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"Night" and Critical Thinking

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For several years now, I have been teaching *Night* in a junior-level composition and literature course, The Dilemma of Human Existence. Required of all students, this course is a staple of our core curriculum and is charged primarily with the task of improving communication and critical thinking skills. As at many liberal arts colleges, such a course is structured on a kind of "great books" model and thus involves readings ranging from antiquity to the present. The pedagogical direction pursued by such courses, however, is not primarily historicist—not only because there is not the time to contextualize works with any rigor, but also because the course has a bigger fish to hook. I refer here to those students majoring in fields outside the humanities who are more likely to see the significance and vitality of literature for their own lives and value systems when every work is treated as if it were their contemporary. Those of us entrusted with a course of the kind I am talking about, then, teach particular literary works not so much for how they reflect or participate in the discourse of their day as for the way they stage for our students difficult encounters with their own ideas or beliefs. In my course, in the attempt to catalyze a critical dialogue about divine justice and our memorial obligations to the dead, I begin usually with Sophocles's *Oedipus* plays, Dante's *Inferno*, and then Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These texts present characters who struggle with the unfairness of the world, the justness of theodicy, and the problem of doing right by the dead—matters that *Night* so powerfully and forcefully foregrounds.

I think it is fair to say, however, that Wiesel's memoir takes the opportunity for—and practice of—critical thinking a step beyond the level that writers of tragedies like Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare get us to inhabit. The tragic

story told in *Night* differs in significant ways. First, Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare invite us, to greater or lesser degrees, to regard the suffering they present as warranted—caused or prolonged either by tragic character flaws or manifestly sinful conduct. Second, Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare dramatize a suffering that is, for their protagonists (and audiences), unmistakably ennobling—part of some meaningfully cathartic, divinely inspired, pedagogical design. The fate Sophocles gives his tragic hero in *Oedipus the King* does, in the end, ratify the integrity of oracular knowledge (a fact noted by the play's chorus), and in *Oedipus at Colonus*, an aged Oedipus is granted a sanctuary and a miraculous death. Dante is repeatedly moved to remark on the moral lesson his journey through hell is designed to teach him, and it is, after all, a journey that will eventually take him to heaven and his angelic beloved Beatrice. Shakespeare does, by play's end, affirm a providential heroism in his hero's conduct. Finally, the stories of Oedipus, Dante, and Hamlet include scenes in which suffering or death is recognized and memorialized by a wider public. These are scenes in which it appears that certain obligations to the casualties of violence are being met: the place of Oedipus's death is designated sacred by the gods and protected as such by the Athenian king, Theseus; Dante consistently asks the sinners he meets for their stories so that, as he says at one point, "your memory / In men's minds in the former world won't fade / But live on under many suns" (29.110–12); and Hamlet has, in the end, done right by his murdered father by fulfilling his father's ghost's command to avenge his death—an act commemorated by Fortinbras in the play's final lines, which announce a ceremony meant to bear witness to Hamlet's essential royalty.

All these features suggest that literary renderings of tragic occurrences operate under a kind of mandate to disclose the larger, affirmative horizon to which such occurrences (ostensibly) belong. Wiesel's book, however, forcefully repudiates this mandate: in *Night*, no characterological flaw or sin is ever described or invoked as a warrant for what the book's narrator experiences. There is, moreover, no way to see Jewish suffering or death as heroic or ennobling. And finally, there is no certainty that what has transpired will be (or is even capable of being) suitably memorialized. If the authors of *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, *The Inferno*, and *Hamlet* have given us ways to understand and resolve the suffering and death their works depict, the author of *Night* has written a book replete instead with moments of interpretive crisis that find no satisfactory resolution. To read *Night* is, for this reason, to be forced to think critically, since such moments of crisis suspend (and thereby render inadequate) all the traditional ways we give meaning to our world and to our lives. Indeed, so many of the traumatic scenes and images in Wiesel's memoir—spare and unadorned in their description—stand implicitly as calls to see the truth or viability of cherished ideas and beliefs as entirely contingent, as dependent on location and circumstance and thus without any claim to stand as absolute or immutable, apart from the catastrophe of history. For me, the sine qua non of any class devoted to critical thinking is the capacity to see knowledge and belief as fundamentally conditioned and thus as capable of crisis. Herein, moreover, lies the ethical importance of critical thinking, since to see truth and belief as conditioned for or capable of crisis is to lose the certitude that often motivates the commission of violence against those who do not share the same truth or belief. Bereft of such certitude, critical thinkers begin to see that traditional codes of ethical conduct are not always singular and not always clear.

