

and ceaseless speaking engagements, from New York public schools to the Nobel prize ceremony. A paradox may reside here, not necessarily due to Wiesel, but to history and society: "Learn to be silent."

Elie Wiesel was born on September 30, 1928, a few days before Simchas Torah (Joy of the Torah), when the year's cycle of Bible readings commences anew. His birthplace, Sighet in the Carpathian Mountains, was a largely Jewish town that passed from Romania to Hungary in 1940; thus his ambient languages were Yiddish, Hebrew, Romanian, Hungarian, and also German. Wiesel's father, Shlomo, was a shopkeeper, his adored mother, Sarah, the daughter of Dodye Feig. From Reb Dodye—"cultured and erudite . . . a festival for the heart and mind . . . a marvelous singer"—Elie imbibed a fervent Hasidism, and he steeped himself in Talmud.

It was not until Passover 1944, when he was fifteen, that Hungarians and German Nazis set up a ghetto in Sighet and deported the town's Jews. Elie's mother and the youngest of his three sisters perished in Auschwitz; he himself stayed with his father, who died after the death march to Buchenwald in January 1945. Upon liberation, Wiesel went to France. In 1949, he became a foreign correspondent for the Tel Aviv daily *Yediot Aharonot*; in 1958, he settled in New York, covered the United Nations, and worked for the Yiddish daily *Forward*.

Years after the nightmare of 1944–45, Wiesel wrote a Yiddish memoir of his experience. Cutting it from 862 to 245 pages, he published *Un di velt hot geshvign* (And the World Stayed Silent, 1956). Cut even further, the French version was entitled *La Nuit* (Night, 1958), symbolizing the horror rather than shaking a prophetic fist. Now Wiesel's style, recalling Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and *The Plague* as well as Samuel Beckett's stripped tableaux, was spare, mostly understated, and refrained from moral or psychological comment. For instance, at the book's end, after his image of a corpse gazing in the mirror, Wiesel's Yiddish version had turned angry and skeptical: "Ilse Koch, the sadist of Buchenwald, is a happy wife and mother. War criminals stroll in the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past has been erased, buried."

As for an American edition, dozens of publishers "sent their regrets," says Wiesel. "Some thought the book too slender (American readers seemed to prefer fatter volumes), others too depressing (American readers seemed to prefer optimistic books). Some felt its subject was too little known, others that it was too well known." Scribner's had "certain misgivings" because it was merely "a document." Finally, Hill and Wang bought the book, giving Wiesel an advance of \$100. *Night* came out in 1960, around the time of Adolf Eichmann's arrest in Argentina. For several years it sold little, but it has become, after Anne Frank's diary, the most frequently read story to emerge from the Holocaust.

What kind of book is *Night*, what genre—memoir or novel? And what makes it part of Jewish American literature? The two questions bear on each other because most Americans, at our distant remove of time and space, cannot organically absorb what happened in Nazi-ridden Europe from 1939 to 1945. Elie Wiesel, trying (as he says) to "unite the language of man with the silence of the dead," gave shape to his account. The rhythm of Jewish holidays, the allusions to liturgy, the image of night, the figure of sons and fathers: such things make *Night* seem a Bildungsroman, a novel depicting one young person's growth and "education," however grim. Yet Wiesel meant this book to be stark, like the ghetto chronicles.

Of course, memory and the act of writing inevitably recompose the past, reenvision the fact of things, so that *Night* is a strange amalgam. American readers did not immediately respond, but before long this book became almost an article of faith, a spiritual and moral touchstone. No American writer—not Malamud or Roth, not even Bellow or Singer—could possess the gravitas to say: *Le silence de Dieu est Dieu*, "The silence of God is God." Nor could they, for that matter, have spoken as simply to Ronald Reagan when, in 1985, the president accompanied Germany's chancellor to lay a wreath at the Bitburg cemetery, where SS men are buried: "That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS."

Wiesel has divided his professional life between public activities and writing. In 1965, during the cold war, he went to Russia to witness the plight of Soviet Jewry, long before the emigration movement; from this came *The Jews of Silence* (1966). In 1979, while leading the effort to establish a Holocaust museum in Washington, he went as a witness to Cambodia. He received the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize. Meanwhile, in 1969, he married Marion Wiesel, who translates his work from French, and they had a son in 1972.

