

RESHAPING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF:

ELIE WIESEL'S *NIGHT*

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While autobiographies are most simply defined as literary representations of their authors' life histories, the genre as a whole offers vast, complex potential for writers and readers alike. In whatever mode or style an author chooses to depict his life—straightforwardly, metaphorically or even deceptively—his final product is an intimate one, irreproducible by any other hand. In theory, the author reflects upon the past, and relates his inner narrative—the story only he knows. However, in practice, consciously misleading self-portraits have appeared in the genre since its inception. And even without conscious efforts to misinform or exaggerate, what writer perceives his life impartially? What person, for that matter, wholly understands his nature or motives, and would be willing to admit them all uncensored? Autobiography, then, is an author's attempt to portray and explain his life, to make sense of both the past and present from his perspective, regardless of historical accuracy.

With this definition in mind, how does a reader come to terms with two dissimilar autobiographies produced by a single author? This issue emerges from the works of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient and author of two strikingly different personal narratives. In 1954, Wiesel wrote a memoir in Yiddish, his native language, titled *Un di Velt Hot Geshvoign (And the World Kept Silent)*, published two years later as one volume of a larger series about Polish Jews (Seidman 4). In 1958, four years after completing this original text, Wiesel published *Night*, a new autobiography in French, the language of his post-Holocaust home. This latter work is not a translation, but a distinct text. In fact, their dissimilarities are so substantial, they have created problems for literary scholars. Among them is Naomi Seidman, professor of Jewish Culture at Berkeley College's Graduate Theological Union. In her essay, "Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage," Seidman asserts that the contrast of the works results from Wiesel's proximity to his respective audiences. She contends that the Yiddish version, in addressing a Jewish audience, portrays a certain hostility that Wiesel could not comfortably reveal to a French-speaking and predominantly Christian audience. While Seidman's interpretation is persuasive, her tightly-focused analysis ignores critical aspects of the autobiographical genre

and Wiesel's transformation of that form that valuably complicate an understanding of *Night*. Because she is primarily concerned with issues of content such as word choice and phrasing that differ from text to text, Seidman neglects features of structure such as the inclusion of novelistic devices that shed light on Wiesel's motives. An analysis of construction reveals anger in the French text, but not exactly as it appears in the Yiddish. This is the result of Wiesel's developing writing skill that enabled him to break from the testimonial formula of his time to create an original form of expression. By infusing his autobiography with literary elements traditionally reserved for novels, Wiesel fashioned a new artistic form—the autobiographical Holocaust novel. In the process, he discovered subtler, yet more evocative methods of expression than were offered by Holocaust survivors in the eyewitness accounts that preceded *Night*, including his own Yiddish text. For these reasons, his autobiographies differ greatly, and the French work emerges as the superior example of Wiesel's literary power.

In her comparison of the acclaimed autobiographical novel *Night* and Wiesel's earlier, lesser known Yiddish narrative, Naomi Seidman cites differences in theme, content, and the depiction of Wiesel's self. In her interpretation, the famed French version has an overall tone of Jewish mysticism, meaning that it centers on the cosmic implications of the Holocaust, and depicts Wiesel as the philosopher, pondering the "mystery of God's silence in the face of evil" (Seidman 1). Because *Night* maintains this somewhat enigmatic theme, Seidman contends that it lacks the rage of the Yiddish version. In *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign*, Wiesel openly condemns man's tendency to forget the past, neglect atrocity and turn a blind eye to horrors in the world. To explain the disparity between these works, Seidman claims the author's interest in attracting a larger and primarily Gentile audience caused him, perhaps unwittingly, to redirect his hostility from man to God, thus creating a "compromise between Jewish expression and the capacities and desires of non-Jewish readers" (14). With the author's accusatory finger shifted away from his audience, the appeal and the influence of his work widened, thereby giving Wiesel the ample platform he desired. According to Seidman, the process of writing his experiences in two languages for two audiences led the author to create "two survivors, then, a Yiddish and a French—or perhaps we should say one survivor who speaks to a Jewish audience and one whose first reader is a French Catholic" (8). She insists that neither text is "more authentic," and acknowledges that "any conversation is a balancing act between two speakers, any text a reflection of its audience as

