

²⁵Paul De Man. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN*. Vol. 94, No. 5 (December, 1979) 922.

²⁶Elie Wiesel. "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future;" *Judaism*. Vol. 16 (Summer, 1967) :281.

²⁷Idinopulos. "The Mystery of Suffering." 58.

²⁸Harry James Cargas. "Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust." *Commonweal*. Vol. 103, No. 19 (September 10, 1976) 596.

Critique

It is not exactly a guarded secret that Jews, for three or four thousand years, have questioned who they were, who they are, and who they are going to be as individuals and as members of the various groups within which they associate. And through those many centuries they have often cried out in anguish and ambivalence to their God. Elie Wiesel, who writes with great power and also great agony, is certainly not the first writer to express these themes. Nor is the German Holocaust with all of its unspeakable and unfathomable horrors the first event to evoke these emotions. Having witnessed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, for example, the prophet Jeremiah, pondered these problems and sent a message to Jews who had been carried off into captivity in Babylon. Essentially Jeremiah's message was that God is everywhere. The significance of this statement, beyond the fire and brimstone of sermons and the finesse of the endless Talmudic debates, is that being Jewish is a matter which transcends time and space and that the values of Judaism are universal. Fundamentally Wiesel says that too, though the pain with which he speaks and the implications of his message are even more horrifying to us because the space and the time about which he speaks are closer at hand.

In her essay focused on Elie Wiesel's book, Culp provides more a book report on *Night* than an interdisciplinary insight into the facts and ramifications of Wiesel's internment at Auschwitz. To be sure *Night* is not considered *in vacuo*. Culp draws on a number of sources, indicated in her notes, in an attempt to demonstrate her basic theses that (1) Wiesel's book is a memoir rather than an autobiography, and (2) that Wiesel believes that God was inoperative at Auschwitz.

Whether Wiesel's book is an autobiography, a memoir, a fictional account, or, for that matter, an ethnographic or sociological study, is a matter of considerable scholarly interest. Discussion of this question

might elucidate the author's background, biases, experiences, and resulting perspectives. The consideration might also reveal the quality of the data base and the significance of the conclusions whether they be philosophical or aesthetic communications or the end products of strict scientific testing within the Aristotelian logic system. Ultimately, after we fit a piece of writing into our preconceived categories of "autobiography," "memoir," or "fiction," we have to ask ourselves some questions. What is the significance of this categorization? What perspectives does the piece give us in understanding human behavior? Such discussions are often heated and the resulting answers are not always clear. Anthropologists, sociologists, and specialists in the study of literature, for example, started arguing over the nature and meaning of the writings of Carlos Castaneda immediately upon the publication of *The Teachings of Don Juan*. The subsequent publication of *A Separate Reality*, *Journey to Ixtlan*, *Tales of Power*, and *The Second Ring of Power* have fanned the flames of the controversy. Questions as to Castaneda's field methods, the accuracy of his descriptions, and the specific tribal affiliation of his informants are legitimate and germane beyond mere curiosity. However, there are matters of greater import in attempting to understand human behavior via Castaneda's works. If nothing else, one can get some glimpses into the difficulties of understanding individuals and groups of people whose world-views are different from one's own *Weltanschauung*. In discussing *Night*, Culp presents some convincing arguments that Wiesel's book goes beyond an autobiographical account or a *Selbstbesinnung* to the realm of a memoir or *Bildungsroman*. Culp thus concludes that Wiesel has performed the functions of the observer/artist as well as the historian/theologian. While this statement is provocative and challenging, the ultimate significance of this knowledge is not articulated in Culp's essay. Does this conclusion, as stated, help us in various disciplines better understand Jews or the nature of cross-cultural perceptions of various ethnic and minority groups?

Culp's second concern is demonstrating her thesis that Wiesel believes that God was inoperative at Auschwitz. Identifying as a Jew and having experienced the Holocaust, Wiesel himself says there is no answer to that consummate question. In so doing, Wiesel joins a long line of people who have identified or been identified as Jews and who have experienced atrocities, borne pain, and posed questions from the depths of their despair. The line extends back centuries, even millennia, from the Holocaust in Germany, to pogroms in Eastern Europe, the Inquisition in Spain, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the exile in Babylon. If potsherds and stone artifacts could speak so specifically, the line would undoubtedly

extend beyond the written records of history into the periods of prehistory. In other words, there are matters here which, if not completely universal, do transcend time and space. Jews may doubt or even deny the existence of their God. Yet their attendant ways of behaving more often reflect a belief in a superorganic force or being, one of the tenets of Judaism.

The *Kaddish*, as Wiesel so poignantly expresses, is just one of the manifestations of this paradox. Culp recognizes this fact but does not exploit it fully. The *Kaddish*, as a prayer and a ritual, represents one of a series of important boundary-maintaining mechanisms which operate across space and back through time. Beyond the glorification of God, for example, the *Kaddish* is not only an explicit expression of the relationship between living individuals and their deceased kinspeople but also a symbolic conceptualization of the social solidarity which reaches out to unknown ancestors and past events in the continuing though evolving religious tradition. Understanding this ritual is important in comprehending certain dimensions of being Jewish. But the process of the ritual and the ramifications of the belief system are not unique to Jews. A clearer reflection upon these points in a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective would be valuable for readers looking for a deeper understanding of world-views and group identifications across cultural or other boundaries.

The facts and results of the Holocaust and the profound searchings represented in Wiesel's writing—as well as those of others who survived the Holocaust—are of obvious interest to Jews. Many insights if not final answers to individual and group identities lie in those discussions. The social and philosophical implications of Wiesel's words vex and intrigue more than Jews in today's world. Why? Perhaps because there are so many examples of atrocities around us and so many instances of xenophobia on the world scene, within the United States, and in the smaller communities and neighborhoods within which we reside. And so we ask ourselves questions as individuals living our own lives and as professionals in various disciplines trying to bring our diverse perspectives into a single focus. What are the dimensions of "ethnic" or other "minority group" identifications? How are these dimensions maintained by members of the "in-group"? How are these boundaries enforced by outsiders? What choices are there in continuing or changing these boundary-maintaining mechanisms through time and in different places? These questions are not parochial to the situation of Jeremiah and the exile of Jews in old Babylon as Wiesel shows in speaking of ideas, individuals, and events in the 20th century C.E. For a greater understanding of the significance of these questions in interdisciplinary ethnic studies, readers will have to turn to the works

of Wiesel for themselves or go to other critical reviews and essays on Wiesel's writing. Unfortunately these insights and their broader meanings are hinted at but not sufficiently developed in Culp's handling of Elie Wiesel's *Night*.

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