Between 1961 and 1970, Wiesel published the novels *Dawn*, *The Accident*, *The Gates of the Forest*, *The Town beyond the Wall*, and *A Beggar in Jerusalem*. His lectures at the 92nd Street Y in New York City produced *Souls on Fire* (1972), portraits and legends of Hasidism, the popular movement of devotion and ecstatic prayer and song founded in the eighteenth century by Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov. Then came *Messengers of God* (1976), personal meditations on Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Job—figures who gripped Wiesel as a child. "Of all the Biblical tales, the one about Isaac is perhaps the most timeless and most relevant to our generation," he writes, since the word *holocaust* originally designates a sacrifice, burnt offering.

Besides Hasidism and Bible, Elie Wiesel's antecedents are Camus, Beckett, Malraux, Dostoyevsky, Racine—not Henry James, whom Cynthia Ozick adored, or Allen Ginsberg's Walt Whitman. Yet the Romanian Jew, French novelist, and American citizen first spoke for survivors to an American public unaware of them in its midst and insisted on keeping memory alive.

From Night

Chapter 3. [Arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau]

The cherished objects we had brought with us thus far were left behind in the train, and with them, at last, our illusions.

Every two yards or so an SS¹ man held his Tommy gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the crowd.

An SS noncommissioned officer came to meet us, a truncheon in his hand. He gave the order:

"Men to the left! Women to the right!"

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father's hand: we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sisters moving away to the right. Tzipora held Mother's hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking. My father held onto my hand.

Behind me, an old man fell to the ground. Near him was an SS man, putting his revolver back in its holster.

My hand shifted on my father's arm. I had one thought—not to lose him. Not to be left alone.

The SS officers gave the order:

1. Abbreviation for *Schutzstaffel*, literally "protection echelon" (German). This unit of Nazis was in charge of intelligence, central security, policing

action, and mass murder of "inferiors" and "undesirables."

"Form fives!"

Commotion. At all costs we must keep together.

"Here, kid, how old are you?"

It was one of the prisoners who asked me this. I could not see his face, but his voice was tense and weary.

"I'm not quite fifteen yet."

"No. Eighteen."

"But I'm not," I said. "Fifteen."

"Fool. Listen to what I say."

Then he questioned my father, who replied:

"Fifty."

The other grew more furious than ever.

"No, not fifty. Forty. Do you understand? Eighteen and forty."

He disappeared into the night shadows. A second man came up, spitting oaths at us.

"What have you come here for, you sons of bitches? What are you doing here, eh?"

Someone dared to answer him.

"What do you think? Do you suppose we've come here for our own pleasure? Do you think we asked to come?"

A little more, and the man would have killed him.

"You shut your trap, you filthy swine, or I'll squash you right now! You'd have done better to have hanged yourselves where you were than to come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you at Auschwitz? Haven't you heard about it? In 1944?"

No, we had not heard. No one had told us. He could not believe his ears. His tone of voice became increasingly brutal.

"Do you see that chimney over there? See it? Do you see those flames? (Yes, we did see the flames.) Over there—that's where you're going to be taken. That's your grave, over there. Haven't you realized it yet? You dumb bastards, don't you understand anything? You're going to be burned. Frizzled away. Turned into ashes."

He was growing hysterical in his fury. We stayed motionless, petrified. Surely it was all a nightmare? An unimaginable nightmare?

I heard murmurs around me.

"We've got to do something. We can't let ourselves be killed. We can't go like beasts to the slaughter. We've got to revolt."

There were a few sturdy young fellows among us. They had knives on them, and they tried to incite the others to throw themselves on the armed guards.

One of the young men cried:

"Let the world learn of the existence of Auschwitz. Let everybody hear about it, while they can still escape. . . ."

But the older ones begged their children not to do anything foolish:

"You must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head. That's the teaching of our sages. . . ."

The wind of revolt died down. We continued our march toward the square. In the middle stood the notorious Dr. Mengele² (a typical SS officer: a cruel

2. Known as the "angel of death," Josef Mengele (1911–ca. 1979), camp doctor at Auschwitz, conducted medical experiments on twins, dwarfs,

giants, and others, and was responsible, directly and indirectly, for the deaths of many of Auschwitz's prisoners.

face, but not devoid of intelligence, and wearing a monocle); a conductor's baton in his hand, he was standing among the other officers. The baton moved unremittingly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left.

I was already in front of him:

"How old are you?" he asked, in an attempt at a paternal tone of voice.

"Eighteen." My voice was shaking.

"Are you in good health?"

