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Elie Wiesel's Transformation from a Yiddish Journalist into an American Novelist

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イディッシュ語ジャーナリストからアメリカ作家への変貌
── エリ・ヴィーゼルの後期の小説をめぐって──

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ホロコースト生存者でノーベル平和賞に輝いたアメリカ作家エリ・ヴィーゼル（1928 ～ 2016）の代表作『夜』（1958 年）は，自身のホロコーストの経験に基づいて書かれた世界的にも有名な作品である。しかし，その原作がイディッシュ語で書かれ，アルゼンチンで出版された『そして世界は沈黙を守った』（1956 年）であることは，ほとんど知られていない。そのイディッシュ語版では，いかに多くのユダヤ人がアウシュヴィッツの収容所で残忍に殺戮されたかが詳述されている。それと同時に，その事実を知りながらも，沈黙を続けた世界各国の無関心さへの憤りや，ドイツやドイツ兵への憎しみが直截に描かれる。しかし，仏訳（1958 年）や英訳（1958 年）ではそうした激しい憤りが表現された部分は削除され，『夜』という抽象的なタイトルに変えられてしまう。

ブッヘンヴァルト強制収容所で書き留めた手記に基づき，戦後すぐにまとめられたこのイディッシュ語版『そして世界は沈黙を守った』やフランス語で著わされた『夜明け』（1961 年），『昼』（1962 年）などの初期の作品と比較すると，後期の小説や回想録にはヴィーゼルの主張に顕著な変化が見られる。ヴィーゼルが一介のユダヤ人ジャーナリストから，著名なアメリカ作家になる過程で，その世界観がいかに変化したのかを明らかにしたい。

キーワード：イディッシュ語，『夜』，エリ・ヴィーゼル，アウシュヴィッツ，ホロコースト

I. The Parallel Structure of Two Unique Protagonists

Joseph Wershba quotes Elie Wiesel's analysis of Eichmann's dehumanization in his article "An Author Asks Why the World Let Hitler Do It" in1961:

> "The most fascinating thing about Eichmann is that he is human." Wiesel observes. "If he were inhuman, he would be easy to understand. If he couldn't

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sleep nights, that too would be understandable. But he can sleep, he does care for his wife, he does love his children. And if it weren't Eichmann, it would have been any number of Germans in his place." (*Elie Wiesel: Conversations*. "Wershba" 3-4)

Wiesel argues that Eichmann's dehumanization should not be attributed to a particular person's abnormal psychology. During the Holocaust, so many unimaginably cruel crimes were witnessed. Deep inside, such cruelty seems to be common in every one of us, and it likely comes out under certain abnormal circumstances such as in wars.

Wiesel's *The Sonderberg Case* (2010) is a philosophical novel that explores questions of identity and memory in the shadow of the Holocaust. As in most of his works, Wiesel returns to this historic tragedy, his lifetime subject, in search of the essence of dehumanization.

Wiesel portrays two unique main characters in a dramatic and contrasting way. The protagonist Yedidyah Wasserman—a Jewish theater critic in New York City, husband of a stage actress, father of two sons—finds himself increasingly drawn to the past for a reason revealed later in the novel.

The second protagonist is Werner Sonderberg, grandson of an infamous Nazi. Wiesel skillfully manipulates a parallel structure in delineating the two symmetrical protagonists. Werner is a mirror image of Yedidyah.

Wiesel attempts to cast new light on the Holocaust in his last novel. The young German, Werner, is arrested and tried as a murder-suspect. Paul Adler, editor in chief of the *Morning Post*, has assigned the Jewish theater critic Yedidyah to cover the intriguing case, because two legal reporters are away.

Since long before the trial, Yedidyah has been suffering from depression for unclear reasons. Wiesel seems to project his own desperate and horrifying Holocaust experiences onto the protagonist, who has lost nearly all his early childhood memories about his parents who perished during the Holocaust. As a result, Yedidyah feels particular interest in Werner, who seems to be indifferent to his past or even present life, as if he were trying to erase it from his memory.

