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"Night" and Critical Thinking

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currence at the time. “That was what life in a concentration camp had made of me”: just what is the that of the statement?

Half a dozen pages later, Wiesel describes an air raid on the camp during which a prisoner, apparently half crazed, throws himself toward a cauldron of piping hot soup, an act that leads to his being shot and killed. After the raid, Wiesel writes, “In the very center of the camp lay the body of the man with soup stains on his face, the only victim. The cauldrons were carried back to the kitchen” (60-61). The body left to lie in the middle of the camp, like the memory of the kindness of the French woman and their meeting years later, seems to function as an image that stands in and substitutes for what happened and for that which can’t be told as a story. These episodes, incongruous with the scheme of the narrative—with its chronological march through the year during which Wiesel and his father lived through the hell of Auschwitz and the death march to Buchenwald—are a sign, like the imperfection in the fabric of testimony, of something that may not be available to memory, or to language, at all.

In fact, one could argue that it is this point—about what happens to language and to knowledge in the face of the horrifying event—that Night makes most directly. The book seems to work against the bilderverbot, the injunction against idolatry, because it insists that, while the event may not be available to memory or language, memory and language are all we have. It’s no coincidence that the book is punctuated by explicit references to the failure of language and narrative in the face of events: from the story Wiesel’s father does not finish early in the book (because he is called to a meeting of the Jewish council just before Sighet’s ghetto is liquidated) to Mrs. Schächter’s failure to make those in the boxcar on its way to Auschwitz see the fire that only she can see (until they reach the camp and see it themselves), the book isn’t a testimony or a memoir so much as it is a document that shows the limits of language and memory when confronted by events. Or, more precisely, Night makes clear what happens when one substitutes images, language, and memories of the ready-at-hand for what is impossible to recall or to relate to others.

Through the inevitable failure of his stories—it’s through his inability to testify to what he saw and through the marks this horror leaves on his writing in the form of hesitations, failures of seeing, incongruities, and the disbelief with which the witness seems to describe even those things he saw—Wiesel most clearly succeeds not in witnessing himself but in providing an instrument for his readers to witness. Though we and our students may not see the horrors Wiesel saw, we are able to glimpse the limits of witnessing and how language both does and doesn’t represent the atrocity of the Shoah.

NOTE

The epigraph is from page 98 of Night.

COURSES AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Night and Critical Thinking
Paul Eisenstein

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 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 to hims elf has to be borne 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 surey, 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
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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 “[w]e 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 barracks lending a religious meaning to their experience, he doubts 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 slaughter-houses. 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.

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 mutability 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 event 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.

**Negotiating the Distance: Collaborative Learning and Teaching Night**

*Phyllis Lassner*

Night has become a canonical text, not only for Holocaust scholars and university courses on Holocaust representation, but also for many younger readers. As my undergraduate students at Northwestern University tell me, the ubiquity of Night on high school reading lists relates to its enduring stature as testimony and its emotive narrative power as well as to its appeal to teenage readers. This appeal is based on the assumption that students’ own adolescent growing pains provide an emotional bridge across the void that separates them from the wrenching psychological and moral experiences faced by young people during the Holocaust. For this reason, despite their obvious differences in context, experience, and form, Night is often paired with that other iconic Holocaust testimony, The Diary of Anne Frank. Trusting the stability of students’ identification and empathy, high school teachers often engage their young readers by asking how they might react in a similar situation or by having them draw a picture, create an interview, or keep a journal to show their feelings about an incident in the text and to create a pathway of relatedness with the Holocaust character. Such activities represent a pedagogical challenge. For if we agree that experiences within the Holocaust universe remain inconceivable and unimaginable to those who escaped its claws, then how do we teach testimonies of adolescent experience that defy the possibility of bridging the chasm to relatedness or identification?

This question has shaped the development of my course Representing the Holocaust in Literature and Film, where the identities and knowledge base of the students create another tension. The course is designed as an upper-level undergraduate seminar; its enrollment limit of sixteen students ensures concentrated time and attention devoted to their individual and collective attempts to express anxious and exploratory responses to disturbing and disorienting readings and films. Although Jewish students usually have some Holocaust education through their congregations and trips to various museums and even to Auschwitz and some students have learned about the Holocaust through other means, neither they nor the uninitiated are prepared for issues raised by the testimony of Elie Wiesel, Charlotte Delbo, and Primo Levi and by ongoing Holocaust criticism: the paradoxical imperatives of silence and filling its void with testimony, the loss of ethical consciousness to survival instincts, and the limits of representation. Though these issues remain vexed even for seasoned scholars, they also provide a template that leads them and students to analyze and interpret not only Holocaust texts but also their own responses. Daniel Schwarz’s chapter “The Ethics of Reading Elie Wiesel’s Night” is a case in point, where he examines the ethical components of “acknowledging who we