

A Review of Trauma in *Night* by Elie Wiesel

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Night by Elie Wiesel

It is unusual for so short a book to be so weighty a tome, but Elie Wiesel's harrowing account of his survival from Auschwitz-Birkenau remains essential reading, perhaps increasingly so, in the twenty-first century. The overwhelming sense one gets from reading it is that there are times and places that avoid any attempt of ours to truly empathise. What is meant here is not that all experiences must be heard in a cold indifference. We mean rather that some horrors and depths of human suffering are too deep for us to understand in the fullness of their truth. We can never feel what Wiesel felt, see what Wiesel saw, touch what Wiesel touched, or smell what Wiesel smelled. Even were we unfortunate co-sufferers with Wiesel in Auschwitz, our experience of the place will be coloured by our life experience up to the event, by our psychology, the way our parents raised us. No two sufferings and no two traumas can be coexperienced. Elie Wiesel tells us how Auschwitz was for him, but he can never tell us how Auschwitz would be for us. He can never even reveal in prose the fullness of what Auschwitz was for him, and how he experienced it, coped with it, and survived it. It is in his brevity that he succeeds in showing us the truest glimpse of Auschwitz.

It is not so much a discussion *of* trauma, but more in the realm of a matter-of-fact memoir of an historical incident. Yet the trauma gleams through the cracks of the narrative and can never be forgotten. Very few would pick up an holocaust memoir without a vague psychological understanding off the topic. Yet for most of us, the smell of burning human flesh is mercifully unimaginable. Those of us who have observed surgery recognise the slightly sweet scent and the overwhelming acidity of singed hair at the tip of an electrocautery knife.

A small portion will have a visceral experience that extremifies the reading. Wiesel only writes in his simple prose that the burning human flesh was a signal he has arrived in Birkenau.¹

Wiesel's prose does not try to tell us why we should be so horrified at what we are reading, and as one moves through each act, the next bit of horror seems to just make sense. Wiesel thus seems matter-of-fact about his trauma, and it is often through the use of Wiesel by other scholars that we see new glimpses of horror.

Wiesel recounts the episode of the hanging of a child and two men. *Night* may best be understood as the theological deconstruction of Elie Wiesel as he moves through aspects of life in the camps. This episode stands for the spiritual trauma that has been done to Wiesel and many others. Reading it again after so many years it still can bring a tear to the eye. But it is Wiesel's answer to the question 'for God's sake, where is God?'² that clarifies Wiesel's position: 'And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where He is? This is where – k hanging here from this gallows ..." That night, the soup tasted of corpses.'³

What I am about to do with this next paragraph seems woefully inadequate – to pick out what seems the most traumatic parts of a carnival of traumas, particularly when their significance might be different to the author. There are of course a range of Jewish theological responses to the *shoah* ranging from atheism to orthodoxy. In bringing up the episode of the hanging of the child, we are following in the footsteps of others such as Jürgen Moltmann who touches on it in *The Crucified God* and contends that a faithful response to this trauma was to express

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 64.

³ *Ibid.*

God's presence.⁴ It would seem that this was not the case for Wiesel at the time.⁵ One is reminded of the basic criteria set out by Rabbi Irving Greenberg in his essay *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire*: 'No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.'⁶

Wiesel's narrative becomes increasingly visceral on the march to Buchenwald. The trauma this time comes not from the traditional source – the German troops, the SS men forcing them to march. When Wiesel was writing it was still a given, and well may we pray that it becomes so again, that a Nazi is evil. What Wiesel reminds us of is that we can be evil, even to those suffering the same fate -- crushing underfoot, beating one another, the beating of Wiesel's elderly father who had lost the ability to walk outside and relieve himself there. We understand what Nazi war crimes were, and the scale of them. But trauma sometimes comes from our peers as we learn to live within a brutal system. According to Jean-Pierre Fortin, 'Any attempt to explain Auschwitz involves an element of profound disrespect toward millions of victims.'⁷ Perhaps there is a little of this for Wiesel. There is no way to explain all the myriad complexities – and genocide studies persist. Only listen to what happened to Elie Wiesel and his father in that most traumatic of moments for many in the world – the Holocaust.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 273–274.

⁵ Although according to his obit in the New York Times he seems to have found religion in the end. Joseph Berger, "Elie Wiesel, Auschwitz Survivor and Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Dies at 87," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2016, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/world/europe/elie-wiesel-auschwitz-survivor-and-nobel-peace-prize-winner-dies-at-87.html>.

⁶ Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust: Papers Given at the International Symposium on the Holocaust, Held at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York City*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1977).

⁷ Jean-Pierre Fortin, *Grace in Auschwitz: A Holocaust Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 4.

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