So that students are ready to see themselves addressed by the difficult scenes and images of Wiesel's book, I assign (and we discuss) his essay "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" before our consideration of *Night*. Invoking the Holocaust's "magnitude and its ontological nature," Wiesel suggests that all our ways of being at home in the world need now to be set against the background of "that faraway kingdom of darkness." According to Wiesel, "all that can be obtained through knowledge has to be recalled into question. . . . [M]an's relationship to his creator, to society, to politics, to literature, to his fellow man and to himself has to be reexamined" (6). In claims such as these, Wiesel enjoins us to see critical thinking as one primary, ethical legacy of the Holocaust, to see the challenge bequeathed to us by it: since virtually every facet of organized society was complicit in the crime (or ineffectual in trying to stop it), every facet must now be reexamined to prevent its repetition. Wiesel sounds a similar theme later in his essay when he claims that if we are to understand the Holocaust, we will have to understand "why all the killers were Christians, bad Christians surely, but Christians" and "why so many killers were intellectuals, academicians, college professors, lawyers, engineers, physicians, theologians" (17).

These claims exempt nothing from critical scrutiny, and we talk here about how Wiesel's remarks bridge the gap between the extreme and the ordinary, about how our ordinary occupations and belief systems are perhaps always just a stone's throw from an extreme that we do not see as extreme or as relevant to us. Thinking about this proximity can get us to recognize how easily our ordinary occupations and belief systems might involve us implicitly in the commission of violence or how our own pursuits might be suddenly halted by the extreme acts of others. Indeed, I try to point out how the very terms *ordinary* and *extreme* already imply a certain perspective or subject position, since during the Holocaust (and even today) the proximity or conflation of the two were experienced in radically different ways depending on how much power, privilege, and comfort one enjoyed. I sometimes write the words *ordinary* and *extreme* on the chalkboard and solicit general impressions of what experiential features might constitute each category. Our reading of the first ten or so stories of Ida Fink's short story volume *Traces* helps with this exercise, since the stories are fundamentally concerned with the threshold—one story in this set is titled "The Threshold" and the word appears in several others—that separates the ordinary (e.g., musical concerts, first romantic loves, schooling plans, enjoyment of nature) from the extreme (e.g., terror, violence, separation, loss). Sometimes I depict the categories as columns and write them intentionally as far apart on the

chalkboard as I can. This setup allows me, when we have finished our data collection, to pose a question about the distance, in our heads, between these two concepts. At other times I write *ordinary* and collect its features at the top half of one board and write *extreme* and collect its features on the bottom half of the same board: this format allows us to consider that perhaps the extreme lies beneath the ordinary and is capable, at a moment's notice, of erupting into it. Either way, the stage is thereby set for a discussion of how Wiesel's goal is to ward off the conflation of the two terms by asking us constantly to remember when they were indistinguishable. At one point in his essay, Wiesel writes that "[a]nyone who does not actively, constantly engage in remembering and in making others remember is an accomplice of the enemy" (16). What this line shares with all the lines I have so far cited from "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" is Wiesel's insistence on the Holocaust's universal implications—his belief that everyone has a stake in thinking about the lasting consequences of what happened. Elsewhere in the essay, Wiesel suggests that the victims "did not die alone, for something in all of us died with them" (7) and that although he sees everything "through that event . . . it would be wrong to assume that it means something only to us Jews" (17).

While I have had students who begin spontaneously to think about the connection between their own ordinary academic disciplines and the commission of extreme (Nazi) violence, my teaching of *Night* aims to use the traumatic scenes to train a critical eye on two of the more general items in Wiesel's list of things in need of reexamination: traditional religious belief and the faith we place in our fellow human beings (especially parental figures). Let me begin with traditional religious belief, because it is the issue that occupies two of the three eighty-minute sessions I give to the book. Here, Wiesel's concern is to document the corrosive effects of Auschwitz on a young boy's piety—his deteriorating belief in a God endowed with traditional attributes, capable of intervening (on his own or at the behest of prayer) in history. Sometimes I hand out a simple, twenty-minute writing prompt that reads:

> How does Wiesel *change* over the course of the first sixty-five pages of *Night*? Introduce and discuss two scenes that you see capturing this change.