Werner Sonderberg is a young German of 24, born in a town near Frankfurt. After studying in France, he began a master's degree in comparative literature and philosophy at New York University. He dreamed of a successful life in the United States. His Nazi grandfather, however, appeared before him unexpectedly, and his dream life disappeared. Werner and his grandfather Hans Dunkelman went out to the Adirondacks, but the local police discovered Hans's corpse at the foot of a cliff. "Two days later, Werner Sonderberg was arrested and charged with murder" (69).

Werner does not show any interest in his own trial as if "he seems preoccupied by something else entirely" (78). Yedidyah, on the other hand, takes in the trial like one of the plays at a theater, and he imagines he were playing some part in a play. In

a strange way, both protagonists have unrealistic reactions towards the serious trial. Their hearts seem to be elsewhere.

Because of his articles about Werner's trial, Yedidyah becomes popular in his office. Even Kathy, one of the secretaries from the cultural pages at his newspaper office, becomes interested in him and asks, "Why do you remain so closed, stubborn, insensitive to warmth and the beauty of the world? Why do you turn down simple pleasure?" (99).

It is impossible for non-Holocaust witnesses to imagine the source of his despondency, because it is closely related to the secrets of his identity, which many Jews had to hide during the Holocaust.

II. Yedidyah's History as a Child Survivor

Revealed to him by his foster parents, Yedidyah's unknown past with his sad family history becomes clearer than before. His dim memory about his real parents, who perished during the Holocaust, is eventually coming back. According to the foster parents'confession, Yedidyah is a child Holocaust survivor, not a survivor's child.

His father Wasserman Morgenstein perished with his young wife and their first son in the Holocaust. Just before he was about to be murdered by the Nazis, a Christian maid named Maria Petrescu offered to save the infant Yedidyah. "She swore on her own life and Christ's that she would watch over me and look after me. They would get me back, safe and sound, as soon as they returned" (123). Having kept her word, Maria took good care of Yedidyah at the risk of her own life in anti-Semitic Romania during WWII. Thanks to his foster parents' confession, Yedidyah's old memories gradually come back to him: "Maria was as magnificently kind and tender as her parents were ill-tempered, morbid, and cruel. They saw me as an intruder" (124).

Until then, "I thought I was the child of survivors, I'm not. I'm a child survivor" (124). He wishes to see Maria and thank her for her love and devotion to him. Learning Yedidyah's birth-secrets, his actress wife Alika also encourages him to track down Maria in his birthplace.

Visiting his native Carpathian town of Davarovsk, Yedidyah finds the house where they lived before the war. He feels "an immense void and bottomless, nameless grief" (125) which he cannot explain well. In his imagination, he would try to tell Alika his feelings upon his return to America.

> "Imagine a character, onstage, feeling pain, anger, and fear, who wants to cry out and make the walls shake; he opens his mouth but remains frozen and mute for an interminable moment. Tell yourself this was me, as a tiny child, probably frightened, in front of what had been my house with my parents and

> their plans at the time, the shared hopes my brother and I embodied." (125)

The situation Yedidyah experienced during the war is beyond description. This explains how deeply seated is his despair. The terrifying condition of the infant Yedidyah is beyond his imagination, and he has buried childhood memories for the sake of his sanity.

Regardless of his strong wish to thank Maria, Yedidyah realizes that he has visited her too late, because she has already lost her memory. According to Maria's nephew, who has been taking care of her, "heart of gold, soul of a saint" (126), Maria has been ill since she lost her little boy (Yedidyah) after WWII. After the boy had left, she no longer had all her wits about her.

> She lives in her own world. We have to force her to eat and drink. What can I say? These things happen. We want to live, grow old, then time goes by. We're here but not she." (127)

Remaining unmarried, Maria devoted her life and love to little Yedidyah as she had promised his parents as a courageous, honest, and honorable woman, and to save his life she never disclosed little Yedidyah's identity during the war. We find a similar kind of Christian rescuer's story in Wiesel's *The Time of the Uprooted* (2005), in which a young Christian cabaret singer named Ilonka saves a little Jewish boy by saying he is her nephew.

