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The Jewish Remembrancer *A Political Reading*

If only I could recapture my father's wisdom, my mother's serenity, my little sister's innocent grace. If only I could recapture the rage of the resistance fighter, the suffering of the mystic dreamer, the solitude of the orphan in a sealed cattle car, the death of each and every one of them. If only I could step out of myself and merge with them. If only I could hold my memory open, drive it beyond the horizon, keep it alive even after my death. I know it isn't possible. But what of it? In my dreams the impossible is not a Jewish concept.

– Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

– Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Imagine two encounters. The first is of a young, diffident Jewish man, living in Paris, eking out a living as a journalist, meeting with a famous French novelist. For a story his newspaper wants him to write, the journalist is attempting to gain access to the French Prime Minister, for he knows that the novelist is intimate with the powerful leader. The year is 1954, the journalist is Elie Wiesel, and the novelist is François Mauriac, and their meeting is charged with drama: a poor Jewish survivor of the Holocaust interviewing a renowned Catholic writer. Elie Wiesel has written of that meeting on more than

one occasion and the story he recounts is how, when confronted by Mauriac's passionate devotion to Jesus, he could not suppress his own indignation at what had happened to his people under the Nazis a scant ten years earlier during World War II. He abruptly leaves Mauriac, but the startled writer pursues Wiesel and interviews him and solicits *his* story. Within a couple of years, Mauriac champions the Jewish writer's testimony about his experience in Auschwitz. Elie Wiesel's vocation as witness then begins in earnest.¹

Now, picture another engagement, over thirty years later. At an official ceremony at the White House, President Ronald Reagan bestows upon this former journalist the Congressional Gold Medal for Lifetime Achievement. Reagan praises the now accomplished novelist and witness to the Holocaust, "Like the Prophets whose words guide us to this day, his words will teach humanity timeless lessons."² At this time, Reagan is involved in a controversy over an impending ceremonial visit to the Bitburg cemetery in West Germany. And on this occasion of receiving such national recognition, Elie Wiesel challenges the American President *not* to go to Bitburg, because his place should instead be with the Jewish victims, not the Nazi SS officers who are buried there.

Here, then, are two major steppingstones in Elie Wiesel's life with powerful elites, one cultural, the other political. In the former instance, Wiesel was an undistinguished journalist just looking for an inside scoop for his paper. In the latter, he had become a celebrated icon speaking up to an American president who did not quite grasp the fervor of Wiesel's commitment to Holocaust remembrance. This book deals with this amazing trajectory of Elie Wiesel, who has become the very symbol of the Holocaust tragedy in his adopted homeland of the United States. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, confidant of and advisor to presidents, author of forty books, Wiesel has acted as a Jewish guardian of memory and an international conscience. Even as he has expressed suspicion about politics, Wiesel has drawn on his own experience to enter the public realm as a witness to atrocity so as to awaken, sensitize, and rebuke ordinary citizens and powerful government leaders the world over.

Themes of a Life

Although Elie Wiesel had published two long volumes of memoirs in his sixties, it is true that he has been telling and retelling his life's story—

with all of its agonizing questions, hesitant responses, and modest initiatives—for more than forty years.³ And although he has become a kind of moral hero in American culture, his existential roots are “over there” in the geography of Eastern Europe, the death camps, and the vanished world of a vibrant Judaism. In novels, essays, reportage, speeches, dialogues, cantatas, dramas, and interviews, Wiesel linked his Holocaust experience both to earlier and subsequent chapters of Jewish history. But in one of the tensions that mark Wiesel’s life and work, this gravitation toward remembering the Holocaust has been matched by a desire to see Jewish history as more than just a series of unending victimizations. As a guardian of Jewish memory, Wiesel’s aim has not been only that of lamentation but also that of celebration. Both modes have been joined in Wiesel’s commitment to storytelling, the one done with great consternation and trepidation, the other with palpable enthusiasm and reverence.

In this section, I introduce three main themes of Wiesel’s life: his childhood in a traditional Judaic culture in Eastern Europe; his traumatic experience in a Nazi death camp and his postwar trials as a survivor and refugee; and his commitment to testimony in a variety of genres.

The Judaic Tradition

In their study of American character *Habits of the Heart*, sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues emphasize the importance of religion and other communities of memory in fostering bonds that might resist the peculiar individualism of American culture.⁴ Sociologist Edward Shils argues more generally for people in contemporary society to nurture a greater sense of tradition, which has been undermined both by modern individualism and nationalism. Shils advocates a healthy respect for “substantive traditionality,” which he describes as “the appreciation of the accomplishments and wisdom of the past and of the institutions impregnated with tradition, as well as the desirability of regarding patterns from the past as valid guides.”⁵ Elie Wiesel’s life and work have been rooted profoundly in such a substantive traditionality, namely, the Judaic community of memory.