At other times I ask questions like, What kind of boy is Wiesel at the beginning of the book? Why do you suppose Wiesel elected to begin with the figure of Moishe the Beadle? In eliciting responses to these sorts of questions, I aim to begin to establish that Wiesel's belief—his daily devotion to prayer and his ardent desire to study the Talmud—is genuine (in anticipation of those students who, after Wiesel loses his faith at Auschwitz, will claim that it must not have been all that strong in the first place). I want also to chart carefully the deterioration of his religious belief, so that we can see Wiesel's eventual loss of faith as a process, as the outcome of a struggle. On the morning of their deportation,

Wiesel wakes at dawn because he "wanted to have time to pray before leaving" (18), and when they arrive at the ghetto, he invokes a prayer that refers to God's "infinite compassion" (20). At the last stop on the way to Auschwitz, when the deportees are told that they are being taken to a labor camp, Wiesel reports that "[we] gave thanks to God" (27). Even after the traumatic first night of Auschwitz—when Wiesel reacts angrily to his father's recital of the Kaddish, when he sees the smokestacks, which he states "murdered my God and my soul" (34), and when he claims that the student of the Talmud whom he had once been "had been consumed by the flames" (37)—Wiesel still evinces a belief in God's power and the efficacy of prayer. When his new pair of shoes is hidden by mud, he thanks God in an "improvised prayer" (38), and when he hears men in his barrack lending a religious meaning to their experience, he doubts not God's existence but his absolute justice (45). Later in the book, he even offers up a prayer "to this God in whom I no longer believed" (91).

A close reading of passages such as these can help deepen a consideration of later scenes that dramatize Wiesel's disbelief in God's traditional attributes and the efficacy of prayer. I refer here not just to the death of the *pipel* (whose body on the gallows, Wiesel claims, is God incarnate [65]) but also to the scenes that follow that death, when the other prisoners are able to pray in observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (66–69). To these scenes one might add Wiesel's portraits of Akiba Drumer and the rabbi "from a small town in Poland" (76), both of whom remain believers for a long time in Auschwitz but, at the end, break under the strain. Students are moved by these scenes, and some try to argue that Wiesel does not lose his religious faith entirely if we take seriously Moishe the Beadle's claim early in the book that "Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him" (5). There is an interesting discussion to be had regarding the status of Wiesel's faith, but, ultimately, it ought not to stop us from asking what is the implication of Wiesel's instances of disbelief for students' own religious beliefs and for religious belief more generally. To pursue this line of inquiry, I have sometimes collected on the chalkboard a set of religious propositions ordinarily regarded to be absolutely true. These range from the claim that "All creation bears witness to the greatness of God" to bumper sticker formulations such as "Never Underestimate the Power of God" or "Prayer Works!" We end up talking about the extent to which the Holocaust forces us to qualify or dismiss altogether such maxims. To get at the provisional nature of truths many regard as eternally self-evident, I ask questions along the following lines: How are we to regard assertions whose truth appears a function of the distance between the extreme and the ordinary? Eliminate this distance—as, indeed, it was eliminated for a Jewish boy like Wiesel—and what are you left with? What would you say about an actual bumper sticker in a death camp announcing the power of prayer?

The power of *Night*'s ability to catalyze critical thinking about traditional religious belief and the efficacy of prayer exists not only at the level of the narrative but also in the form of the book. I refer here to the inclusion of François

Mauriac's foreword. In this foreword, Mauriac (the Nobel Prize–winning French Catholic author whose work is consistently occupied with the religious themes of grace and redemption) recounts his first meeting with Wiesel in Paris after the war and recalls wanting to provide the Jewish survivor with the redemptive and loving message of the Christian gospel. Mauriac cites the lines in *Night* that seal Wiesel's absolute estrangement from the God he once adored and in response writes:

> And I, who believe that God is love, what answer was there to give my young interlocutor whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness that had appeared one day on the face of a hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak to him of that other Jew, this crucified brother who perhaps resembled him and whose cross conquered the world? Did I explain to him that what had been a stumbling block for *his* faith had become the cornerstone for *mine*? And that the connection between the cross and human suffering remains, in my view, the key to the unfathomable mystery in which the faith of his childhood was lost? And yet, Zion has risen up again out of the crematoria and the slaughterhouses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among its thousands of dead. It is they who have given it new life. We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Almighty is the Almighty, the last word for each of us belongs to Him. That is what I should have said to the Jewish child. But all I could do was embrace him and weep. (xxi)

This passage is remarkably powerful and should be read aloud in class. Some instructors may elect to assign the foreword as an afterword; my inclination is to teach it before *Night*, but either way it works to clarify the impasse between Christianity as a progressive (and redemptive) philosophy of history and the Holocaust survivor who will reject the consolations offered by it. Mauriac's peroration is rhetorically complex, and there is much to be said not only about his suggestion that Israel's creation means that the story of the Jewish people remains a story of progress (a view that may need to be sketched out for students unfamiliar with the history of Israel's creation) but also the fact that Mauriac cannot say directly to Wiesel what he feels that he should have said. Does this reaction mean that when faced in person with someone whose experiences confirm Nietzsche's cry that God is dead, a Christian can say nothing? Or does Mauriac, by publishing the foreword (no doubt with Wiesel's consent), in fact say that the Holocaust was part of a divine plan, the necessity of which is bound up in a grace we cannot fathom? But if he can say it in print, why cannot he say it in person? And why did Wiesel allow Mauriac to say it in print when Mauriac could not say it in person? Does Holocaust testimony turn interfaith encounters into speechless embraces and restrict religious doctrinal disputes to print?