"Yes."

"What's your occupation?"

Should I say that I was a student?

"Farmer," I heard myself say.

This conversation cannot have lasted more than a few seconds. It had seemed like an eternity to me.

The baton moved to the left. I took half a step forward. I wanted to see first where they were sending my father. If he went to the right, I would go after him.

The baton once again pointed to the left for him too. A weight was lifted from my heart.

We did not yet know which was the better side, right or left; which road led to prison and which to the crematory. But for the moment I was happy; I was near my father. Our procession continued to move slowly forward.

Another prisoner came up to us:

"Satisfied?"

"Yes," someone replied.

"Poor devils, you're going to the crematory."

He seemed to be telling the truth. Not far from us, flames were leaping up from a ditch, gigantic flames. They were burning something. A lorry drew up at the pit and delivered its load—little children. Babies! Yes, I saw it—saw it with my own eyes . . . those children in the flames. (Is it surprising that I could not sleep after that? Sleep had fled from my eyes.)

So this was where we were going. A little farther on was another and larger ditch for adults.

I pinched my face. Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare. . . . Soon I should wake with a start, my heart pounding, and find myself back in the bedroom of my childhood, among my books. . . .

My father's voice drew me from my thoughts:

"It's a shame . . . a shame that you couldn't have gone with your mother.

. . . I saw several boys of your age going with their mothers. . . ."

His voice was terribly sad. I realized that he did not want to see what they were going to do to me. He did not want to see the burning of his only son.

My forehead was bathed in cold sweat. But I told him that I did not believe that they could burn people in our age, that humanity would never tolerate it. . . .

"Humanity? Humanity is not concerned with us. Today anything is allowed. Anything is possible, even these crematories. . . ."

His voice was choking.

"Father," I said, "if that is so, I don't want to wait here. I'm going to run to the electric wire. That would be better than slow agony in the flames."

He did not answer. He was weeping. His body was shaken convulsively. Around us, everyone was weeping. Someone began to recite the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. I do not know if it has ever happened before, in the long history of the Jews, that people have ever recited the prayer for the dead for themselves.

"*Yitgadal veyitkadach shmé raba*. . . . May His Name be blessed and magnified. . . ."3 whispered my father.

For the first time, I felt revolt rise up in me. Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for?

We continued our march. We were gradually drawing closer to the ditch, from which an infernal heat was rising. Still twenty steps to go. If I wanted to bring about my own death, this was the moment. Our line had now only fifteen paces to cover. I bit my lips so that my father would not hear my teeth chattering. Ten steps still. Eight. Seven. We marched slowly on, as though following a hearse at our own funeral. Four steps more. Three steps. There it was now, right in front of us, the pit and its flames. I gathered all that was left of my strength, so that I could break from the ranks and throw myself upon the barbed wire. In the depths of my heart, I bade farewell to my father, to the whole universe; and, in spite of myself, the words formed themselves and issued in a whisper from my lips: *Yitgadal veyitkadach shmé raba*. . . . May His name be blessed and magnified. . . . My heart was bursting. The moment had come. I was face to face with the Angel of Death. . . .

No. Two steps from the pit we were ordered to turn to the left and made to go into a barracks.

I pressed my father's hand. He said:

"Do you remember Madame Shcächter,4 in the train?"

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

The barracks we had been made to go into was very long. In the roof were some blue-tinged skylights. The antechamber of Hell must look like this. So many crazed men, so many cries, so much bestial brutality!

There were dozens of prisoners to receive us, truncheons in their hands, striking out anywhere, at anyone, without reason. Orders:

"Strip! Fast! *Los!* Keep only your belts and shoes in your hands. . . ."

We had to throw our clothes at one end of the barracks. There was already

3. The first words of the Kaddish.

4. In Chapter 2 of *Night*, a woman in Wiesel's railway car who went mad during the journey to

Auschwitz and saw "a terrible fire"—which, on arrival, became true.

a great heap there. New suits and old, torn coats, rags. For us, this was the true equality: nakedness. Shivering with the cold.

Some SS officers moved about in the room, looking for strong men. If they were so keen on strength, perhaps one should try and pass oneself off as sturdy? My father thought the reverse. It was better not to draw attention to oneself. Our fate would then be the same as the others. (Later, we were to learn that he was right. Those who were selected that day were enlisted in the *Sonder-Kommando*,5 the unit which worked in the crematories. Bela Katz—son of a big tradesman from our town—had arrived at Birkenau6 with the first transport, a week before us. When he heard of our arrival, he managed to get word to us that, having been chosen for his strength, he had himself put his father's body into the crematory oven.)