Elie Wiesel was born on 30 September 1928 in Sighet, Transylvania, in the Carpathian mountains. The region alternately had been claimed and ruled by Romania and Hungary. Wiesel’s father, Shlomo, was the owner of a grocery store and a leader in Sighet’s Jewish community; he frequently was more immersed in the often-troubled daily affairs of that

community than he was in his son's life. He believed it was important that his son learn modern Hebrew, one indication of the inroads that the modern world was then making into Orthodox Jewish communities.⁶ His mother Sarah encouraged him to pursue a rigorous religious education and she exuded a fundamental confidence:

The Messiah. My poor mother never ceased to demand and await his coming. He was never far from her mind. At night, as she rocked me to sleep, she would sing of her deep conviction that nothing bad would happen to her child, since the Messiah would come in time to protect him. Anti-Semites? Doomed, reduced to impotence. His merest stirring would scare them off. Military service? "Fear not, my child. There will be no more armies." My mother believed this with all her soul. The Jewish people would soon be delivered, never again sending their children to be killed for European emperors and kings.⁷

Because his father was a distant, though respected, figure, Wiesel felt closest to his mother, whom he considered "my sole ally and support. She alone understood me."⁸ Along with his three sisters, Wiesel lived in the polylingual world of Romanian, Hungarian, Hebrew, and, for daily intercourse, Yiddish. Years later, Wiesel testified to his abiding affection for his mother tongue: "I love speaking that language. There are songs that can be sung only in Yiddish, prayers that only Jewish grandmothers can murmur at dusk, stories whose charm and secret, sadness and nostalgia, can be conveyed in Yiddish alone."⁹

In Sighet Wiesel grew up steeped in the Jewish religious tradition. He and his friends arose early in the morning to study the Bible and Talmud. Memorization of texts was privileged in a routine of study that went on for many hours each day. His sensibility was profoundly shaped also by the Hasidic mystical tradition inaugurated by Israel Ba'al Shem Tov in the eighteenth century. In a recent study of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Moshe Rosman contends that "[t]he historical image of the Besht has been exceptionally malleable in the service of ideology. With so little in the way of written sources, traditions could be interpreted, shaped, and rewritten to make the Besht conform to the perceived needs of contemporary reality."¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Wiesel interprets the Hasidic movement and its founder to conform to the needs of a post-Holocaust Judaism: "Our generation resembles that of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Just as in his time, it is necessary today to build on ruins, to hold on to something—another human being, a faith. Hasidism? An antidote to resignation."¹¹ Wiesel's maternal grandfather Doyde Feig introduced Wiesel to the Hasidic path by

recounting the stories of the masters and their disciples: “The enchanting tales of Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav, the parables of the Rebbe of Kotzk, the sayings of the Rebbe of Rizhin, and the witticisms of the Rebbe of Ropshitz: he knew them all, and he taught me to savor them.”¹² Wiesel also experimented audaciously with the secrets of the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah.¹³ Along with his young friends, he experienced an intense mystical yearning for salvation.¹⁴ They met frequently with their master, engaged in spirited incantations, and subjected themselves to ascetic practices, such as fasting, rolling around in the snow, and maintaining strict silence. Wiesel must have appropriated his mother’s love for the Messiah, as he himself recollects, “I was convinced that every Jewish child must either bring the Messiah or become the Messiah.”¹⁵ He was far more attracted to sacred writings than secular subjects in school such that his future path seemed clear: He would become a teacher in a yeshiva, with the modest hope of writing a commentary on one of the traditional texts. With his enthusiasm for mysticism, Wiesel paid little attention to the political events that were then engulfing Europe: “Tragedy loomed, but life went on. I paid little attention to the outside world. I was growing up, maturing, learning more difficult and obscure texts. Hider’s howling failed to penetrate my consciousness.”¹⁶

Whereas other Jewish youth of his time were preoccupied with the secular variations of messianism in Zionism and Communism, Wiesel’s own adolescent convictions were traditional and mystical, and these continued to influence his own interpretations of contemporary social and political events.¹⁷ His devout love for the Jewish people was nurtured by the substantial inheritance he received in Sighet’s stable community. His parents, grandfather, and teachers; the Bible, Talmud, and Hasidism; modern and classical Hebrew and Yiddish; mysticism and messianism—all of these contributed to the formation of Wiesel’s intensely Judaic worldview. This world of childhood has remained precious to him and often he has evaluated his adult actions by making reference to the innocent child he once was: “Sometimes I feel that the child accompanies me, questions me, judges me.”¹⁸ In his 1995 memoir, Wiesel extended his identification with children to all those exterminated by the Nazis: “To this day I am shaken when I see a child, for behind him I glimpse other children. Starving, terrified, drained, they march without a backward glance toward truth and death—which are perhaps the same.”¹⁹ Indeed, Wiesel would come to feel a lacerating nostalgia for this world that was eradicated in the Nazis’ Final Solution.

