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Theodicy From the Inside: Viewing the Problem of Evil Through Shoah Survivor Narratives

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Theodicy from the Inside:
Viewing the Problem of Evil through Shoah Survivor Narratives

by

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
Gardner-Webb University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Come, take this giant leap with me
into the other world ... the other place
where language fails and imagery defies,
denies man's consciousness ... and dies
upon the altar of insanity.

Come, take this giant leap with me
into the other world ... the other place
and trace the eclipse of humanity ...
where children burned while mankind stood by,
and the universe has yet to learn why
... has yet to learn why.

— Sonia Schreiber Weitz, from “Yom Ha’Shoah”

You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
 Consider if this is a man
 Who works in the mud
 Who does not know peace
 Who fights for a scrap of bread
 Who dies because of a yes or a no.
 Consider if this is a woman,
 Without hair and without name
 With no more strength to remember,
 Her eyes empty and her womb cold
 Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
 Or may your house fall apart,
 May illness impede you,
 May your children turn their faces from you.

—Primo Levi, “Shema”

Chapter One

Introductory Matters

People usually seem impressed when they find out that I am writing a master's thesis, and even more so that this is a choice I have made rather than a requirement. The first question they ask is, "what's your topic?" and I answer, "Holocaust autobiography and the problem of evil." To this, I get one of two reactions: either "wow" or "so what's the solution?" Depending on my mood, I'll either chuckle and not say anything, or try to give a brief explanation that theodicy is not so much about solving the problem of evil, but often trying to explain it and finding a way to react to evil and suffering.

I have been interested particularly in theology's reactions to suffering and evil for most of my life, and it has very personal implications for me. I am a twinless twin. After our two-month premature birth, my twin sister died from a congenital heart defect when we were seventeen days old. For me, any explanation of evil, pain, and suffering must stand in the face of this; it must give me a satisfactory response to Samantha's death.

At the same time, I have also been fascinated by war—oddly enough, since I lean heavily towards pacifism. In high school history classes, I was always the one who, when we played Jeopardy to review for tests, would clear out the war categories with all the right answers. Something about war catches my attention.

In particular, the Second World War intrigues me, in part because it is difficult to fathom, much less comprehend, the horrors this war entailed. I am a voracious reader, and my bookshelves contain a perhaps disproportionate number of World War Two and Holocaust stories. This reading has also affected my perception of the problem of evil.

Not only must a theodicy stand up before Samantha, but also before the millions whose lives were stolen from them by the Nazi regime.

Anne Lamott writes of her religious backgrounds and the various traditions with which she has had contact; among these, she remembers a group of Jewish women who befriended her in college. These were women who were Jewish by blood, not by religious choice. She writes of them, “All these girls had been bat mitzvahed, but when I asked why they weren’t religious, they shrugged. ‘Maybe,’ they said, ‘it’s hard to believe in a God who would not stop the Holocaust’” (25).

These women are not alone in this difficulty, nor is it only Jews who cannot reconcile God with Auschwitz. For many, this is a stumbling block in a personal path to God. Indeed, I would hope that it makes us all stumble, although I pray we might make it a point of reflection and introspection rather than one where we abandon our faiths.

If the Shoah is the single most important event in the twentieth century, as many would argue, then any examination of the problem of evil must take this into consideration. In order to adequately respond to evil, we must look the deepest, darkest evils in the face.

We can know the facts and details of the Shoah from history books and official records, but if we go no further than this, we cannot get the full picture. To truly glimpse what happened in the camps, we must turn to the accounts of survivors, of those who experienced and lived those facts and details. To truly look the Shoah in the face, we must look into the faces of these survivors.

It is for this reason, then, that when I began to dig deeper into theodicy studies, I turned simultaneously to Shoah survival narratives. Those who have suffered beyond

what can be imagined can best teach us how to respond to such suffering—that in light of such deep suffering, the academic enterprise of justifying and explaining the existence of evil should not take top priority. Rather, what is most important is to stand in solidarity with those who suffer, providing a compassionate caring for them and working to eliminate the sources of evil from this world.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

However we might want to deny it, words have power. We tell sensitive children to remember that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”—I heard this more times than I can remember. Words can hurt, though; Wordsworth writes that “[w]ords are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts” (qtd. in de Man 929). Words, through the thoughts they reflect and influence, can impact those to whom they are directed in traumatic and long-lasting ways—even more than this, “care must be taken with words, for words can kill” (J. Roth, “From Night to Twilight” 65).

And so I seek to be deliberate about the words I use. I seek to be aware of connotations as well as denotations, and to make my words as sensitive to the needs of others as I can. My words have power, and I seek to use them as appropriately as possible. Because of this, I would like to explain why I have chosen to use some of the terminology I employ.