Now, Yedidyah sees the old saint Maria in front of him, and realizes how strongly he yearned for her. This might have been the cause of his despondency.

> "I'm pained for her . . . I've been foolishly hiding from everyone, even from Alika, and my friends, and my children: that I'm sick" (130).

Partially regaining his memories, Yedidyah has obtained a clue to get his sanity back. With the help of Dr. Weiss, a psychiatrist, Yedidyah tries to solve his identity problem, who he is, or where he comes from. Yedidyah's repressed memories have been nagging Yedidyah for a long time. Thanks to the doctor's hypnosis, his repressed memories slowly reveal themselves.

Through Dr. Weiss's treatment, Yedidyah's repressed memories lead him into the past, when his parents and brother were with him in a basement during the war. He, however, cannot recall his real name, because he was a Jewish child. "Jewish children have to rid themselves of their names so they can live" (139).

> Yedidyah breaks off. He takes a deep breath as if to free himself of a burden. Then he starts talking again. "In fact, I couldn't help telling my

> grandfather that I'm convinced I'll see my parents and my brother again. In the other world, the world of truth. . . . Help me to stand fast, Professor. Help me make headway in reviving my extinguished memories." (142)

After this session, Yedidyah goes out into the street, and he thinks about Werner Sonderberg, comparing his memory with Werner's. "Is it possible that he, too, would have been happier, twenty years earlier, if he had been able to extirpate from his memory a grief that had colored his life?" (142)

Here we see the connection between the two parallel protagonists, Yedidyah and Werner. Yedidyah is the mirror image of Werner.

III. Werner and His Sinful Grandfather

At the trial, it is argued that Werner was guilty of murder because he was "guilty of having abandoned a man who was going to die" (150). Nevertheless, after careful examination, it became clear that he was not responsible for Hans's suicide.

One day, long after the trial, a meeting with Werner takes place in the lobby of a hotel where Werner is staying. Yedidyah, who is in the process of regaining his childhood memories, asks Werner why he did not say plainly that he was not guilty.

> "First of all," Werner immediately replies, "I never considered myself innocent. I said guilty and not guilty. From the standpoint of the truth, this 'and' was important. And do you really believe that everything is crystal clear in life? That it's always this or that, one or the other: good or evil, happiness or sadness, fidelity or betrayal, beauty or ugliness? You're not that naïve. Admit it, a clear-cut choice, so distinctly drawn, would be too easy, too convenient." (154-55)

Yedidyah agrees with his idea that in life there is no clear-cut purity as in chemistry. "Not in the intrigues of the soul" (155).

Werner narrates his disgraceful family history, embodied by his paternal grandfather Sonderberg, who changed his name to Hans Dunkelman, trying to escape his atrocious crimes as a Nazi.

> Yes, Hans had been a member of the Nazi Party. Worse: he had been an SS officer. Worse still: he had been a member of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the special commandos whose task was the annihilation of every Jew in occupied Europe. He had changed his name because he was on every list of persons wanted for crimes against humanity. (157)

Here, the parallel structure between two protagonists, a Holocaust survivor and a grandson of a former Nazi member, becomes clear.

There was a big argument between the grandson and the grandfather. Like many SS officers, Hans felt guiltless, since he firmly believed that Germany had lost the First World War because of the Jews and their communist allies. To Hans, the "Third Reich became a religion and Adolf Hitler its prophet if not its god" (159).

It was impossible for Werner to imagine why his grandfather had been able to murder Jews without any regret. Still, as Hans insisted, if Werner had been in his position at that time, it might have been possible for him to perform the same inhumane deeds that his grandfather had done. Werner harshly criticized Hans: " 'A human monster, or inhuman, it makes no difference. And the fact that I'm your grandson is unbearable to me and makes me boil with indignation; there's a part of me that refuses to accept it' " (162-63).