Incomparable Trauma

In his early years, Wiesel felt a special affinity for the Passover celebration. Many decades later, he wrote a commentary on the traditional ritual in which he admitted to a profound shift in his own understanding of the Seder, because Passover was the last Jewish holiday Wiesel spent with his family in Sighet before the Nazis invaded. As an adult, Wiesel recited the prayers and engaged in the rituals, but he acknowledges that “[a] lifetime separates me from the child I once was. Today I know that happiness can never be complete. The joyousness of this holiday is so tinged with melancholy that it seems more like a time of sadness.”²⁰ After Passover 1944, Wiesel, his family, and townspeople joined millions of other European Jews in suffering the relentless cruelty of the Nazis and their accomplices.

Wiesel had been well acquainted with anti-Semitism in his hometown. Churches filled him with apprehension, and he knew that beatings of Jews were likely at Christmas and Easter. And even though Wiesel’s mother maintained her fervent hope in the protective powers of the Messiah, Sighet’s citizens witnessed omens of terror. As early as 1942, Wiesel’s teacher, Moshe, had been deported from Sighet; he had survived a mass killing of Jews and returned to warn his people of the Nazis’ murderous plans. Moshe’s agitated testimony largely was ignored or dismissed by the town’s Jewish population. Sighet’s Jews could not believe that Hitler could eliminate Jews throughout Europe and so turned their attention to other matters, such as the hopes of diplomacy or Zionism.²¹ By the spring of 1944, the Nazis began their plan to exterminate the large Jewish population of Hungary. Jews were stripped of all their rights, forced into a ghetto, and then deported to Poland. It was in the Sighet ghetto, Wiesel later marvels, that he “truly began to love the Jews of my town. Throughout the ordeal they maintained their dignity as human beings and as Jews. Imprisoned, reduced to subhuman status, they showed themselves still capable of spiritual greatness.”²²

Wiesel and his family endured the long railroad journey to a place of which they had never heard, Auschwitz. He and his father were immediately separated from his mother and three sisters. During his first night in the camp, Wiesel was shocked beyond belief to see how Jewish children were being thrown alive into burning pits. Forty years after the war ended, Wiesel gave voice to the perduring agony from that first night:

And if I bear within me a nameless grief and disillusionment, a bottomless despair, it is because that night I saw good and thoughtful Jewish children, bearers of mute words and dreams, walking into darkness before being consumed by the flames. I see them now, and I still curse the killers, their accomplices, the indifferent spectators who knew and kept silent, and Creation itself, Creation and those who perverted and distorted it. I feel like screaming, howling like a madman so that that world, the world of the murderers, might know it will never be forgiven.²³

Wiesel worked as a slave laborer in the Auschwitz-Buna camp, often accompanied by his stoic father, whose presence was enough to keep Wiesel alive. They and the other prisoners suffered the endless affliction of beatings, meager food rations, brutal humiliations, and the ever-present specter of death in the “selections” that led to the gas chambers and crematoria. When it was clear that the Russian Army would soon overtake Auschwitz in January 1945, the Nazis forced their captives to engage in a long march through the deadly winter cold toward German soil. Countless people died from starvation, exhaustion, and beatings along the march from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, including Wiesel’s father. Buchenwald finally was liberated by American troops in April 1945, and Wiesel recovered in a hospital and faced dangers even there—the U.S. soldiers did not know that to give the emaciated survivors food with fat could prove deadly.

Wiesel presumed that no one in his family had survived and the thought of returning to Sighet was more than he could bear. Upon the invitation of French General Charles de Gaulle, Wiesel and others in a contingent of young Jewish survivors accepted an offer of resettlement in France. He soon learned that his two older sisters also survived. With home now being a French orphanage, Wiesel began his life over by resuming his religious studies:

I rededicated myself to the study of the sacred works. Spontaneously, without thinking about it, I recovered my religious fervor, perhaps as a way of closing the parentheses on my recent past. Most of all, I needed to find my way again, guided by one certainty: However much the world had changed, the Talmudic universe was still the same. No enemy could silence the disputes between Shammai and Hillel, Abbaye and Rava.²⁴

He also continued his mystical quests with the itinerant genius Shushani, who was said to know thirty languages and who also taught the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Wiesel and his brilliant, inscrutable teacher might have spent weeks studying one page of Talmud, and it was from

these exhilarating encounters in France that Wiesel admitted, “It is to him I owe my constant drive to question, my pursuit of the mystery that lies within knowledge and of a darkness hidden within light.”²⁵ During these first years in France, he worked as a Hebrew teacher and choir-master. In addition to maintaining this continuity with his past, Wiesel made a necessary linguistic and cultural break: He began to learn French. For Wiesel, the French language “meant a new home. The language became a haven, a new beginning, a new possibility, a new world. To start expressing myself in a new language was a defiance.”²⁶ He studied at the Sorbonne in the late forties and discovered the postwar philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, whose existentialist doctrines, such as humanity’s inescapable decision to confer meaning in an absurd world, would later give Wiesel a resource for reckoning with the destruction of his family, hometown, and culture.²⁷