much as its writers" (14-15). However, she clearly believes Wiesel sacrificed the anger of the first text to create the latter. To show this change, Seidman writes, "The Yiddish survivor is alive with a vengeance and eager to break the wall of indifference he feels surrounds him" (8). In contrast, the French survivor conducts a spiritual quest that "labors under the self-imposed seal of silence" (8). Thus, Seidman believes Wiesel suppressed his rage in order to come to terms with God in the aftermath of religious persecution. While both the hostile and spiritual survivors deliver insightful representations of Wiesel, Seidman maintains that *Night* lacks the fury of its Yiddish predecessor. This loss causes her to pronounce, "Wiesel found the audience he told his Yiddish readers he wanted. But only, as it turns out, by suppressing the very existence of this desire" (8). In other words, the furious narrator of *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* finally broke through the world's indifference, but only after being recast as the passive, French seeker of spiritual truth.

If, instead of following Seidman's content-driven exploration, one concentrates on Wiesel's transformation of the autobiographical structure, the discrepancy between Wiesel's two works is better explained. While the Yiddish version bears witness to Wiesel's actual experiences during the Holocaust by providing a straightforward testimony, the French text explores his overall transformation and emotional responses through an experiment with form. By adding an imaginative arrangement of time, metaphor, and narration to tell his story in French, Wiesel forced the autobiographical genre to suit his total experience, rather than confining his story within the traditional structure of the testimonial form. Furthermore, the unique construction of the narrator allowed for an investigation of the variable nature of his self. These elements may seem more akin to literature than narrative. However, Wiesel is quick to dismiss claims that his work is fictional, plainly stating in his memoirs that: "*Night* is not a novel" (*Memoirs* 271). While an author's opinion of his own work is seldom objective, Holocaust scholar Barbara Foley concurs with Wiesel's assessment of *Night* by writing, "Wiesel is not fictionalizing his experience at Auschwitz; he never permits his reader the luxury of believing that his represented world is an invented one" (341). Thus, while there are elements of fiction in *Night*, they never detract from its stark realism. Its novelistic devices enhance the vividness of the author's experiences for the reader without misrepresenting them. Thus, while the Yiddish work possesses vivid emotions and a deep portrayal of Wiesel's self, the French work offers these same things but shaded with a different literary approach. Thus, contrary to Seidman's claim, Wiesel is able

to render his autobiographical self even more revelatory and complete in *Night* than it is in the Yiddish. The following analysis will explore Seidman's research, and trace the origin of the autobiographical Holocaust novel to uncover a more fitting theory about Wiesel's motives, method and literary achievement.

The starting point for Seidman's analysis is Wiesel's declaration that *Night* is an edited version of his earlier Yiddish work. In his 1995 book, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea*, the author discusses his extensive process of revision and the further changes stipulated by his French editor, Jérôme Lindon. Their joint editing led to "significant differences in length among the successive versions. I had cut down the original manuscript from 862 pages to the 245 of the published Yiddish edition. Lindon edited *La Nuit* down to 178" (*Memoirs* 319). Significant alterations occurred in the cutting of 67 pages of manuscript; this loss is not simply a consequence of translation. In gauging the significance of these massive revisions, Seidman reaches the conclusion that Wiesel's numerous, specific declarations of rage have been removed and replaced with a general mysticism. She cites four specific locations within the texts that support her assertion: the dedications, one passage in both texts that concerns the behavior of liberated Jews, and the beginning and end of both works. A careful examination of her evidence in light of Wiesel's modification of the autobiographical genre suggests a different conclusion.