Holocaust vs. Shoah

The Nazi Final Solution is a major event not only in Jewish history, but in the history of Western civilization as a whole. Usually one hears this referred to as the Holocaust. The word “holocaust” comes from biblical references to offerings: it is a burnt offering, a total sacrifice to God (Fasching 22). Coming from the Greek *holos*, “whole,” and *kaustos*, “burned” (the aorist form of *kaio*, “I burn”), a holocaust historically is “a Jewish sacrificial offering that is burned completely on an altar” (Metzger 12, 35; “Holocaust”). Capitalized, Holocaust has come to refer specifically to the Nazi Final Solution, while in lowercase, it references destruction and mass murder (“Holocaust”).

While it is best known as the title of Claude Lanzmann’s epic documentary, “Shoah” is a modern Hebrew word that is coming to replace “Holocaust” as the referent for the time of Nazi destruction (“Shoah”). “Shoah” is a “desolation” or “time of desolation;” it can also mean “catastrophe” (Fasching 22; Bergen viii).

There are two questions that come to mind here: what is the difference between these terms? and why does it matter? The difference between sacrifice and catastrophe/desolation is perhaps subtle at first. A sacrifice suggests some complicity, if not some willingness. A sacrifice is given; even where it is a required giving, there is still some agency on the part of the giver. On the other hand, a catastrophe is something that happens, without asking for the permission or involvement of the people to which it happens.

Given the particular course of actions that led up to Final Solution, it seems clear to me that this was not an offering—those who died in the crematoria of the camps were not sacrificed to God—but rather a tragedy, a desolation, a catastrophe on a grand

scale. While I respect the history of the usage of “Holocaust,” I choose to label this time with a title that seems more fitting with the reality: I choose to speak of Shoah narratives and Shoah survivors. In doing so, I hope to respect those who died so pointlessly, and give honor to those who have survived by recognizing their experiences for what they have been: a tragedy.

A BRIEF NOTE ON STYLE

I have chosen a dual-natured topic to pursue, to explore not only the problem of pain or the literary stylistics of autobiography, but to bring the two together, and to see how they might influence each other. Because of this duality, there are some points at which I necessarily make jumps from one subject matter to another. There are places where I could steal a phrase from Monty Python and say, “and now for something completely different.” I like to see this project as a braiding together of different ideas, and so there is, like a braid, first one idea, then another, and back and forth until the distinct pieces become a unified whole. I simply ask your patience when I have my Monty Python moments.

Chapter Two

A Nutshell-within-a-Nutshell History of the Shoah

When dealing with a sub-genre that is so historically specific as Shoah narrative, it is, I feel, important to have in mind at least a broad overview of the times and events through which the authors of survivor narratives lived. To this end, then, I present here not the nutshell version of the history of Nazi Germany, but the nutshell-within-a-nutshell version. As Doris Bergen suggests, one “could probably read for the rest of [one’s] life and never get through all that has been written” about this era; I give only a glimpse into this (ix).

WEIMAR GERMANY: THE WAKE OF WORLD WAR ONE

In the wake of the First World War, Europe ailed. Nearly twenty million Europeans died as a result of the war, not only in battle, but also due to the epidemics and economic hardships that followed (Bergen 28). The war was not only costly in terms of life, but in fiscal terms as well. Much is often made of the reparations Germany was to pay to the victors; this certainly did not help the financial crisis of Germany, although in reality, the reparations paid were quite small compared to the originally-quoted amount (Bergen 27). Still, Germany, along with the rest of Europe, felt the pains of war recovery through the decade that followed the Treaty of Versailles. Adding to the economic hardships, Germany was impacted by the 1929 New York stock crash, joining nations around the world in the Great Depression (Bergen 49).

Many Germans, so sure of their rightness in the course of World War One, did not want to accept defeat; instead, they sought someone to blame. If they lost, there must have been a traitor, someone who caused the German downfall. Here, long-standing prejudices against Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals entered, and tensions heightened; Hitler himself believed that somehow the Jews had cost Germany the war (Bergen 28, 33). This, then, was the emotional state of Germany in the early 1920s: tense, shocked, and looking for a way out of the pain and into better days.

THE NSDAP AND HITLER'S RISE TO POWER

After the end of the war, the German Worker's Party began to rise in prominence; it would later be renamed the National Socialist German Worker's Party—in German, *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP). This was abbreviated by speakers of English to Nazi, the German pronunciation of the first syllables of *national* (Bergen 33-34). Adolph Hitler joined the party in 1919, and quickly became highly involved and a popular speaker.