Blows continued to rain down.

"To the barber!"

Belt and shoes in hand, I let myself be dragged off to the barbers. They took our hair off with clippers, and shaved off all the hair on our bodies. The same thought buzzed all the time in my head—not to be separated from my father.

Chapter 9. [Liberation]

I had to stay at Buchenwald until April eleventh. I have nothing to say of my life during this period. It no longer mattered. After my father's death, nothing could touch me any more.

I was transferred to the children's block, where there were six hundred of us.

The front was drawing nearer.

I spent my days in a state of total idleness. And I had but one desire—to eat. I no longer thought of my father or of my mother.

From time to time I would dream of a drop of soup, of an extra ration of soup. . . .

On April fifth, the wheel of history turned.

It was late in the afternoon. We were standing in the block, waiting for an SS man to come and count us. He was late in coming. Such a delay was unknown till then in the history of Buchenwald. Something must have happened.

Two hours later the loudspeakers sent out an order from the head of the camp: all the Jews must come to the assembly place.

This was the end! Hitler was going to keep his promise.

The children in our block went toward the place. There was nothing else we could do. Gustav, the head of the block, made this clear to us with his truncheon. But on the way we met some prisoners who whispered to us:

"Go back to your block. The Germans are going to shoot you. Go back to your block, and don't move."

We went back to our block. We learned on the way that the camp resis-

5. Literally, "Special Squad" (German).

6. Site in Poland of a second concentration camp near Auschwitz.

tance organization had decided not to abandon the Jews and was going to prevent their being liquidated.

As it was late and there was great upheaval—innumerable Jews had passed themselves off as non-Jews—the head of the camp decided that a general roll call would take place the following day. Everybody would have to be present.

The roll call took place. The head of the camp announced that Buchenwald was to be liquidated. Ten blocks of deportees would be evacuated each day. From this moment, there would be no further distribution of bread and soup. And the evacuation began. Every day, several thousand prisoners went through the camp gate and never came back.

On April tenth, there were still about twenty thousand of us in the camp, including several hundred children. They decided to evacuate us all at once, right on until the evening. Afterward, they were going to blow up the camp.

So we were massed in the huge assembly square, in rows of five, waiting to see the gate open. Suddenly, the sirens began to wail. An alert! We went back to the blocks. It was too late to evacuate us that evening. The evacuation was postponed again to the following day.

We were tormented with hunger. We had eaten nothing for six days, except a bit of grass or some potato peelings found near the kitchens.

At ten o'clock in the morning the SS scattered through the camp, moving the last victims toward the assembly place.

Then the resistance movement decided to act. Armed men suddenly rose up everywhere. Bursts of firing. Grenades exploding. We children stayed flat on the ground in the block.

The battle did not last long. Toward noon everything was quiet again. The SS had fled and the resistance had taken charge of the running of the camp.

At about six o'clock in the evening, the first American tank stood at the gates of Buchenwald.

Our first act as free men was to throw ourselves onto the provisions. We thought only of that. Not of revenge, not of our families. Nothing but bread.

And even when we were no longer hungry, there was still no one who thought of revenge. On the following day, some of the young men went to Weimar to get some potatoes and clothes—and to sleep with girls. **But of revenge, not a sign.**

Three days after the liberation of Buchenwald⁷ I became very ill with food poisoning. I was transferred to the hospital and spent two weeks between life and death.

One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto.

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.

1958 (in French)
1960 (in English)

7. The German concentration camp to which Wiesel was transferred after Auschwitz.

Why I Write¹

Why do I write? Perhaps in order not to go mad. Or, on the contrary, to touch the bottom of madness.

Like Samuel Beckett,² the survivor expresses himself “en désespoir de cause,”³ because there is no other way.

Speaking of the solitude of the survivor, the great Yiddish and Hebrew poet and thinker Aaron Zeitlin⁴ addresses those who have left him: his father, dead; his brother, dead; his friends, dead: “You have abandoned me,” he says to them. “You are together, without me. I am here. Alone. And I make words.”

So do I, just like him. I also say words, write words, reluctantly.

