningful when considering Wiesel’s original conclusion, included in his 1995 memoir: *All Rivers Run to the Sea*:

“A skeleton stared back at me. Nothing but skin and bone. It was the image of myself after death. It was at that instant that the will to live awakened within me. Without knowing why, I raised my fist and shattered the glass, along with the image it held... Today, ten years after Buchenwald, I realize that the world forgets. Those who yesterday held their tongues will keep their silence tomorrow. That is why, ten years after Buchenwald, I ask myself the question, Was I right to break that mirror?” (Wiesel 319-320)

Though Wiesel eventually changed the ending of *Night*, this excerpt reveals his defiance of death to be part of his reconciliatory process. When he breaks the mirror, he rages against the innumerable deaths the Holocaust took, characterized by his own starved figure. Wiesel also has to reckon with the world’s tendency to forget, overlook, and outright ignore the tragic history of the Holocaust despite his efforts to bear witness to the atrocities. He identifies silence as an antagonistic force again, something that facilitated the industrial erasure of his people. In the final line, Wiesel challenges his initial notion to attack his reflection as he realizes the need for

the honest testimony of survivors like himself. A crucial element of his reconciliation is his willingness to bear witness and share the events of Auschwitz with the world.

Terence Des Pres also noted the reconciliatory compassion Wiesel demonstrated through writing *Night* as well as the recurring theme of impossible silence and the pressure to “scream” throughout his lifelong work. In studying *Night*, Des Pres claims those who survive an ordeal like the Holocaust “will take with him the burden of speaking for the others. Someone will survive and death will not be absolute. This small pledge is enormously important to people facing extinction. In the survivor’s own case furthermore, it becomes a way to transcend the helplessness with hope and self-respect in the presence of so much affliction.” (Des Pres 678) This contemplation perfectly encapsulates Wiesel’s transcendence of his own trauma through the retelling of other’s stories and the willingness to educate the world on the inhuman horrors he endured. Des Pres goes so far as to suggest the conflict between remaining silent and the urge to “scream” one’s experience lies at the center of all of Wiesel’s writing. His ability to write and share the stories of himself and those killed in the camps allows Wiesel to navigate the divide between the “allegiance of the dead and the care of the living.” (Des Pres 676) By fulfilling his “responsibility” as a survivor and bearing witness to the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel achieves reconciliation.

More than 80 years have passed since the first exterminations took place at Auschwitz. While it can be difficult to remain optimistic during dark times, it is imperative, now more than ever, for the human race to look back on the harrowing tales of those who survived the Holocaust and commit to combating totalitarianism and ideological hatred on a global scale. As the number of living Holocaust survivors dwindles by the day, we must learn from their experiences and honor them in memory.

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