Thus, Werner rejected his grandfather, but Hans continued:

> "So listen closely," said Hans. "Kamenetz-Podolsk and the Hungarian Jews, Kiev and the Ukrainian Jews. Vilnius and Lithuanian Jews. Barbed wire as far as the eye can see. Huge communal graves. I saw. Shattered heads. Infants pummeled, scorned, trampled, used as targets. I saw. The undressing sessions. The stupor of women pushed into the gas chambers. Silent old men with stony shattered faces. I saw. What did I feel? Nothing. I felt nothing. The gun I held, I was that gun."
>
> He became ironic, cruel. "You, darling little grandson, you would have gone mad. With rage? With pain, no doubt. Whereas I felt nothing. I was Death. You're Death's grandson." (163)

According to Hans, Werner's father also denied Hans shortly before his death. About this fact, Werner said to his grandfather, "I'm proud to be his son" (164). Even though Hans argued that Werner was his own flesh and blood, Werner categorically denied it. "Well, blood can lie. In our case, it lies. You and I, we don't belong to the same human family" (165).

Hans got mad at his son's and grandson's total rejection of what he had done guided by Nazi Germany, instead of showing sympathy and understanding for his deeds. We must understand why Wiesel narrates Hans's memories so minutely: Wiesel is aware of the potential brutality lying in human beings under special conditions. Regardless of his grandfather's imploring, Werner denied even his existence:

> "Knew that you deserved society's contempt, and prison, if not something more drastic. Your son regretted being born, regretted being the fruit of your seed;

> the cancer that undermined him was the 'you' he had inside him, the memory of you, of your blood and your past. And now you're so brazen as to think I'll forgive you? If that's case, you're crazy." (167)

Shortly before their parting in the woods, Werner declared to Hans, "I erase you from my memory" (168). His last remarks might have led his grandfather to his suicide/accidental death after his heavy drinking. Probably Werner was responsible for his grandfather's death, consciously or unconsciously.

We can see a great distance between Werner's philosophy and Hans's attitude towards Jews. It is noticeable how Wiesel has changed his position in this last novel from his attitude well expressed in his first Yiddish biographical work, *Un die Velt hot Geshivign (And the World Remained Silent*,1956. *Night*, the English translation, 1958). In this work, his narration suggests hatred towards Nazi Germany and frustration against the indifferent world that remained silent during the Holocaust. A new English translation *Night* (2006) by Marion Wiesel ends:

> One day when I was able to get up, I decided to look at myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto.
> From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me.
> The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me. (Marion Wiesel 115)

However, the Yiddish original continues as follows:

> Without knowing the reason, I clenched my fist and shattered the mirror, and I crushed the image that lived in the mirror. I then fainted. From that day on, my state of health became better. I stayed in bed for some more days, but I wrote the draft of the book that you have in your hands, dear reader, while I stayed in bed. Ten years after Konzentrationslager Buchenwald, I see that the world is forgetting about it. Germany has become a sovereign state. The German Army has been resuscitated.
>
> Probably, the mean woman, a sadist of Buchenwald, has children. She is spending her life happily. War criminals walk the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past has been wiped out. Forgotten. Germans and anti-Semites tell the world that the story of the six million victims is only a legend, and the ignorant world probably believes it. If not today, it will tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.
>
> I have thought that it would be worthwhile to publish the book that I had jotted down in Buchenwald.
>
> I am not so naïve as to believe that it will change the course of history and shake up the conscience of humankind. These days, a book does not have the power that it had in the past. The world, which remained silent, will remain

silent tomorrow, too.