There are easier occupations, far more pleasant ones. **But for the survivor, writing is not a profession, but an occupation, a duty.** Camus⁵ calls it “an honor.” As he puts it: “I entered literature through worship.” Other writers said: “Through anger, through love.” Speaking for myself, I would say: **“Through silence.”**

It was by seeking, by probing, silence that I began to discover the perils and power of the word.

I never intended to be a philosopher, or a theologian. The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having survived by chance, I was **duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life.** I knew the story had to be told. **Not to transmit an experience is to betray it; this is what Jewish tradition teaches us.** But how to do this? “When Israel is in exile, so is the word,” says the Zohar.⁶ The word has deserted the meaning it was intended to convey—impossible to make them coincide. The displacement, the shift, is irrevocable. This was never more true than right after the upheaval. We all knew that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words, coherent, intelligible words, our experience of madness on an absolute scale. The walk through flaming night, the silence before and after the selection, the monotonous praying of the condemned, the Kaddish⁷ of the dying, the fear and hunger of the sick, the shame and suffering, the haunted eyes, the demented stares. I thought that I would never be able to speak of them. All words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless, whereas I wanted them to be searing. Where was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language? The language of night was not human; it was primitive, almost animal—hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sound of beating. . . . A brute striking wildly, a body falling; an officer raises his arm and a whole community walks toward a common grave; a soldier shrugs his shoulders, and a thousand families are torn apart, to be reunited only by death. This is the concentration camp language. It negated all other language and took its place. Rather than link, it became wall. Could it be surmounted? Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer to be negative, and yet I also knew that

1. Translated by Rosette C. Lamont.

2. Playwright, novelist, poet who was born in Ireland and wrote in France (1906–1989); author of *Waiting for Godot*, an absurdist play.

3. “As a last resource” (French).

4. 1898–1973.

5. Albert Camus (1913–1960), French novelist, essayist, and playwright who often wrote of the

absurdity of life.

6. Book of Splendor, a 13th-century text of esoteric Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, in Aramaic and Hebrew.

7. Aramaic hymn of praise to God, recited at the end of principal sections of all synagogue services, especially by mourners at services after the death of a close relative.

"no" had to become "yes." It was the wish, the last will of the dead. One had to break the shell enclosing the dark truth, and give it a name. One had to force man to look.

The fear of forgetting: the main obsession of all those who have passed through the universe of the damned. The enemy counted on people's disbelief and forgetfulness. How could one foil this plot? And if memory grew hollow, empty of substance, what would happen to all we had accumulated along the way?

Remember, said the father to his son, and the son to his friend. Gather the names, the faces, the tears. If, by a miracle, you come out of it alive, try to reveal everything, omitting nothing, forgetting nothing. Such was the oath we had all taken: "If, by some miracle, I emerge alive, I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of those whose shadow will fall on mine forever and ever."

This is why I write certain things rather than others: to remain faithful.

Of course, there are times of doubt for the survivor, times when one would give in to weakness, or long for comfort. I hear a voice within me telling me to stop mourning the past. I too want to sing of love and of its magic. I too want to celebrate the sun, and the dawn that heralds the sun. I would like to shout, and shout loudly: "Listen, listen well! I too am capable of victory, do you hear? I too am open to laughter and joy! I want to stride, head high, my face unguarded, without having to point to the ashes over there on the horizon, without having to tamper with facts to hide their tragic ugliness. For a man born blind, God himself is blind, but look, I see, I am not blind." One feels like shouting this, but the shout changes to a murmur. One must make a choice; one must remain faithful. A big word, I know. Nevertheless I use it, it suits me. Having written the things I have written, I feel I can afford no longer to play with words. If I say that the writer in me wants to remain loyal, it is because it is true. This sentiment moves all survivors; they owe nothing to anyone, but everything to the dead.

I owe them my roots and memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself. And since I feel incapable of communicating their cry by shouting, I simply look at them. I see them and I write.

While writing, I question them as I question myself. I believe I said it before, elsewhere: I write to understand as much as to be understood. Will I succeed one day? Wherever one starts from one reaches darkness. God? He remains the God of darkness. Man? Source of darkness. The killers' sneers, their victims' tears, the onlookers' indifference, their complicity and complacency, the divine role in all that: I do not understand. A million children massacred: I shall never understand.

Jewish children: they haunt my writings. I see them again and again. I shall always see them. Hounded, humiliated, bent like the old men who surround them as though to protect them, unable to do so. They are thirsty, the children, and there is no one to give them water. They are hungry, the children, but there is no one to give them a crust of bread. They are afraid, and there is no one to reassure them.