It would take years before Wiesel articulated his experience of what he called the Kingdom of Night. Prior to his twentieth birthday, he had experienced being a victim intended for extermination; he had witnessed humanity’s depravity and indifference; he had survived torture and hunger; he had become a refugee who could not return home because home had been destroyed; he had endured poverty as a young refugee in France; and he had faced the uncertainties and awkwardness of embracing a new language and culture. Much later, as an adult, he would affirm in no uncertain terms:

The Holocaust was the greatest event in my life, and I think the greatest event in the life of my people, and I think the greatest event in the life of mankind. I believe that that event cannot be compared to any other, should not be compared to any other, and should not be invoked in vain. It has a special status. It is a mystery whose parallel may only be the one of Sinai when something was revealed to mankind.²⁸

In this formulation, Wiesel’s mystical sensibilities were joined to the experience of physical, emotional, cultural, and religious trauma. In his own study of Wiesel, Michael Berenbaum asserted, “Wiesel’s fundamental experience is one of absence in a world that was once pregnant with presence. Where Wiesel formerly experienced God, he has come to encounter the void.”²⁹ However, Wiesel claimed in his memoir, “I have never renounced my faith in God. I have risen against His justice, protested His silence and sometimes His absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it.”³⁰ Wiesel could not break with his precious patrimony and he attempted to maintain some continuity with his

youthful mysticism in fidelity to his murdered family and people.³¹ But in the 1950s Wiesel began to embark upon a very different world in France from the religious one that shaped him as a child and teenager.

The Duty of Testimony

With his fluency in modern Hebrew, Wiesel found employment as a Paris correspondent for an Israeli newspaper. This work afforded him many opportunities to travel, including assignments to South America, North Africa, and India. In 1954 Wiesel received an assignment to interview French Prime Minister Pierre Mendel-France. Wiesel hoped that he could gain access to the statesman through his associate, the famous novelist François Mauriac. During Wiesel's first meeting with Mauriac, the Catholic writer began to talk about his faith in Jesus. Soon, however, the normally soft-spoken Wiesel could not restrain himself. He challenged Mauriac's faith in that one Jew who had been murdered two thousand years ago and whose death still moved hundreds of millions of people worldwide, whereas, just ten years earlier, millions of Jews were murdered with scarcely a protest. Wiesel then left Mauriac, but the novelist pursued and implored Wiesel to come back and speak of his experiences. Wiesel confided that he had decided not to speak about his time in the camps until he had maintained a vow of silence for ten years after liberation; he wanted to be sure he was ready to do justice to the event. Mauriac countered, "I think that you are wrong. You are wrong not to speak. . . . Listen to the old man that I am: one must speak out."³²

However, as Naomi Seidman pointed out in an insightful study of Wiesel's first efforts at writing-to-remember, he had already written a long manuscript in Yiddish on the events that marked the demise of his family and people.³³ Before the encounter with Mauriac, Wiesel learned that this Yiddish work had been accepted for publication in Argentina, to be published in 1956 with the title *Un di velt hot geshvign* (*And the World Stayed Silent*). Eventually, Wiesel pared down his Yiddish memoir and translated it into French. Mauriac became a major advocate for the young journalist by using his own publishing contacts and authorial prestige to see that Wiesel's memoir would be published in France. Wiesel expressed gratitude:

I owe him a lot. He was the first person to read *Night* after I reworked it from the original Yiddish. He submitted it to his own publisher, promising to write a preface for the book, to speak of it in the press, and to support it

with all the considerable means at his disposal. “No one’s interested in the death camps anymore,” he was told. “It won’t sell.”³⁴

Thus, the initially disconcerting encounter with the devout French Catholic was instrumental in securing a major literary consecration for Wiesel. His memoir was published as *La Nuit* in 1958 and subsequently translated into English as *Night*. Perhaps more than any other, this volume introduced U.S. readers to the shattering effect of the death camps on a young person, his family, and faith.³⁵

Throughout the 1950s, Wiesel earned his livelihood as a journalist. Often called upon to confront the great events of the day, he was frustrated with political issues, and considered himself a political naïf:

Don’t ask me how I became a journalist. I don’t know. I needed to do something, so I became a reporter and managed to fool everybody. I wrote about politics but understood nothing about politics. I still don’t. I wrote about anything under the sun, because I had to, without understanding what I was writing.³⁶

Although Wiesel was enchanted with the new State of Israel, he did not emigrate there. Upon recovering from an accident, for which he was hospitalized in New York in 1956, he decided to begin the process of becoming a U.S. citizen. While living in New York as a UN correspondent for an Israeli paper, he also wrote for the Yiddish *Jewish Daily Forward*. In addition to this journalism, Wiesel wrote novels—*Dawn*, *The Accident*, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, *The Gates of the Forest*—that explored the painful realities confronting Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.³⁷ In 1965 Wiesel visited the Soviet Union to witness and report on the plight of the harassed Russian Jews and he worked tirelessly to mobilize the American Jewish community to take up their cause.³⁸ Beginning in 1966, he became a popular lecturer on the Hasidic movement (as well as the Bible, Talmud, and other Judaic themes) at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York. He eventually collected these lectures in a series of books that helped introduce this branch of Jewish mysticism to a wider American audience.³⁹ Although Wiesel was not immersed in the steadfast orthodoxy of the Hasidic Jews in New York, he maintained a fervent connection to the Hasidic movement, largely based on his devotion to his grandfather and his upbringing in that tradition.⁴⁰ He also began to meet weekly with the renowned scholar Saul Lieberman to study Talmud.