From its very first page, *Night* is more than a mere translation of its Yiddish predecessor. Its dedication, in which Wiesel offers his work to his family, appears markedly different from the earlier version. Seidman feels this is the first indication of a sacrifice of rage. She writes, "While the French memoir is dedicated 'in memory of my parents and of my little sister, Tsipora,' the Yiddish names both victims and perpetrators: 'This book is dedicated to the eternal memory of my mother Sarah, my father Shlomo, and my little sister Tsipora—who were killed by the German murderers'" (Seidman 5). Seidman sees the removal of "German murderers" as proof that Wiesel sought to redirect accountability from men, in this case Germans, to God. By removing the oppressors' ethnicity, she believes that he attempts to alleviate the guilt of the German people. Beyond this, she feels that by specifying murder, the Yiddish conveys rage that is absent from the French. The dedication of *Night* does not state that Wiesel's family has been murdered, only that he wishes to remember them. Seidman sees the missing pronouncement of murder, as well as the missing indictment of specific perpetrators, as early confirmation of her theory. While competently

employed in Seidman's argument, these illustrations can be considered from a different perspective. Wiesel's aim in removing references to Germans could have been an expansion of guilt rather than a reprieve. By indicating that Germans are solely responsible for his family's murder, as he does in the Yiddish text, Wiesel thwarts his plan to condemn the whole of humanity who stood by and allowed the Holocaust to happen. By removing specifics, then, he amplifies rather than suppresses his rage. Also, he places the focus back on his family and his desire to honor them. Not sharing the dedication with their murderers can be viewed as a tribute Wiesel pays to his parents and sister.

Evidence continues, Seidman claims, in a passage appearing in both texts, which again specifies ethnicity only in the Yiddish version. The quote records Wiesel's impressions of Holocaust survivors after their liberation. In the Yiddish text he writes, "Early the next day Jewish boys ran off to Weimar to steal clothing and potatoes. And to rape German girls" (Seidman 6). The starkly different French text reads, "On the following day, some of the young men went to Weimar to get some potatoes and clothes—and to sleep with girls" (*Night* 109). The boys and their intended acts have obviously been altered, as Seidman rightly declares: "In the Yiddish, the survivors are explicitly described as Jews and their victims (or intended victims) as German; in the French they are just young men and women" (6). While the removal of ethnicity and the Jewish desire to perpetrate crimes against Germans is critical, it is not necessarily important for the reasons Seidman suggests. She claims Wiesel attempted to keep his true feelings from surfacing in the French version: "To describe the differences between these versions as a stylistic reworking is to miss the extent of what is suppressed in the French" (6). The element that Seidman believes "suppressed" is the author's rage against German criminals. She believes that his goal to eliminate human culpability is vividly portrayed.

As concerns the theft and rapes in the Yiddish that disappear in the French, Wiesel's own statements suggest that he is protecting the image of the Jewish victims. In his aforementioned memoir, he states that he will not tarnish their image for any reason, even if doing so serves the facts: "Moreover, I must warn you that certain events will be omitted, especially those episodes that might embarrass friends and, of course, those that might damage the Jewish people. Call it prudence or cowardice, whatever you like" (*Memoirs* 17). Clearly, Wiesel feels strongly for the victims, and crafts his text around this empathy. There was no need to safeguard Jews in his first work because his audience was Yiddish-speaking,

and thus, predominantly Jewish. However, once he introduced his story to non-Jews, Wiesel undertook specific efforts not to injure his fellows and to avoid obscuring their image as victims. Thus, the protection of these survivors, and not an attempt to increase his audience and influence, can be seen as his motivation for eliminating references to Jewish crimes.

Another source of evidence for Seidman is Wiesel's reworking of the introduction and conclusion of the Yiddish text for their inclusion in *Night*. The original text begins with a detailed description of Wiesel's hometown, complete with a "historical account of the region" (Seidman 5). On the other hand, the French text summarizes the location in a single sentence. Instead, its introduction concentrates on a youthful Wiesel's interaction with Moshe the Beadle. It claims that this local man nurtured the boy's budding interest in Jewish mysticism, a tradition customarily pursued by experienced scholars that uses prayer and meditation to answer cosmological questions about God and his relationship with man. Moshe also appears in the Yiddish, but not until much later, and not as the person who "initiates Eliezer into the mysteries of Kabbalah" (Manseau par. 49). In the earlier text, Moshe tries in vain to warn local Jews about the Nazi's diabolical intentions. He plays no spiritual part, nor any direct role in Wiesel's life. Seidman claims the addition of mysticism and its placement at the forefront of the French text indicate Wiesel's conscious decision to focus on God rather than man. However, she overlooks the fact that the original text has many religious references that mirror the spiritual questions of *Night*. According to Peter Manseau, author and former administrator of Boston University's Division of Religious and Theological Studies, "Not only are all the French version's famous passages about God present in the Yiddish volume, but the latter contains other equally harrowing examples of the young death camp inmate's struggle with his faith. In fact, God's role in *Un de Velt Hot Geshvign* is not entirely unlike that in *Night*" (Manseau par. 31). Thus, Seidman's assertion that Wiesel's mysticism is a strictly French development is unreliable, and what remains of her idea is the movement of mysticism to the foreground by way of the new introduction. The motive for this reorganization gains clarity when viewed as the author's turn towards novelistic technique.