The second feature of Wiesel's memoir that I take as an occasion for critical thinking is the book's turn from religious belief to what might be called a kind of humanism—*Night*'s replacement of (as a source of sustenance) the divine father with the flesh and blood one. Here, I sometimes write on the chalkboard a line of testimony recorded in Robert Kraft's *Memory Perceived* (a study of the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University that is a valuable teaching resource, since it is full of powerful and discussion-catalyzing transcriptions of oral testimony given by Holocaust survivors). The line is uttered by Edith P.: "I don't pray to God, [she] says, I pray to my father" (130). Building on this idea, many undergraduate readers will speak of noticing and being drawn to Wiesel's growing reliance on (and intimacy with) his father as his belief in God wanes. As a pious boy, Wiesel is not at all close to his father, who is described early on as a "cultured man, rather unsentimental. He [. . .] was more involved with the welfare of others than with that of his own kin" (4). And yet from the moment the Nazis arrive in Sighet, a bond forms between the two of them. This bond becomes most pronounced at Auschwitz, and *Night* invites readers to believe that the bond between a parent and child in adverse circumstances is unbreakable. Wiesel's one thought on the ramp at Auschwitz is not to lose his father (30). Near the end of the book, when the prisoners learn that they will be evacuated, Wiesel thinks only of not being separated from his father. During the march to Gleiwitz, the presence of his father is the only thing that sustains him (86), and when they finally arrive at Buchenwald, Wiesel writes, "I tightened my grip on my father's hand. The old, familiar fear: not to lose him" (104). A case can be made, however, that the invitation implicit in such scenes is given only so that later it can be violently retracted. Students will notice, for instance, how Wiesel—in the Rabbi Eliahu episode (90–91)—foreshadows his own struggle with his father (another instance of failed prayer, since Wiesel had prayed never to become like Rabbi Eliahu's son). And in the scene of his father's death, Wiesel is forced to confess to feeling a sense of liberation (112).

I elicit the material I have just discussed by giving another in-class writing prompt:

> What do you see *Night* saying about fellowship, the human spirit, or human nature in extreme situations? Introduce and discuss two scenes in your answer.

As with the scenes of religious belief, students are moved by the scenes that reveal the disintegration of Wiesel's regard even for his father, but they must be pushed a bit to consider the wider implications for our notions of familial love. Here again, students must reckon with the way a truth's apparent immutability is a function of the distance between the ordinary and the extreme, between, say, nourishment and deprivation. Is a belief in familial love's inviolability entirely dependent on our own relative comforts? What

does it mean when a *Blockälteste* says to Wiesel, "In this place, there is no such thing as father, brother, friend" (110)? Is the goodness of human nature in fact something that exists only in environments where basic needs are being met? Are there environments that put to rest any and all consideration of a triumphant human spirit? These questions are entertained with more complexity in *Night* than might first appear. Students notice, for instance, the extent to which Wiesel is beset by feelings of guilt and shame even as he entertains the notion of taking his father's rations. In the end, however, Wiesel believes himself "[f]ree at last" after his father has died (112). The book's final image is one that forces us to think critically about what it means to be human. Bereft of all cherished relationships—with God and with his father—Wiesel faces the mirror (and our students) as a living corpse. Students thus encounter a person whose very existence stands as a kind of dark spot on the ideas and beliefs we might want to believe are timeless and transcendent. And because *Night*'s final line leaves us with the clear sense that Wiesel is still this corpse, there is no way to cement anew an inviolable foundation for such ideas and beliefs—without appearing either to ignore the textual details of the book or to impose by fiat a meaning the book will not support. Our foundations shaken, Wiesel thus challenges us to linger with and concede the Holocaust's irremediable trauma. Getting us to see the contingency of any and all values, *Night* works ethically to create critical thinkers who are ready to endure the destabilization of their unshakable truths, who are capable of seeing their cherished ideas and beliefs less as absolute or self-evident truths and more as difficult, opaque, and in some cases insoluble problems. In their absolute or fixed form, such ideas and beliefs often animate or sanction the commission of violence, underwriting in the process an understanding of history and experience as essentially progressive and redemptive. In the form in which Wiesel gets us to consider them, however, such ideas and beliefs become provisional and plural, requiring debate and dialogue and remembrance of those events in history that cannot be redeemed. Here, perhaps, is the insuperable value of teaching a book like *Night* in a class devoted to critical thinking.