In the spring of 1967 the world Jewish community was shocked by

Arab threats to wipe out the Israeli Jews. That this was the second time in a generation that Jews had received a promise of impending extermination jolted the American Jewish community into giving greater public support to Israel as well as confronting the calamity of the Holocaust. When the war broke out, Wiesel traveled to Israel fearful of witnessing the final chapter of Jewish history. Instead, he was mesmerized by the swift Israeli victory and the army's capture of the Old City of Jerusalem. Because of America's enthusiasm for Israel's military prowess and the non-Jewish public's nascent recognition of the centrality of the Holocaust and Israel to Jewish life, Wiesel became an increasingly sought after speaker on cultural, religious, historical, and contemporary issues. His 1968 novel *A Beggar in Jerusalem* won the prestigious Prix Médicis, and the English translation was the first of Wiesel's novels to be reviewed widely and favorably.⁴¹ In 1969 in Jerusalem he married Marion Rose, who became the translator of his works. In 1970 he published *One Generation After*, a collection of essays that articulated the Jewish survivor's burden of memory and the excruciating ordeal of choosing between silence—because that which was experienced in the death camps could not be expressed in speech—and testimony—at the risk of the message falling on deaf ears or being trivialized by sensation-seeking media.⁴²

In the 1970s Wiesel enthusiastically identified himself with Jewish causes, especially the plight of the Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union. In 1972 his son was born; he decided then to work more vigorously to build a world worthy for his son to inherit, particularly by calling attention to a variety of non-Jewish issues of human suffering, from state-sponsored violence to starvation.⁴³ He also stopped journalistic work and embraced a new career as a professor. At City University of New York, he was Distinguished Professor of Judaic Studies from 1972 until 1976 when he became the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities at Boston University. He maintained an arduous schedule of twelve-to-sixteen-hour workdays, in a succession of traveling, teaching, writing, and speaking. Throughout all of this productivity, Wiesel's work exemplified both a hermeneutics of suspicion and generosity.⁴⁴ Because of the enormity of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, Wiesel maintained a suspicion toward God from within the Judaic tradition, even as he practiced a generous retrieval of that tradition, most evident in his reinterpretation of the tales of the Hasidic masters he had heard at his grandfather's side. Indeed, Wiesel's ambition was not to offer a critical perspective on these tales and teachers but rather to pay

them respect and honor.⁴⁵ In the preface to *Messengers of God*, a book of commentaries on biblical figures, Wiesel affirmed his *modus operandi*:

And so, faithful to his promise, the storyteller does nothing but tell the tale: he transmits what he received, he returns what was entrusted to him. His story does not begin with his own; it is fitted into the memory that is the living tradition of his people. The legends he brings are the very ones we are living today.⁴⁶

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Wiesel committed himself to transmit, testify, and remember in the genres of journalism, novels, Hasidic tales, biblical narratives, and ethical commentaries. He had come full circle, trying to hold together the glories of the Jewish tradition and the ordeals of his own generation.

As Wiesel continued his propagation of remembrance in the 1970s, he extended his associations beyond fellow Jews to include Christian intellectuals. The official Catholic world had become more open to the Jewish religion after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and shortly thereafter some Christians began to develop a strong critique of Christian anti-Semitism.⁴⁷ Wiesel had a profound effect on several U.S. Christian thinkers, precipitating in their lives something akin to a theological and ethical conversion. In 1978 Harry James Cargas collected testimonies from Jews and Christians as to Wiesel's import, *Responses to Elie Wiesel: Critical Essays by Major Jewish and Christian Scholars*, while Alvin Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg added their book, *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel*.⁴⁸ In 1979 Christian philosopher John Roth, in his book, *A Consuming Fire: Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust*, also testified to Wiesel's unsettling yet inspiring effect on him.⁴⁹ In 1983 Robert McAfee Brown added his study, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*.⁵⁰ Thereafter, various symposia and journals were dedicated to surveying Wiesel's work and its theological, literary, and ethical implications. Sometimes seeing Wiesel as a kind of "rebbe," or Hasidic master himself, his Christian disciples played an important role in promoting his works and furthering his renown in American Christian communities.⁵¹

By 1978 Wiesel had become so recognized as a powerful speaker on Holocaust-related themes that President Jimmy Carter invited him to chair his Commission on the Holocaust.⁵² Wiesel's charge was to lead a group of religious and civic leaders to envision an appropriate way of commemorating the European Holocaust on the national mall in Washington, DC. In this way, Wiesel's own objective of Holocaust

remembrance was given powerful backing by a directive from the Executive Office. In 1979 he was appointed chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council and thereafter played a key role in helping to establish Holocaust Remembrance Days in Washington, DC, with these annual services attracting the participation of government leaders and officials. In subsequent years, he received one award after another: the Congressional Gold Medal (1985), the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1986), and the Nobel Peace Prize (1986), all of which enhanced his fame in the United States and around the world. In these national and international distinctions, Wiesel was lauded for his pursuit of remembering the Holocaust and speaking out on behalf of contemporary victims. Such eminence gave Wiesel much greater access to media, heads of state, and the general public.