They walk in the middle of the road, like vagabonds. They are on the way to the station, and they will never return. In sealed cars, without air or food,

they travel toward another world; they guess where they are going, they know it, and they keep silent. Tense, thoughtful, they listen to the wind, the call of death in the distance.

All these children, these old people, I see them. I never stop seeing them. I belong to them.

But they, to whom do they belong?

People tend to think that a murderer weakens when facing a child. The child reawakens the killer's lost humanity. The killer can no longer kill the child before him, the child inside him.

Not this time. With us, it happened differently. Our Jewish children had no effect upon the killers. Nor upon the world. Nor upon God.

I think of them, I think of their childhood. Their childhood is a small Jewish town, and this town is no more. They frighten me; they reflect an image of myself, one that I pursue and run from at the same time—the image of a Jewish adolescent who knew no fear, except the fear of God, whose faith was whole, comforting, and not marked by anxiety.

No, I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either. "You will not understand, you will never understand," were the words heard everywhere during the reign of night. I can only echo them. You, who never lived under a sky of blood, will never know what it was like. Even if you read all the books ever written, even if you listen to all the testimonies ever given, you will remain on this side of the wall, you will view the agony and death of a people from afar, through the screen of a memory that is not your own.

An admission of impotence and guilt? I do not know. All I know is that Treblinka and Auschwitz⁸ cannot be told. And yet I have tried. God knows I have tried.

Did I attempt too much or not enough? Out of some fifteen volumes, only three or four penetrate the phantasmagoric realm of the dead. In my other books, through my other books, I try to follow other roads. For it is dangerous to linger among the dead; they hold on to you, and you run the risk of speaking only to them. And so, I forced myself to turn away from them and study other periods, explore other destinies and teach other tales: the Bible and the Talmud,⁹ Hasidism¹ and its fervor, the *Shtetl*² and its songs, Jerusalem and its echoes; the Russian Jews and their anguish, their awakening, their courage. At times, it seems to me that I am speaking of other things with the sole purpose of keeping the essential—the personal experience—unspoken. At times I wonder: And what if I were wrong? Perhaps I should not have heeded my own advice and stayed in my own world with the dead.

But then, I have not forgotten the dead. They have their rightful place even in the works about Rizhin and Koretz,³ Jerusalem and Kolvilläg. Even in my biblical and Midrashic⁴ tales, I pursue their presence, mute and motionless. The presence of the dead then beckons in such tangible ways that it affects even the most removed characters. Thus, they appear on

8. Nazi death and concentration camps.

9. Jewish religious teachings and commentary.

1. A Jewish mystical religious movement originating in 18th-century Eastern Europe.

2. A small Jewish town or village in Eastern Europe.

3. Eastern European towns where Hasidism flour-

ished.

4. Pertaining to the exposition or interpretation of Hebrew Scripture. "Kolvilläg": a shtetl in Transylvania (Romania) invented by Wiesel for his novel *The Oath* (1973). A massacre of Jewish martyrs occurred in medieval Kolvilläg, and in the 16th century a Jewish sage flourished there.

Mount Moriah, where Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, a holocaust offering to their common God. They appear on Mount Nebo, where Moses enters solitude and death. And again in the Pardés⁵ where a certain Elisha ben Abuya,⁶ seething with anger and pain, decided to repudiate his faith. They appear in Hasidic and Talmudic legends in which victims forever need defending against forces that would crush them. Technically, so to speak, they are of course elsewhere, in time and space, but on a deeper, truer plane, the dead are part of every story, of every scene. They die with Isaac, lament with Jeremiah, they sing with the *Besht*,⁷ and, like him, they wait for miracles—but alas, they will not come to pass.

“But what is the connection?” you will ask. Believe there is one. After Auschwitz everything brings us back to Auschwitz. When I speak of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when I evoke Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai⁸ and Rabbi Akiba,⁹ it is the better to understand them in the light of Auschwitz. As for the Maggid of Mezeritch¹ and his disciples, it is to encounter the followers of their followers, that I attempt to reconstruct their spellbound, spellbinding universe. I like to imagine them alive, exuberant, celebrating life and hope. Their happiness is as necessary to me as it was once to themselves. And yet.

How did they manage to keep their faith intact? How did they manage to sing as they went to meet the Angel of Death? I know Hasidim who never vacillated; I respect their strength. I know others who chose rebellion, protest, rage; I respect their courage. For there comes a time when only those who do not believe in God will not cry out to him in wrath and anguish.