By replacing the lengthy description of his obscure hometown with the story of Moshe, Wiesel disregards the autobiographical custom of presenting time linearly and begins, as a novelist would, at the point where he can best grasp the reader's attention. In this way, he avoids the constricting design of previous works of which renowned

autobiographical theorist Roy Pascal wrote, "The linear narrative form of the autobiography imposes a distortion on the truth" (Elbaz 10). In other words, Wiesel avoids the pitfalls of autobiographers who present their lives as one steady and consistently accumulating stream of events. Since neither life nor memory develops in this linear, non-reflexive way, Wiesel is wise to choose an alternate portrayal. By dispensing with chronology, Wiesel focuses on the event he perceives as the true beginning of his story, not simply the life event that occurred first. In this way, he presents his self in an individualized way. Additionally, Wiesel seizes an opportunity to establish symbolism in the introduction to *Night*. Moshe's struggle parallels Wiesel's efforts. The character attempts to warn townspeople of the Nazis' aims, but they will not heed his warnings: "I wanted to come back, and to warn you. And see how it is, no one will listen to me" (*Night* 5). Moshe's desperate attempt to connect with his community mirrors Wiesel's enterprise. His first autobiography was an effort to share his tale, but it did not deliver his message to those who needed it most. With his second text, Wiesel reaches out to non-Jewish readers to explain the implications of the Holocaust in their lives, and even more, the effect of their lives on the Holocaust. The inaction and subsequent slaughter of the townspeople symbolizes the apathetic world that allowed the Nazis to perpetrate the Holocaust unchecked. By moving this story to the beginning, Wiesel makes it his first priority to show how indifference and inaction permit tragedy to occur. By drawing these connections between his characters and audience, Wiesel holds man responsible for the pain of the world. This is not, as Seidman asserts, the removal of blame, but instead an indictment of the world. If only the Jews of his town had fled; if only the world had acted. The text that follows this opening metaphor presents the brutal consequences of that inaction.

Seidman's final concern is the disparity between the conclusions of the works. While both endings depict Wiesel's liberation, they do not conclude similarly. In both texts, a hospitalized Wiesel looks in a mirror for the first time since his internment began. The French version ends in two sentences. "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (*Night* 109). However, the earlier text continues. After seeing his skeletal reflection, the Yiddish Wiesel reveals that he "raised a balled-up fist and smashed the mirror, breaking the image that lived within it" (Seidman 7). He discusses the disappointing legacy of the Holocaust, stating that "Germans and anti-Semites persuade the world that the story of the six million Jewish martyrs is a

fantasy, and the naïve world will probably believe them, if not today, then tomorrow or the next day" (7). Seidman believes this additional text shows "a survivor who, ten years after liberation, is furious with the world's disinterest in his history . . . depressed by the apparent pointlessness of writing a book" (7-8). She contends that the hostile voice of the Yiddish is not allowed to replace the crippled corpse of the French. She writes that "precisely the image that Wiesel shattered at the end of his Yiddish work," is the very one he "resurrects to end the French one" (8). She believes *Night* shows a devitalized Wiesel seeking a larger audience, but there is another perspective available. This frustration and anger may be products of Wiesel's inability to effectively communicate an account to preserve the memory of the Holocaust. What Seidman should have referred to was the "pointlessness of writing" the *Yiddish book*, a work that, for Wiesel's grand aims, was crafted incorrectly and directed towards an already-omniscient Jewish audience. The traditional narrative formula could not convey the appalling reality of his experience and therefore, at its conclusion, Wiesel believed his message was incommunicable. Out of frustration came hostility and Wiesel wrote from that emotion, lashing out first at his own image and then the world. However, neither attack granted him the outlet he desired. Eventually, in writing *Night*, Wiesel found the way to depict his experience. Afterwards, the frustration that drove his fist through the mirror subsided. He mastered his fear that the Holocaust would be forgotten by creating a powerful new form of narrative that enabled his audience to understand, and therefore, remember.