In November 1923, Hitler was part of an attempt to overthrow the Bavarian government. Dubbed the Beer Hall Putsch, the attempt was poorly planned, and an utter failure. Hitler was arrested and charged with high treason. It was during his subsequent prison sentence that he wrote *Mein Kampf* (Bergen 34).

Hitler gained publicity during the Beer Hall Putsch trial, though, and was released after serving only thirteen months of his five-year sentence, a light punishment for the treason he was actively engaged in. He helped build up the NSDAP, and in 1929, the

party increased both in membership and in representation within local and state governments (Bergen 48).

In the early 1930s, Germany technically remained the democratic Weimar Republic, but in reality, the president had invoked his right to sole government in case of emergency, effectively allowing him to rule by decree. In 1932, Hitler ran for president, unsuccessfully, but later that year, the Nazi party increased the number of seats it held in the Reichstag. In the miscalculated hope of obtaining some control over Hitler and his party, Nazi rivals convinced the president to make Hitler his chancellor, thinking this post would keep him in line without allowing him to do any real harm. Contrary to the usual image of Hitler's political greed, he "did not need to seize power. It was handed to him" (Bergen 49-50). In January 1933, Hitler assumed his role as German chancellor.

Less than a month later, the Reichstag building burned down, giving Hitler two major opportunities: first, to suppress his greatest rivals, the Communists, by blaming the fire on them; and second, to dismantle the remnants of German democracy (Bergen 53). The Enabling Law of March 1933 gave Hitler the power to act without the approval of the Reichstag or even the formality of a presidentially-declared state of emergency; in approving this law, the members of the Reichstag voted themselves out of power and gave Hitler total control.

SOCIAL REVOLUTION

By the end of the summer of 1933, the NDSAP was the only legal party in Germany; Hitler's political revolution was complete (Bergen 54). Next came the social revolution, wherein Hitler began to act against those he viewed as his enemies.

Communists, homosexuals, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, the handicapped, and Germans of African descent all began to feel the wrath of the Nazis come against them (Bergen 55).

The Jewish population in Germany at the time was small—about 500,000—but Hitler dealt harshly with them, as had always been his plan. Some of the earliest actions were not terribly successful; a boycott of Jewish businesses in April 1933 did not have much effect. But “Hitler's Nazis used a combination of intimidation and legislation to create a mood of hostility toward Germany's Jews, a kind of open season for abuse,” and public response grew stronger (Bergen 58). Jews were banned from the civil service, and a number of non-Jewish Germans took measures of their own; some in mixed marriages divorced their Jewish spouses, and many university administrators fired Jewish professors and scholars (Bergen 59). Even aside from this overt cooperation, Hitler found that the general indifference of the masses to the fate of their Jewish neighbors allowed him to push forward his plans.

In autumn of 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were introduced, implementing a series of legislation against the Jews. Initially, the laws regulated Jewish-Aryan relationships: intermarriage was forbidden, and it restricted the employment of Aryan women within Jewish households. These laws also began to define who counted as a Jew, and defined it by blood rather than religious affiliation (Bergen 71).

Perhaps the most infamous action against the German Jews is *Kristallnacht*, the Night of the Broken Glass. On the night of November 9-10, 1938, the anniversary night of the failed Beer Hall Putsch, a pogrom spread across Germany and Austria. Hatred and prejudice were the order of the night as civilians were given permission to act out their

cruelest intentions. Synagogues were burned to the ground, and the sacred objects of the faith with them. Store windows were smashed (thus the appellation given to the night), and Jewish homes were destroyed (Bergen 85). Hordes of Aryans robbed, beat, and raped the Jews they could get their hands on. Ultimately, twenty-six thousand Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps, “the first Jews in Germany arrested simply for being Jewish” (Bergen 86). This was the last open pogrom organized by the Nazis, and in its aftermath, German Jews fled for what shelter they could find; by September 1939, German Jews numbered half what they had in 1933 (Bergen 87-88).

HITLER’S FOREIGN POLICY

While showing his true colors at home, Hitler pretended to play nice with the rest of Europe. In July 1933, Nazi representatives came to an agreement with the Vatican; the Pope would recognize Hitler’s legitimacy and Hitler, in turn, agreed to respect the rights of German Catholics and the Catholic Church (Bergen 66). Through this concordat, the Pope’s moral authority bought Hitler support within Germany and across Europe and the world.