He put his Nobel Prize money to work in a Foundation for Humanity that supported various humanitarian projects. He also organized international conferences on the theme Anatomy of Hate, hoping to illumine this human penchant for domination.⁵³ He marched with Polish Solidarity leader Lech Walesa; conferred with Czech President Václav Havel and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev; and advised U.S. President Bill Clinton. He traveled to scores of universities to receive honorary doctorates and found time to continue to write novels.⁵⁴ Throughout this period, he addressed human rights issues from South Africa, Bosnia, Burma, and Tibet to Central America, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Acclaimed as a “messenger to all humanity” in McAfee Brown’s honorific phrase, Wiesel achieved an unusual kind of celebrity in American culture, that of iconic witness to a twentieth-century atrocity.⁵⁵ In addition to counseling the cultural and political elite, Wiesel shared his message of morality and memory in the broader American popular culture by appearing on Oprah Winfrey’s talk-show and excerpting his memoirs in the Sunday newspaper supplement *Parade Magazine*.⁵⁶

Whether it is delivered before enthralled university audiences or the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Elie Wiesel’s public message has been rooted deeply in his own life history.⁵⁷ As a Jew, Wiesel has interpreted the world principally from his formative immersion in Judaic religiosity. As a survivor, he escaped from the Nazi attempt to make Europe *Judenrein* and he struggled to find ways to make a new life for himself in France and the United States. As a witness, he has felt compelled to challenge others to remember the Holocaust, in fidelity to the Jewish dead. In his study of how the Holocaust came to assume such a

prominent place in American life, historian Peter Novick acknowledged a central place for Elie Wiesel as the emblematic survivor of the European catastrophe. Novick asked what he considered an “unanswerable question”: “What would talk of the Holocaust be like in America if a skeptical rationalist like Primo Levi, rather than a religious mystic like Wiesel, had been its principal interpreter?”⁵⁸ As a venerated spokesman, Wiesel has used his acknowledged moral authority to draw attention to urgent issues of violence and suffering. In the analysis that follows, one can more fully appreciate Wiesel’s strengths and limitations in his many social and political interventions by keeping in mind these biographical data of mysticism, trauma, and testimony. For, in an essay on why he writes, Wiesel noted, “I owe the dead my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself.”⁵⁹ It is this refusal to betray the dead that also has propelled Wiesel into social and political activism and led him to attempt to take sides with victims in opposition to their oppressors.

The Political Economy of Worthy and Unworthy Victims

Elie Wiesel’s work has been examined from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints, including literary and theological studies, but there has yet to be a sustained analysis of Wiesel’s mission of Holocaust remembrance and social engagement.⁶⁰ In their focus on Wiesel’s challenge to Jewish or Christian theology, many writers typically read Wiesel’s message and practice, its production and reception, apart from the social-political context of U.S. domestic and foreign affairs. Colin Davis came closer than many, though, in locating Wiesel politically:

This concern with general moral issues and the attribution of universal significance to individual instances of suffering lie behind Wiesel’s consistent claims to be uninterested in and ignorant about politics: “I distrust politics—moreover I don’t understand anything about it”; “politics is not my field.” He insists that his campaigning is ethical rather than political, and this perhaps helps to explain the uncontroversial nature of many of his interventions, at least for a Western readership. Because the position from which he speaks cannot easily be identified as, say, left- or right-wing, then both left- and right-wing readers and activists can find reason to support him: he criticizes Communist and Fascist regimes, champions the cause of

the oppressed and the rights of the individual, opposes state violence and individual acts of terrorism, and attacks Western indifference as a whole without singling out particular nations, leaders, or parties. In short, it is easy to find oneself in agreement with him.⁶¹

However, this study focuses on such issues as Wiesel's refusal to "single out" as well as on the political nature of many of these supposedly apolitical interventions. My aim is to analyze the stringency either/or in Wiesel's discourse, practice, and evolving social location: Either a political silence before victimization (which benefits the powerful) or a practical solidarity (which sides with the victims of power).