Do not judge either. Even the heroes perished as martyrs, even the martyrs died as heroes. Who would dare oppose knives to prayers? The faith of some matters as much as the strength of others. It is not ours to judge, it is only ours to tell the tale.

But where is one to begin? Whom is one to include? One meets a Hasid in all my novels. And a child. And an old man. And a beggar. And a madman. They are all part of my inner landscape. The reason why? Pursued and persecuted by the killers, I offer them shelter. The enemy wanted to create a society purged of their presence, and I have brought some of them back. The world denied them, repudiated them, so let them live at least within the feverish dreams of my characters.

It is for them that I write.

And yet, the survivor may experience remorse. He has tried to bear witness; it was all in vain.

After the liberation, illusions shaped one's hopes. We were convinced that a new world would be built upon the ruins of Europe. A new civilization was to see the light. No more wars, no more hate, no more intolerance, no fanaticism anywhere. And all this because the witnesses would speak. And speak they did, to no avail.

They will continue, for they cannot do otherwise. When man, in his grief,

5. A book (1549) by Galilean Kabbalist Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522–1570).

6. A 2d-century Jewish sage.

7. Acronym for the Ba'al Shem Tov, Israel ben Eliezer (ca. 1700–1760), the charismatic, Polish founder (ca. 1750) of Hasidism.

8. First-century Jewish sage who, after the

destruction of the Temple, founded an academy at Javneh.

9. Jewish sage, patriot, and martyr (ca. 50–135), the principal founder of rabbinic Judaism.

1. Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezhirech (d. 1772) succeeded the Ba'al Shem Tov as Hasidic leader.

falls silent, Goethe² says, then God gives him the strength to sing of his sorrows. From that moment on, he may no longer choose not to sing, whether his song is heard or not. What matters is to struggle against silence with words, or through another form of silence. What matters is to gather a smile here and there, a tear here and there, a word here and there, and thus justify the faith placed in you, a long time ago, by so many victims.

Why I write? To wrench those victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death.

1978

2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German Romantic poet, novelist, playwright, and natural philosopher; author of *Faust*.

JOHN HOLLANDER

b. 1929

“I suppose that the American Jewish poet can be either blessed or cursed by whatever knowledge he or she has of Jewish history and tradition,” John Hollander says. “I obviously believe in the power of the blessing.” Clearly, albeit subtly, this blessing has touched the poems anthologized here. Each forms a kind of midrash or commentary on sacred or canonical text—in the sense that “all poetry,” as Hollander suggests, is “unofficial midrash.” He has also set his hand and mind to things not-quite-canonical, such as Kabbalah mysticism and Yiddish poetry. And with all this, he remains steeped in Western mythological, classical, and Anglo-European Christian sources. He is as much at home with Virgil as with Jeremiah, with George Herbert and Andrew Marvell as with Mani Leyb and Moyshe-Leyb Halpern.

Born in New York City in 1929, Hollander took degrees from Columbia and Indiana universities. His first poetry collection, *A Crackling of Thorns* (1958), gratefully took its title from Ecclesiastes 7.6—“For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool” (King James version)—which carries far, Hollander adds. His poetry has been called dense, difficult, dexterous, erudite, academic, elegant, urbane, witty. At its best, it marshals all such qualities within verbally inventive, intricate verse, wedding thought to passion.

In *Adam's Task*, Hollander combines the real and the imagined. With an epigraph from Genesis, he humorously reworks the biblical account of Adam's naming of the beasts. Combining the grandiosity of the task with Adam's seemingly offhand gibberish, Hollander illustrates just how easily the imagination, where the phonetics of language breathe, becomes reality through the naming of the animals. *The Ninth of Ab* builds on Israel's mourning over the destruction of the Temple but enlarges it, linking our modern situation to the destruction of the city as seen in Jeremiah and 2 Kings.

Hollander's foray into biblical topics has impressed literary critics, especially Harold Bloom, who has written that Hollander “has developed into an American-Jewish high Romantic, esoteric and elegiac and daring to write long poems in the Sublime mode.”

For four decades, John Hollander has been a Renaissance man in contemporary American letters. He has written over twenty books of poetry, half a dozen books of criticism, and several books on poetic form including the influential and delightful *Rhyme's Reason* (1981). He has also edited books of critical essays as well as anthol-