I often ask myself ten years after Buchenwald: if it was worth it to shatter the mirror? If it was worth it? (Translation by Hirose)

In *The Sonderberg Case*, Wiesel has moderated his tone towards Germans and shown sympathy towards the present Germans who are deeply hurt, like young Werner, by their grandfathers' mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust. Wiesel has changed his attitude from hatred to understanding and sympathy through the illustration of the two protagonists, Yedidyah and Werner. This sort of drastic change in Wiesel's attitude toward present day Germans is already seen in *The Judges* (2002, French original in 1999) through a young medical doctor who is treating a young Jewish patient. The young doctor's father served in the SS, and what's worse, he took part in the "selection" at Birkenau. The Israeli soldier patient tells the German doctor, "We Jews in Israel plan to survive. Weak and defenseless, we would have no chance; recent history——ours and yours——is proof of this" (156). Then the doctor vehemently responds to the Jew:

> "Don't forget that the Jews were not the only victims of my father and his accomplices: we, their children, are victims too. In our way, we too have been uprooted and left on the scrap heap. For the children of executioners too, midnight will always be sounding. Don't forget that." (159)

This is the only remark about the Holocaust made by the doctor, but this young German is surely developed into Werner in Wiesel's last novel *The Sonderberg Case* (French original in 2008), published nine years later.

At the trial of Werner, one Jewish juror is wearing a yarmulke. The prosecutor questions him on his attitude towards Germany and the Germans. In reply to this question, the juror retorts:

> "I happen to be against the principle of collective guilt. Whether German or Muslim, only criminals are guilty; the children of murderers are children, not murderers." (78)

There is no doubt that his remarks echo Wiesel's voice. The author eventually reached this forgiveness and objectivity in his evaluation of the German people.

IV. Memory and Mutual Respect

The theme combining both protagonists, Yedidyah and Werner, is certainly the subject of "memory," in the shadow of the Holocaust. Yedidyah is in search of his

childhood memory while, on the contrary, Werner tries to erase his cursed-memory as a grandson of a vicious SS officer.

Yedidyah yearns for his half-forgotten memory about his past——his parents and a brother——in order to regain his Jewish identity. On the contrary, Werner, however, tries to forget his grandfather's atrocious crimes during WWII to keep his sane identity, but he fails to totally reject his past. In reality, Werner realizes that it is impossible to discard the blood of "a human monster," because if he does so, he would not be able to establish his identity.

In *From the Kingdom of Memory* (1990), Wiesel applies Isaac Luria's philosophy of *shvirat hakelim* to the world of today, where we are facing a serious identity crisis, and an alienation:

> The Kabbala speaks of *shvirat hakelim*, the "breaking of vessels" at the moment of creation. In the same way, today we would do well to envisage the possibility of a similar break, on a scale no less vast than the first, involving the totality of being: a break between past and future, between creation and creator, between man and his fellow man. (35)

There are no better expressions than *shvirat hakelim* to describe the present confused situation of the world. We need to bring chaos back into the heart of our spiritual, conceptual, moral and psychological structures. In other words, it is Isaac Luria's philosophy of *Tikkun* (repair). This is the hope against hope that Wiesel tries to restore through *The Sonderberg Case*. The two symmetrical characters, Yedidyah and Werner, finally realize this in their face-to-face conversation, as if they were filling the gap between their lives as a Holocaust survivor and a descendant of a Nazi. A real life for Yedidyah and Werner in the present is possible only if they reconcile with their pasts.

This is a remarkable interpretation of the Kabbalistic *shvirat hakelim*. It is worth noting that Wiesel precisely grasps the essence of Jewish mysticism, Kabbala, and sees the present world more clearly with the help of the worldview of Jewish mysticism. Wiesel argues how important it is to interpret the metaphor contained in mysticism in a 1978 interview.

> What does mysticism really mean? It means the way to attain knowledge. It's close to philosophy, except in philosophy you go horizontally while in mysticism you go vertically. You plunge into it. Philosophy is a slow process of logic and logical discourse: A bringing B bringing C and so forth. In mysticism you can jump from A to Z. But the ultimate objective is the same. It's knowledge. It's truth. *(Elie Wiesel: Conversations 87)*

Wiesel expounds his interpretation of Yedidyah's despondency as well as Werner's isolation through a mysterious theologian in *The Time of the Uprooted* (2005).