In their lucid study *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., identified three models of social analysis and social change: the traditional, liberal, and radical. Naturally, writers coming to Wiesel with either a liberal or conservative social analysis would make a very different interpretation and arrive at a dissimilar assessment of his work than the one offered here. The authors stressed that social analysis "never provides the complete picture. However it does offer a set of important questions that help to expose the basic contours of the reality before us."⁶² The contribution of radical social analysis, these authors contended, is its systematic interrogation of the political, economic, and cultural structures of society. Such radical analysis increasingly has been used as a tool in recent religious social ethics.⁶³ Indeed, it has been the key, if also controversial, contribution of Latin American liberation theology to employ radical social analysis in its investigations of capitalism and third world suffering.⁶⁴ Other North American Christian theologians and ethicists have complemented their biblical, theological, and ethical tasks with radical social analysis in their studies of faith and society.⁶⁵ For example, the feminist ethicist Beverly Harrison noted in one of her essays that "the particular social theories most employed [traditionally] in religious ethics, whether informed by a neoconservative or a liberal ideology, mask the existence of the modern economy."⁶⁶

The U.S. political analysts Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman have focused a great deal of their attention on the function and ethical implications of political economy in the United States.⁶⁷ Both men have been strong critics of U.S. foreign policy since the Vietnam War and have contributed their intellectual skills to popular movements organizing for social change. Chomsky has commented that such popular movements since the 1960s have helped to raise the moral level of the country by asking unprecedented critical questions about long-neglected dimensions of

U.S. history, such as the treatment of Native Americans and the persistence of U.S. intervention in the affairs of other countries.⁶⁸ In three coauthored works as well as their numerous individual studies, Herman and Chomsky have made a radical critique of what they termed the U.S. political economy of human rights and the mass media.

In a two-volume 1979 work, they described how, since World War II, the U.S. government organized under its control and protection a global system of allies and clients whose economic and military elites regularly controlled their own populations through terror.⁶⁹ These third world associates (Marcos in the Philippines, Duvalier in Haiti, and Somoza in Nicaragua immediately come to mind) were friendly to U.S.-based corporations and provided impressive incentives for them to do business in their countries. According to Chomsky and Herman, what drives U.S. foreign policy is the quest for “economic freedom—meaning freedom for U.S. business to invest, sell, and repatriate profits—and its two basic requirements, a favorable investment climate and a specific form of stability.”⁷⁰ In another work, Chomsky has allowed one of the elites to speak to these issues with impressive candor. He quoted the State Department’s George Kennan in the once-classified Policy Planning Study 23 from 1948:

We have about 50% of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3% of its population. . . . In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction. . . . We should cease to talk about vague and—for the Far East—unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.⁷¹

The kind of desired stability necessitates the elimination of disruptive elements, such as dissident students, priests and nuns organizing peasants, labor unions, and investigative journalists. Many of these U.S. allies were National Security States that employed torture against their own populations to maintain this requisite control. Because this state of affairs is not likely to inspire the confidence of the American population, the ideological institutions frame U.S. policy as invariably promoting the causes of justice, human rights, and democracy. The mainstream press, much of

academic scholarship, and intellectual commentary generally constructs and conforms to a doctrinal system that serves established state and corporate power and fails to expose that power to the kind of sustained, critical scrutiny that it naturally expends on official enemies.⁷² The recent past and current events regularly are shaped in a manner conducive to upholding the position that the United States pursues an essentially benevolent role in international affairs, although it may occasionally fail in this unique quest because of individual error or misjudgment.⁷³

Chomsky and Herman contended that in the social-historical context of the United States in the Vietnam War era there were three kinds of atrocities, or bloodbaths, that occurred in the world: benign, constructive, and nefarious. “Benign” bloodbaths were those about which the U.S. government did not much care, because they did not affect primary U.S. elite interests of “maintaining the disparity.” Accordingly, these violations of human rights did not arouse the U.S. government or political commentators. “Constructive” bloodbaths were committed by the United States or by its trusted allies (and so supported by the United States), because they served elite interests in preserving the kind of stability noted above. In the ideological system, these atrocities were ignored, downplayed, or even denied as atrocities because they revealed the values and interests operative in the real world of policymaking. “Nefarious” bloodbaths were those outrages committed by official enemies of the United States. These abuses were denounced loudly in the U.S. press and, perhaps, exaggerated if the truth alone was not enough to instill in U.S. citizens the proper fear and contempt for the perpetrators. The demonization of these enemies also served the domestic function of making the United States stand out even more favorably in comparison to such evil countries (as well as justifying ever-increasing “defensive” military budgets to contain these threats).

According to Chomsky and Herman, the war that the United States led against Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia during the 1960s and 1970s constituted a “constructive” bloodbath: Elite media and scholarship faithfully supported the war effort in the struggle against Communism. Also, General Suharto’s mass murder of up to a million Indonesians and his openness to U.S. investors was much admired in the West and also was considered “constructive.”⁷⁴ Post-1975 Vietnam and Cambodia (under Pol Pot) were framed as “nefarious” bloodbaths, with the media effacing the role of the United States during its war in destroying much of pre-1975 Indochina. East Timor, under a brutal occupation by Indonesia, was

an example of a “benign” bloodbath; many U.S. intellectuals who denounced the Khmer Rouge said nothing about the slaughters committed by a major Western ally. The authors point out that the extent of attention to one atrocity (say, Cambodia) over another (East Timor) is not accidental. The reason for the selective indignation is the simple criterion of utility to U.S. power. The ideological institutions focus on the crimes, real or alleged, of enemies and minimize those atrocities committed, supported, or tolerated by the United States.