After examining Seidman's specifics, it is clear that the Yiddish and French works are much more than a source text and translation. Their differences extend beyond language, presenting varying portrayals of their author. However, the divergence of *Night* is not the result of eliminated rage, but rather, the product of a new form of story telling—the autobiographical novel. The French version reveals Wiesel's self in a way the straightforward Yiddish version could not. By leaving the detail-oriented, testimonial style behind, the author was able to concentrate on the most important aspect of an autobiography: identity. A genuine appreciation of Wiesel's literary accomplishment must begin with an understanding of the state of the genre, specifically the Holocaust narrative, at the time he began writing.

Wiesel's work is exceptional for its innovation, but *Night* is largely significant for having been written at all. There was a pronounced lack of writing about the war in its

aftermath. In her essay, "Fact, Fiction, Fascism," Holocaust scholar Barbara Foley introduces her interesting explanation by stating, "During the two decades after 1945, the great majority of writers simply avoided the stage of history" (331). Foley believes that writers felt unable to properly address the Holocaust. Genocide was so unfathomable that man lacked the thought process necessary to comprehend it, and consequently, writers lacked the language to discuss it. For support, she cites literary critic George Steiner who states, "What man has inflicted upon man in very recent time has affected the writer's primary material—the sum and potential of human behavior—and it presses on the brain with a new darkness" (330). Because man's potential for evil exceeded all previously estimated boundaries, writers no longer knew how to accurately represent man.

Foley believes the impact on writers was especially intense for autobiographers. She claims that prior to the Holocaust, these writers presented their lives as examples of what they believed to be the typical path of man, the "journey toward self-definition and knowledge" (333). Their works were modeled upon and shaped by this view of humanity. However, after the stability of this ideology was destroyed, they could not firmly believe man's fundamental path was evolution towards a higher plane of existence. In his essay, "Trivializing Memory," Wiesel agrees by stating, "Auschwitz represents the negation of human progress and casts doubt on its validity" (*Kingdom* 166). He feels the existence of death camps raises doubts that progress is man's driving force. For autobiographers, the consequence of this uncertainty was extreme. Once confusion about how to view themselves arose, writers lost command of the genre. In his work, *Altered Egos*, G. Thomas Couser explains that autobiographers generally enjoy "a natural, inevitable and relatively secure authority over their texts because they initiate and control them as well as serve as their subjects" (16). Because he is the key player in his tale, the autobiographer is assumed to be the foremost expert on his own existence. However, after the Holocaust, this status was lost as writers no longer understood their subjects, i.e., themselves. At this point, Foley argues, with the quest for enlightenment no longer a realistic representation of the species, autobiographers began searching for a new and more accurate perspective from which to write about themselves as men.

Prior to *Night*, those who felt compelled to bear witness to their Holocaust experience displayed this loss of authority by writing in a testimonial style. These documents, while highly detailed about places and events, were not explicit about the self. Wiesel fell in with

this group, following examples of “Yiddish Holocaust memoirs [that] modeled themselves on the local chronical (*pinkes*) or memorial book (*yizker-bukh*) in which catalogs of names, addresses and occupations served as form and motivation” (Seidman 5). Without an appropriate philosophical foundation, these reports were all that could be produced. As Foley writes, it is “not that the Holocaust is unknowable but that its full dimensions are inaccessible to the ideological frameworks that we have inherited from the liberal era” (333). In other words, while survivors knew what they had lived through, they lacked a frame of reference with which to explain its “full dimensions.” Yet, while survivors could not fully express what had happened or why, they recognized the importance of preserving the memories. While the atrocities would not be immediately understandable, survivors knew they must not be forgotten. They therefore concentrated on places and people involved in the tragedies. In this way, their testimonies fell short as autobiographies because they did not address individual psychological or emotional journeys.