Germany also saw other diplomatic changes throughout 1933. In October, Germany severed its ties with the League of Nations. Although the Treaty of Versailles forbade German militarization, Hitler began to build tanks that same year under cover of a program that supposedly built tractors. By 1935, the cover was completely dropped, and Germany was openly rearming itself (Bergen 67). Still vulnerable from the First World War, none of the victorious nations was in a position to challenge Germany on this issue. America firmly held to its isolationist policy throughout the Nazi buildup, and even into

the beginning years of the Second World War (Bergen 75). By the beginning of 1934, Hitler had signed a non-aggression pact with Poland, which he had no intention of honoring, but it gained him further political support (Bergen 66).

The Winter Olympic games of 1936 were held in Berlin; Hitler viewed this as a chance to show off the “new Germany” to the rest of the world, and to that end deported the undesirables from Berlin into nearby detention camps (Bergen 74). In March, Hitler made a bold move, reoccupying the Rhineland, which had been demilitarized at the armistice to provide a buffer zone between Germany and France (Bergen 76). No one stopped him.

In public, Hitler remained committed to maintaining peace in Europe; in private, though, he told his close compatriots to be prepared for war by 1940 (Bergen 76). Indeed, Hitler sought out war, and he and his forces acted before this deadline; in March 1938, Nazi Germany “annexed” Austria, invading and occupying the country in a matter of hours (Bergen 81). While Hitler was acting once again in direct opposition to the Treaty of Versailles, the various world powers did not protest.

Hitler next turned his sights to part of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland. Eager to avoid the war that Hitler tried to provoke, British and French representatives met with the Germans, deciding that Czechoslovakia should cede the part of the country in question to Germany, and all would be well—thus beginning the policy of appeasement (Bergen 83). Nazi troops took the Sudetenland, and soon moved into the rest of Czechoslovakia as well.

At the same time that Hitler was expanding his territory, he was also garnering allies. In 1939, the Nazis signed non-aggression pacts with Italy, Estonia, Latvia,

Denmark, and Russia. Even with these agreements in place, Hitler and Stalin secretly divided Eastern Europe between them, giving each “spheres of interest,” with Poland divided down the middle (Bergen 93). If Hitler were to go to war, he would have a large portion of Europe on his side.

On September 1, 1939, the Nazis struck out against Poland with frightening speed and devastation. The Nazis launched a *blitzkrieg*, a lightning war, and Britain and France could no longer stand to the side. Both nations declared war on Germany, thus beginning World War Two (Bergen 102-103).

THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

The first of the concentration camps, Dachau, opened in March 1933, and others soon followed (Bergen 53). By July, about twenty-seven thousand people were imprisoned in the camps—mostly political prisoners, but also common criminals and homosexuals (Bergen 64). These camps were not secret—quite the contrary: the Nazis publicized their existence, rationalizing that knowledge of them would deter further resistance.

Each camp (in German *Konzentrationslager*, usually shortened to “Lager”) was placed to provide coverage for a region of the expanding Reich. Their purported purpose was to reeducate criminals and political opponents, to turn them into “useful citizens” (Bergen 89). Quickly, though, they became places where the Nazis could imprison people without trial, and cruelty became more and more common.

With the invasion of Poland, the number of Jews under Nazi control dramatically increased; Poland was home to more than three million Jews. More camps were built to

house the Jewish population, and ghettos were set up in major cities to isolate them from the rest of the Poles. Nazi party members roamed around Poland, wreaking destruction wherever they went, raping, pillaging, and burning what they could (Bergen 106).

Hitler made no secret of his genocidal intentions.¹ Seven months before the attack on Poland, Hitler declared to the Reichstag that

Europe cannot find peace until the Jewish question has been solved. [...] if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevizing of the world, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe! (qtd. in Bergen 94)

With several million Jews now in his hands, Hitler's words began to find realization. Although it was not until 1941 that Hitler and his officials decided upon the "final solution to the Jewish problem," half a million Jews died before then, in the ghettos and labor camps; they starved, died of diseases, and were beaten to death (Bergen 111). In the meantime, the Nazis were perfecting means of mass killings. Experiments were made with gassings, including the use of carbon monoxide (Bergen 129-130).

Events of 1941 intensified Nazi policy toward the Jews. Hitler declared war on Russia, and his armies marched eastward. Following these troops were newly-authorized "special action groups," *Einsatzgruppen*, which were essentially "special murder squads" (Bergen 154). Their job was to extinguish German enemies (primary among them, of course, the Jews) along the march to Russia. They forced Jewish populations to dig large trenches, which would soon be their own graves, and summarily shot each person,

¹Indeed, the word "genocide" was coined in 1944 in direct reference to Hitler's actions (Roth, "Theodicy of Protest" 2).

knocking him or her backwards into the pit (Bergen 154; see also Wiesel 4). In this manner, nearly a million people were killed. Within Germany, Jews were forced to begin wearing the Star of David upon their clothes, divesting them of their last hint of anonymity (Bergen 147).