In their 1988 study *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Herman and Chomsky elaborated on a “propaganda model” to explain how U.S. media coverage favors government-corporate interest.⁷⁵ This model proposed that the news that citizens receive must pass through several filters, two of which are the ownership by wealthy persons and companies and the profit orientation of the media corporations. In a subsequent essay on the model’s cogency, Edward Herman emphasized that the propaganda model

does suggest that the mainstream media, as elite institutions, commonly frame news and allow debate only within the parameters of elite interests; and that where the elite is really concerned and unified, and/or where ordinary citizens are not aware of their own stake in an issue or are immobilized by effective propaganda, the media will serve elite interests uncompromisingly.⁷⁶

In a case study of how the media participate in propaganda campaigns, Herman and Chomsky used the paired expression “worthy and unworthy victims” to show how the government and mainstream media distinguished categories of people suffering from violence and repression.⁷⁷ Herman clarified this use of terms: “We used the concepts of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ victims to describe this dichotomization, with a trace of irony, as the differential treatment was clearly related to political and economic advantage, rather than anything like actual worth.”⁷⁸ Thus, “worthy victims” are the victims of our official enemies and their nefarious bloodbaths; their plight merits substantial, outraged, and even distorted coverage. Comparably, one could identify “worthy refugees” as those who flee from Communist terror and are welcomed to the United States as further proof of Communist inhumanity. Similarly, “worthy dissidents” are those like Andrei Sakharov and Václav Havel whose heroism under Communism receives expressions of praise and solidarity from Western intellectuals.

But “unworthy victims” are those people who suffer from policies of

the United States or its allies. That is, they are unworthy of our attention and concern, reflected in the media's minuscule, sporadic reporting in which U.S. responsibilities are minimized or denied. Correspondingly, refugees who flee from the terrors of U.S. allies are deemed not welcome, because they might tell the wrong story about why they fled their homelands. Also, dissidents from the U.S. sphere of influence do not merit impassioned editorials, television coverage, or congressional admiration. Herman and Chomsky maintained that

the observable pattern of indignant campaigns and suppressions, of shading and emphasis, and of selection of context, premises, and general agenda, is highly functional for established power and responsive to the needs of the government and major power groups. A constant focus on victims of communism helps convince the public of enemy evil and sets the stage for intervention, subversion, support for terrorist states, an endless arms race, and military conflict—all in a noble cause. At the same time, the devotion of our leaders and media to this narrow set of victims raises public self-esteem and patriotism, as it demonstrates the essential humanity of country and people.⁷⁹

One of the themes of this work is how Elie Wiesel and the Jewish victims of Nazism went from being “unworthy victims” in the 1940s to “worthy victims” in the United States in the late 1970s.⁸⁰ Indebted to Herman and Chomsky's radical interpretative framework and their extensive documentation, as well as that of other scholars and activists, I raise in this book different social, political, and cultural questions about Wiesel's work of remembrance and responsibility than have heretofore been addressed by his generally admiring Jewish and Christian interpreters.

In an interview with Harry James Cargas, Elie Wiesel expressed his concern that our response to today's victims not be selective: “Some people are sensitive only to one category of victims and not to the others. That is wrong. . . . If one is sensitive to one injustice, one must be sensitive to all injustice, which will never be at the expense of others.”⁸¹ Surely, this constitutes an immensely demanding job description. But one is confronted with the sobering reality of having only so much time and energy. How does one respond to so many cases of victimization that occur daily throughout the world? Noam Chomsky offered a helpful perspective on this issue of focus and responsibility:

My own concern is primarily the terror and violence carried out by my own state, for two reasons. For one thing, because it happens to be the larger

component of international violence. But also for a much more important reason than that; namely that I can do something about it. So even if the U.S. was responsible for 2 percent of the violence in the world, it would be that 2 percent I would be primarily responsible for. And that is a simple ethical judgment. That is, the ethical value of one's actions depends on their anticipated and predictable consequences. It is very easy to denounce the atrocities of someone else. That has about as much ethical value as denouncing atrocities that took place in the 18th century. The point is that the useful and significant political actions are those that have consequences for human beings. And those are overwhelmingly the actions which you have some way of influencing and controlling, which means for me, American actions.⁸²

Moral responsibility toward victims has been a chief theme in Elie Wiesel's public work of testifying, teaching, writing, and engaging. I now turn to an early stage of Wiesel's career, long before he received presidential accolades and expressions of Christian repentance, when he began to serve as the emissary of the unworthy Jewish victims and to criticize the bystanders who had done nothing to interfere with genocide.