How Wiesel realized the testimonial form needed a new ideology is unknown, but he clearly recognized it before writing *Night*. To achieve these aims, the author created a new perspective from which to relate his tale, an identity theory unlike any that preceded it. Autobiographies of the past enumerated multiple events that influenced the creation of one distinct self. However, Wiesel realized the Holocaust was not merely one in the lifetime of occurrences. For survivors, it was *the* event. He also understood that survivors were not the same after as they were before. They lived through traumas that damaged and often destroyed the core of their pre-Holocaust identities. Wiesel realized that the traditional autobiographical ideology would never account for this impact on a survivor’s identity. Therefore, he broke from that form, and portrayed his self as a collection of identities that were created, affected and destroyed by this one central experience. He wrote of the daily trauma that fractured his self-conception, and led to the formation of new identities. The result was a work that embodied autobiographical scholar Judith M. Melton’s theory that disruptive changes, experienced during identity formation, rupture a subject’s sense of self. In her book, *The Face of Exile*, Melton writes, “Social discontinuity, particularly uprooting experience and general upheaval, frequently breaks the thread of memory and consciousness and fragments the sense of self” (73). This is the very situation outlined in *Night*—a fracturing of identity caused by forced relocation and prolonged, unimaginable cruelty.

To explore the damage to his inner workings, Wiesel employed an adaptable narrator, a literary representation of his selves, with privileged information and creative leeway. The storyteller existed in the moment as he revealed it, but simultaneously viewed scenes with hindsight. In this way, he understood his self throughout each experience, and recognized moments when his identity was affected in order to report on these changes. Because Wiesel presented the story through this privileged narrator and not as a straightforward account, he illustrated his transforming self in a way testimonials could not. The narrator understood the long-term effects of events at the very moment they occurred. He was therefore able to endow each moment with its ultimate significance to heighten the reader's involvement with the text. Through this narration, Wiesel's audience witnessed and experienced changes to his identity at the same moment that he (as narrator) experienced them. In this way, the reader participated in Wiesel's journey as with the reader would of main character of a novel.

Wiesel's narrator reveals three categories of identity fracturing: the disruption of his childhood self, a battle between the inhuman self of imprisonment and the residual childhood identity, and the detachment of his physical from mental life. The splintering of his childhood self is seen on the first night he and his father are imprisoned. When a guard beats his father, Wiesel is amazed by his own lack of response: "I did not move. What had happened to me? My father had just been struck, before my very eyes, and I had not flickered an eyelid. I had looked on and said nothing. Yesterday, I should have sunk my nails into the criminal's flesh. Had I changed so much, then? So quickly?" (*Night* 37). Wiesel no longer conceives of himself as he did only one day before, and for good reason. He is no longer that child; everything he knew, including his own self, has changed overnight. Because it is a narrator who describes this event, Wiesel can impart reflection on his change at the very the moment it occurs.

By the middle of the text, Wiesel is losing his humanity, and appears unmoved by the horrors that surround him. He writes, "The thousands who had died daily at Auschwitz and at Birkenau in the crematory ovens no longer troubled me" (59). After witnessing an execution, he coldly recollects that he "found the soup excellent that evening" (60). This is not the spiritual Wiesel of the introduction. The boy interested in the mysteries of Jewish faith is fading and yet that identity fights to remain. A short time later, Wiesel is deeply grieved by the execution of a young boy. He later reflects, "That night the soup tasted of corpses" (62). From this, the reader can see that Wiesel's initial identity persists despite the

appearance of a new, calloused self. Thus, at least two identities exist simultaneously. Through the symbolic act of eating his soup, Wiesel links these two moments, increasing the weight of each encounter by illustrating his alteration through them.

