

The Focus on "Night" as a Symbol

The choice of *La Nuit* (Night) as the title of Elie Wiesel's documentary work is propitious in that it epitomizes both physical darkness and the darkness of the soul. Because young Elie and his father observe the sacrifice of a truckload of children in a fiery ditch and watch the flaming corpses light up the night sky at Birkenau, the darkness evokes multiple implications. The crisply methodical work of the Nazi death camps spreads over night and day and actualizes the fanatical intent of Hitler to wipe out all traces of European Jewry. The night that enshrouds their humanity obliterates mercy and human feeling: So long as the perpetrators of consummate evil can view genocide as a worthy job, the "night" of their soullessness shines in medals and commendations for their commitment to the Nazi world view, which pictures a future of blue-eyed blondes, all derived from Gentile backgrounds.

More significant than these intertwined forms of night is the darkening of young Elie's idealism. Once moved to identify with past martyrs of the Babylonian Captivity and the Spanish Inquisition, he finds himself standing outside the romantic episodes of historical anti-Semitism on a dismal scene that his eyes absorb in disbelief. He refrains from wondering if the smoky wreath over Auschwitz's crematories contains the ashes of his mother and sisters. By depersonalizing the fears that lurk in his subconscious and that overwhelm the badly shaken Chlomo, Elie concentrates on food, warmth, and rest. The instinctive need to pray falters on his mind's surface, yet, deep within, he continues to fight the descent of spiritual night that threatens to obliterate God from his being.

On a global scale, Wiesel the writer chooses to incubate the darkness of his memories for a decade, then, at the age of twenty-six, to heed the urgent request of François Mauriac to unveil to the world a front-row memoir of Hitler's hellish night, the palpable blackness that fills his eyes with smoke, his nostrils with the stench of scorched flesh, and his ears with inarticulate cries of the dying. The particularized scenes he flashes on his verbal screen become mere suggestions of a reality that only Holocaust survivors can share. Even though words will always fail his purpose, he persists in recreating his battle against the sooty residue that coats his soul and robs him of his most precious tie with childhood — the orthodox faith that motivated him to pray, read, study, and tread the path of Hasidic Judaism.

In Wiesel's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he recalled a young man discovering "the kingdom of the night." Like Dante winding downward on a horrific spiral into Hell, young Elie questions how such negation of light can rob the twentieth century of its progress in human relations. At the age of fifty-eight, Elie the Nobelist confronted the reality of the metaphoric night: the silence of apathy, the wordlessness of bystanders who knew the truth of Hitler's death camps but who took no action, made no objection. Like the lone crier who alarms the village to fire, theft, or massacres of old, Elie the Nobelist, Elie the cavalier, finds no rest in his battle against the incessant fall of night. Wherever the shroud of inhumanity descends — on prisons, battlefields, or the pathless flight of refugees — he stirs himself to sound the alarm, to bid the world to strike back at an enveloping cynicism that tempts humanity to turn aside and say nothing.