War on Russia meant Soviet prisoners of war, and new camps were built to house them—most prominently, Auschwitz. It was also in the management of POWs that the Nazis found their most efficient means of killing, the one that would subsequently be implemented in Auschwitz and other killing centers and which would cost millions more their lives: hydrogen cyanide, the pesticide known as Zyklon B (Bergen 163). Early in 1942, several of the most prominent German officials met to coordinate a unified plan of action against the Jews. The Wannsee Conference targeted the entire Jewish population of Europe, some 11 million people, and decided upon gas chambers as the preferred killing method.² To that end, new killing centers would be constructed, and existing camps would be converted to this heinous purpose (Bergen 164-165). Auschwitz was one of these expanded camps.

As horrific as life had been for Jews in German-occupied Europe through 1941, it only got worse in the following years. The extent of killing that occurred during 1942 is shocking: “At the beginning of 1942 [...] 75 percent of the Jews who would be murdered in the Holocaust were still alive. At the beginning of 1943, 75 percent of the approximately 6 million who would be killed were already dead” (Bergen 182-183).

Mass murder found a new level of efficiency in the death camps. In each of the camps,

² *Die Wannseekonferenz*, a real-time representation of the conference, is the most chilling and disturbing film I have ever seen and shows the utter coldness of Nazi policies and officials.

the means of death came in a slightly different form, but what pervaded it all was careless cruelty of the killers.

The tripartite camp at Auschwitz—Auschwitz-Birkenau-Monowitz (also called Buna)—was one of the final camps converted to a killing center, but because it was in operation longer than any of the others, it had a devastating impact on European Jews (“Auschwitz”; Bergen 189). Birkenau, the part of the camp that held the gas chambers and crematoria, became the final destination for Jews across Europe; as new territories were taken, Jews were shipped in cramped cattle cars to Birkenau (Bergen 189). Thus when Italy was invaded in 1943 and Hungary in 1944, Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel found themselves on trains bound for Auschwitz (Bergen 180, 223). In all, over a million Jews were deported to the Auschwitz camps (“Auschwitz”). In the summer of 1944, as many as twelve thousand Jews were killed in Birkenau every day (Bergen 226); one record-breaking August day left 24,000 dead (Levi, Afterword 222).

Aside from its killing function, Auschwitz also served as a forced-labor camp. As each trainload of Jews came into the camp, quick decisions were made, separating those who would work from those who would die. Those sent to the gas chambers faced immediate death, but those who were brought into Auschwitz faced inadequate food supplies, poor sanitation, and long, hard working days with little or no reprieve. They also still faced “selections,” that separation of the soon-to-be-dead from the living, made whenever space needed to be cleared within the camp. Levi and Wiesel both write extensively of these conditions, and in particular of the selection in October 1944 (see Levi, *Survival* 123-130 and Wiesel 66-73). The prisoners of Auschwitz were technically still alive, but it was a tenuous hold on life they held, and one over which they had no

personal control. Their decisions were largely made for them, and they struggled through camp life. As the Allied forces drew nearer the camps (the Russians, in the case of Auschwitz), those left alive were forced to evacuate the camps, to “march” to another camp, to harsher conditions, to less of a life. These have become known as the death marches, and the Nazis made their prisoners run from camp to camp. At least a quarter of a million prisoners lost their lives in these marches (Bergen 228). Nazi killing continued until the very day of Germany’s surrender; there was no reprieve for the Jews. Over a million souls were lost to the Auschwitz camp system, the majority of these Jewish (“Auschwitz”). This is but a portion of the lives lost in the Shoah, but it is a significant portion.

While the atrocities of the Shoah are far too large to be encompassed by a single camp, they are also too large for most to take in at once, and so Auschwitz has become representative of Shoah experience at large; “the Holocaust was too vast to be synonymous with any one place alone, but none comes closer than Auschwitz, the most lethal of the Shoah’s multiple epicenters,” and so Auschwitz becomes the synecdochic referent for the whole of the Shoah (Roth, “Deliver Us from Evil” 244). Auschwitz is also brought to the forefront of Shoah consciousness by the fact that the most famous Shoah survivors are survivors of the Auschwitz camps: Jean Améry, Viktor Frankl, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel. By focusing on Auschwitz, one begins to see the heart of the Nazi system, without being immediately overwhelmed by the immensity of that system.