> "Now take God, for example," the old man is saying. "He was separated from His Creation, and His Creation betrayed Him. Ever since, He's been feeling the same melancholy as the rest of us. And the same remorse." (65)

Wiesel also suggests that the two protagonists' melancholy or sense of isolation stems from modern man's lack of faith in God and,what's worse, in man. For Wiesel, memory, like a Jewish prayer, is a binding force to restore human potentiality, embodied by Maria's selfless love for the little Jewish boy Yedidyah. Like Isaac Luria's philosophy of the "breaking of vessels" and the philosophy of "*Tikkun*," we are destined to look for a broken spark trapped within material creation——in other words, within each person's heart. If we can restore these sparks of God's self and allow them to reunite with God's essence, we will be able to liberate ourselves from the sense of loneliness and despair. In order to achieve it, we have to overcome whatever difficulties we may have. Without the faith or the memory of tradition, we may fall into an abyss of melancholy or despair like Yedidyah and Werner.

The contrasting protagonists Yedidyah and Werner become closer by confessing their horrible memories, and they are expected to liberate God's spark within themselves through their mutual understanding instead of hostility. Thus, we see now in his last novel how Wiesel has overcome his anger and hatred towards Germans and Germany to realize his idea of "mutual respect." The following quotation is from the very beginning of *Un di Velt hot Geshvign*. Here we see his serious criticism of God and rage toward humanity, which did not save Jews from the hands of killers.

> In the beginning, there was faith, the foolish belief; and the trust. The hollow belief, and the illusion. The dangerous illusion. We believed in God. We had belief in man and lived with the illusion that exists in every one of us. There is a sacred *Shekinah's* spark which each of us has in our eyes and souls, in other words, humanity. That was the source——even if it is not reason——of our misfortune.
>
> I remember in the year of 1941, the Hungarian regime issued a decree that all Jews who could not prove their Hungarian citizenship were to be deported. We cried in Sighet——the most important city and the greatest Jewish community of the Maramures province. Till the First World War, Sighet belonged to Austrian-Hungary. Afterwards she became a part of the Rumanian state. In 1940, Sighet once again became a part of Hungary. (Hirose's translation)

Judging from this Yiddish original of *Night*, we can safely say how deep Wiesel's pessimism about humanity and his negative reaction toward belief in God were.

Some thirty years later, however, he remarkably transformed himself from a Yiddish journalist with a pessimistic worldview to an American novelist of humanity, though he wrote almost everything in French.

Regarding his harsh protest against God, Wiesel tried to justify in 1995 what he wrote in *Un di Velt hot Geshvign*.

> My words have been misinterpreted, misunderstood, very often——some believe that I said I no longer believe in God. . . Well, I came to France from Buchenwald and I entered an orphanage, a kind of children's home. I really became as religious as I had been before if not more so. It was only later when I began studying philosophy and learned how to ask certain questions that I felt a need to protest. And I still protest. But I protest from within, with faith, not outside faith. (167)

When Carol Rittner interviewed Wiesel about the dialogue between Christians and Jews on August 9, 1988, two years after his acceptance of Nobel Prize for Peace, Wiesel insisted,

> "Respect, mutual respect, should be the name of our link. When I experience it, it gives me hope, because then I do not have to play games. I don't have to put on masks. I can be the person I am, with my foibles, my virtues, with my memories, my fears. There are memories that weigh on both of us, and yet, I can say, Look, we are equals. When I meet the same attitude toward me from Christians, it gives me hope. (Carol Rittner 40)

Similarly, "there are memories that weigh on" Yedidyah and Werner, but both of them have to overcome misunderstanding between victims and victimizers in order to obtain mutual respect, or Martin Buber's "I-Thou relationship." (Sternlicht, 9)

In an interview by John S. Friedman in 1978, in *Elie Wiesel: Conversation*, Wiesel answers Friedman's question "Are you waiting for the Messiah?" (92), "Not for a personal one. But I am waiting for something. It may be forever, but I would not want to stop waiting" (92).

More clearly in *Open Heart* (2012), his last memoir, a profoundly intimate and deeply affecting summing up of his life, Wiesel similarly argues:

> As a Jew, I believe in the coming of the Messiah. But of course this does not mean that the world will become Jewish; just that it will become more welcoming, more human. (73)

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