The last category is the separation of Wiesel's mental and physical existences. While most people experience them concurrently, e.g. by thinking about a desired activity and then acting it out, the narrator experiences a detachment of mind and body. On one of the forced runs imposed by the Nazis, the author notes, "I was dragging with me this skeletal body which weighed so much. If only I could have got rid of it! In spite of my efforts not to think about it, I could feel myself as two entities —my body and me" (81). Wiesel's mental and physical selves have divided into separate worlds, and he can exist in only one realm at a time. Tormented by the threat of becoming an inhumane replica of his former self, he now struggles to balance these two sides as well. Thus, the sagacious narrator guides the reader through Wiesel's evolution, from past to present, through compassionate and indifferent selves to his fractured psychological and physical identities. Through his novelistic narrator, Wiesel found his way to deliver all of these contrary and diverse representations of his self.

Wiesel's innovative depiction was not only a presentation of his fractured identity, but also a means of rebuilding it. While nothing would erase his memories or dull his loss, the process of arranging and communicating his experience had curative powers. The monumental impact of his words affected him more than any other. Creating a perspective from which to meaningfully consider the Holocaust was Wiesel's goal, and in accomplishing it, he helped not only the world, but also himself. In documenting his damaged identity, he trod the path to reconstructing it. As Melton writes, "The autobiographical act, cataloging this disintegrating self and creating new strategies for formulating it, becomes a healing process" (80). Telling the story of his inner life, remembering and ruminating upon who he once was and what he had become, helped Wiesel to unify and ultimately reclaim his identity.

The disparity between Wiesel's texts is clear, but the difference Naomi Seidman perceives as a suppression of emotion in the latter work is more of a by-product of the author's concentration on identity. In writing *Night*, Wiesel focused on his self, creating a text with the individualism that was missing from the testimonial form. Wiesel pursued this personalization, not to increase readership, but because he believed it was essential to communicate both his experience and his self, both the external situation and its internal

effect. This move towards introspection was a shift in perspective, not a sacrifice of emotion. Novelistic devices and a thorough investigation of identity increased the autobiographical element of Wiesel's work, and consequently, the impact of his tale.

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COMMENTARY

Meredithe McNamara

As Jennifer Flynn rightly asks, “How does a reader come to terms with two dissimilar autobiographies produced by a single author?” She explores the answer to this question within the context of Elie Wiesel’s two starkly different autobiographical works, *And the World Kept Silent* and *Night*. Flynn takes special care to tell her reader that she is not the first to attempt to explain why Wiesel might portray his self in two completely different ways, especially as she poses many of her arguments to counter those of noted literary scholar Naomi Seidman. Flynn organizes her essay as a point-by-point rebuttal of Seidman’s theories in an effort to establish the validity of her own claims on what Wiesel was trying to accomplish in paring down his Yiddish work into *Night*. Flynn’s analysis delves into the heart of Wiesel’s self as both a Holocaust survivor and a writer, his personal and literary intentions and how the end result functions to uphold these latter two. Ultimately, we see Flynn assert herself and her conclusions as the equal if not the superior of Seidman’s theories.

Flynn also gives us an insightful look at the ever-changing genre of autobiography, focusing her discussion on the inception of the autobiographic Holocaust novel with publication of *Night*. Here, Flynn looks at the genre itself in an effort to explain how Wiesel’s work revolutionized it. She uses a community of Holocaust scholars to both illustrate the identity crisis that survivors faced and the expertise with which Wiesel transcended these limitations. Also, she makes the keen observation that a major component of Wiesel’s innovation is the employment of narrative devices. His Yiddish work, she states, while conforming to the pre-established conventions of autobiography, was not flexible enough to address his identity crisis and adequately portray his self. She draws directly from Wiesel’s text to substantiate these claims with examples that show Wiesel’s use of literary devices that were heretofore unique to narrative, citing the use of an adaptive narrator, a nonlinear plot and metaphor and symbolism.

What do we learn from “Reshaping the Autobiographical Self”? Flynn gives her reader certain understanding of how widespread the effects of mass atrocity can be, in literature and the lives of the writers who seek to portray them. We learn just how much identity figures in the mind of an autobiographer and how Wiesel’s Yiddish work serves as an example of a transitional piece that allowed Wiesel to find his newly-defined self in

Night. In a new age where we are capable of more destructive powers than ever before, Flynn's theories have a special relevance.