Chapter Three

Theodicy

Theodicy is not yet a word common to everyday English; it remains a philosophical term. If I say that I am writing my thesis partly on the issue of theodicy, I get blank stares and confused looks. What exactly is theodicy?

Theodicy is not a simple term to define. Its roots lie in two Greek words, *theos* and *dikaios*, meaning respectively “God” and the adjective “right” or “just” (“Theodicy”). Thus, “theodicy” lexically refers to a just God, though in a very specific context—namely, the existence of evil in the world. Theodicy asks the question, “How can there be a just God in light of evil?” This, then, raises the question of what constitutes a just God and brings into question the character of God. The instigating problem of theodicy comes out of the following four propositions:

- A. God is all-powerful (omnipotent); that is, God can do anything and everything.
- B. God is all-knowing (omniscient); that is, God fully knows the past, present, and future.
- C. God is all-loving (omnibenevolent); that is, God is wholly good and perfectly moral.
- D. Evil exists.³

Propositions A, B, and C constitute the traditional attributes of God, argued perhaps most persuasively by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (see particularly 1.6.2, 1.20.1-2, 1.14.13, and 1.25.3).

³ This definition has been modified from Davis, “Free Will” 73; Griffin, “Creation out of Nothing” 114; and Mackie’s definition, qtd. in Phillips, *The Problem of Evil* 4.

The so-called problem of evil comes in the synthesis of these four propositions. It seems as though one of these must be dropped in order to make a coherent statement. In Hume's words, "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (Hume 298). If God can do anything, why doesn't God stop evil? If God knows everything, then God knows the evil that will occur, and so why does God not prevent it? If God wants what is best for us, and God is perfectly moral, how can God allow such terrible things to happen? These are questions with important ramifications for a theist.

The inquiry into matters of theodicy has been a pressing issue throughout the centuries, but it has never been more evident and complex than it became in the course of the twentieth century. This past century was one of previously-unthought-of horrors, from the gas bombs and trench warfare of World War One to genocide in Nazi Germany, Rwanda, Bosnia, and elsewhere.⁴ Theodicy is a historical question, but it is just as much, if not more, a question for today, in light of both the atrocities of the twentieth century and the increasing atheistic tendencies of the world, in which faith in God is no longer assumed but must be defended (Griffin, *Power, God, and Evil* 255).

Philosophers of religion have spent great amounts of time trying to piece the data relevant to the theodical question together into a whole that makes some amount of sense. There is no single answer, though, nor are any of the proposed theories easy or simple. Rather, theodicy remains a field of inquiry that is inherently dis-unified—which is not to say this is a bad thing, for it allows for a continuing conversation about the important issues at hand.

⁴ For the shocking numbers that portray the sheer bloodiness of the twentieth century, see J. Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest" 1-2.

In this multitude of theodical responses, several take prominence, in the sense that they have the most (and most vocal) proponents, and thus require further investigation: the free will defense, process theodicy, and protest theodicy.

THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

If you ask Christians to explain why evil exists in this world, or where evil comes from, many will tell you that it stems from humans having free will and from the misuse of this freedom. God gave Adam and Eve the ability to choose between good and evil, and they chose to sin. Likewise, every person since them has also led a sinful life, rather than a wholly righteous one. Evil is a natural consequence of this sin.

This is the heart of the free will defense. It is the most traditionally orthodox of the theodicies presented here. The free will defense (FWD) dates back at least to Augustine; certainly, he is its most famous proponent. It still retains currency, both academically (Alvin Plantinga and Stephen T. Davis, among others, maintain avid support of the FWD in their philosophies) and religiously (as evidenced by its popularity in the everyday life of the church; C. S. Lewis addresses *The Problem of Pain* in a manner reminiscent of the FWD).

Like all theodicies, the FWD begins with the problematic formula outlined above: that God is omnipotent and morally perfect (that is to say, God cannot do evil), and yet that evil exists. For proponents of the FWD, it is of utmost importance that the first two elements in this equation not be sacrificed or modified, as they will claim that others do, wittingly or not (see Davis' response to Griffin's argument in Griffin, "Creation out of Nothing" 133-137). After all, "the nature of God can never, nowhere, nowise be

defective,” and a compromised God would be a defective God (Augustine, *City of God* 387).

Free will defenders maintain the traditional definition of God’s omnipotence: God can do everything that is logically possible (Aquinas 1.25.3). Thus God cannot make a square circle, because such a thing is logically impossible: “[i]t is no objection to [God’s] omnipotence that he cannot make a square circle [...] because ‘making a square circle’ does not describe anything which it is coherent to suppose could be done” (Swinburne 149). By definition, a circle is a circle and a square, a square, and never the twain shall meet. The infamous question “can God create a rock so big God can’t lift it?” is an attempt to catch this definition of omnipotence in an unsolvable conundrum (and thus Swinburne spends some time addressing this problem; 152-158). The point, though, is that God can do anything possible; there are no boundaries outside God that are limiting God’s power.

Likewise, the total goodness of God is uncompromised. God is wholly good, morally perfect, and without defect; Augustine calls God “the supreme and highest good” (*Confessions* 114). Thus, God cannot be responsible for evil, for evil is not good, and there is nothing not good about God.

If God is both all-powerful and all-good, how, then, did evil enter the picture? The FWD argues that evil came with humanity—not inherently, but by means of free will. When God created Adam and Eve, they were good, or at least morally neutral, and allowed them free choice: “God created what was originally an evil-free world” (Davis, “Free Will” 78, 74). They were created with free moral choice, with free will, without which, “[h]umans would not be genuinely human” (Erickson 448). God’s desire in

creation was for creatures who would freely choose to love God; this choice is what allows humans to be uniquely human. The usual distinction made here is between humans and androids, who have no decisions to make, but rather simply programming to follow (see Erickson 449). It is our choice that sets us apart from these hypothetical androids.

Adam and Eve, then, were created capable of making a choice for or against God, and this ability to choose has been passed on to each subsequent generation as an inherent part of what it means to be human. The problem with free will, though, is that it is abused in every generation; humans seem far more often to choose against God than for God, and this is the source of evil in the world. It is not God who created evil; rather, God created humanity with the ability to choose, and thus the ability to choose evil (Erickson 454).

God may not have created evil, but with the omnipotence of God maintained by the FWD, there remains a question about the extent of evil—if God can do anything, why has God allowed the sheer vastness of evil present in human history? God could have prevented some of the more atrocious events—kept Mr. and Mrs. Hitler from procreating, for instance, or converted Stalin somewhere along the road—yet God didn't. Why?

The FWD addresses this in several ways. Defenders argue that suffering is good for the soul: “suffering, and the waiting it almost always includes, can be spiritually uplifting” (Davis, “Free Will” 83). Pain and suffering can lead to new understandings of God, can spur spiritual growth. It causes us to place greater trust in God, to gain the proverbial “patience of Job.” Davis even says that “some kinds of spiritual wisdom and

maturity are probably obtainable only through suffering” (“Free Will” 83). Suffering produces spiritual benefits that may not be procured in other ways.

The FWD also maintains that God stands with us in suffering, that nothing, “in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*New International Version*, Rom. 8:39). God is with us through it all. And, in the end, God will redeem all suffering, all evil. Some evil will be used in the building of the Kingdom of God; though some things seem evil now, the good that will issue forth from them means that, in the long run, these evils are actually benefits, used by God to bring about good. We may not understand it now, but in the end, some evil will not be evil after all (Davis, “Free Will” 84). Ultimately, even the evil that is not redeemed in this process will be redeemed in the fullness of the Kingdom. From the vantage point of the Kingdom, all sufferings will pale; we will see that they “have been overcome and no longer matter” (Davis, “Free Will” 84). The Kingdom will be so great that everything else will simply fade away. In the manner of Julian of Norwich, all shall be made well.

PROCESS THEODICY

Process theodicy stems out of process philosophy, based on the thinking of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Process theology is not simply a way of looking at the study of God in a new and different light, but rather encompasses a different metaphysical framework; it returns in many ways to Platonic understandings of the universe.

To understand the process way of addressing the problem of evil, we must start at the very beginning (it is, after all, a very good place to start): with creation. “In the

beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty” (*New International Version*, Genesis 1:1-2a). This presents a very stark image of the beginnings of the universe. In this view, *everything* started with nothing, and there was only God. God then created the cosmos from this nothingness, this formlessness, this void. This is the traditional view of creation: creation *ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing, and some traditionalists sound rather vehement in their defense that creation truly is from nothing (see Erickson 394-397).

Compare this image, then, with the translation of this same verse in the New Revised Standard Version: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void ...” This is quite similar to what is generally accepted as the best translation of the Hebrew: “When God began to create the heaven and the earth, the world was without form and void” (see Griffin, “Creation out of Nothing” 108).

The NIV translation and the one given by Griffin look the same at first glance—after all, they only differ by one word, but that word makes a world of difference. *When* God created, the earth was formless. So, in the beginning, at the initial moment of creation, there was God, but there was also something else, this formless, chaotic mix of matter. God created everything out of this chaos, but the chaos preexisted creation (Griffin, “Creation” 108).

Creation out of chaos is not a new concept; many of the cosmogonies of the Ancient Near East espoused this view, and it was articulated at least as early as Plato; in his *Timaeus*, for example, Plato writes, “God’s creation of the world did not involve an eliciting of an actual world out of nothing, but a bringing of an ordered cosmos out of a ‘chaos’” (Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil* 39; Griffin also references *Timaeus* in “Creation

out of Nothing”). In the Platonic metaphysic, being is power, both to act and be acted upon, so this initial coexistence of God and other stuff means that God does not have absolute power, even at the moment of creation (Dombrowski 33). Rather, God shares power with creation, not by choice, but of necessity. It was this way in the beginning and continues thus today.

Similarly, for Whitehead and his process progeny, being is energy; specifically, creative energy. Being is moment-to-moment activity, continual change. All matter has been put into initial action by God, but after that causal influence, matter has the energy, the freedom, to act on its own (Griffin, “Creation” 120). Again, this energy is innate, essential to the nature of matter, and not a characteristic granted by God.

If all being is power, is energy, what does this mean for the traditional doctrine of God’s omnipotence? Aquinas argues “since the divine essence, through which God acts, is infinite, [...] it follows that His power likewise is infinite,” and “God can do all things that are possible; and for this reason He is said to be omnipotent” (1.25.2, 1.25.3). But if God is not the only being with power, then God cannot have complete control over the cosmos. God, in the process view, is not all-powerful, but rather the most powerful—in Hartshorne’s words, God’s power is “absolutely maximal, the greatest possible, but even the greatest possible power is still one power among others, is not the only power” (qtd. in Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil* 273). God has all the power that it is possible for God to have given that all beings have some power. “Power is always shared power”—even, and perhaps especially, God’s power (Griffin, “Creation” 122).

God’s power is not the power to control absolutely; rather, God’s power is that of influence (Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil* 276). The power and energy inherent in all

beings becomes manifest in each being's freedom—freedom to obey or disobey God as it wills. This is human free will; we, as individuals and as greater societies, may feel the influence of God leading us in one direction, but can willfully choose to ignore that influence and go another way. While this freedom is perhaps most evident in humanity, it exists in all beings. Even molecules and subatomic particles have this freedom, although it is in proportion to complexity—the more complex a being is, the more creative energy and thus the more freedom it has, which is why we see this freedom and energy best in humanity (see Griffin's discussion of complexity, triviality, and freedom in *God, Power, and Evil* 283-285, 291-295).

If God is not omnipotent in the traditional sense of the word, this changes the theological question. If Plato, Whitehead, and the other process thinkers are right, God *cannot*, in fact, do anything and everything, and the freedom and power of all beings require that all have autonomy of action—for good or for evil. Logically, then, it seems that the coexistence of the goodness of God and of evil has been resolved.

Simply saying that God cannot stop or prevent all acts of evil because God shares God's power with all of creation is not quite satisfying, however. We humans want to believe that God is actively interested in our lives, and so a secondary question of evil arises: If God cannot control evil, what can God do about it?

Does God's inability to exercise complete control in the matter of evil mean that God does not wish the best for creation? Or that God is pleased with evil? Quite the contrary; God desires good, not evil, and is continuously involved in working towards the good. God's power is influence: "God, by hypothesis, influences every finite event [or being], but God cannot wholly determine how any event will use its own creativity"

(Griffin, "Creation" 122). The very nature of God means that in every instance, God is "everlastingly seeking to overcome evil in the world" by influencing all beings toward what is good, but movement in such a direction cannot be guaranteed, for "[c]reatures everlastingly have the power of resisting God" (Clarke 45). And too often, we do just that.

Not only is God always influencing for the good, but God experiences the world alongside us. God has a stake in creation; God lives through our pains and joys just as we do, just as they are. In our trials, God suffers, and in our blessings, God rejoices (Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil* 309). In Whitehead's words, God is "the great companion—the fellow sufferer who understands" (Clarke 45). God knows our trials and tribulations, and seeks with us to overcome them.

Even with God beside us in our experiences, though, we alone are responsible for the consequences of our actions. Our "freedom of creativity" means that we hold "a radical responsibility for choices which are made, since one chooses the essential value which one ultimately becomes" (Suchocki 72). When one chooses values of evil, one enacts evil into the world. It is thus creaturely freedom that is the cause of evil, not God.

A process theodicy, like all theodicies, looks at the logical problem of evil and asks, "How can a good God exist given the evidence of this evil world?" It gives a logical answer, working from a rather different metaphysic, though one that historically has been accepted as truth, and presents a God who is limited in power by the inherent power of all other beings. It is the creative, and thus also potentially destructive, energy of beings that explains evil in the world, and while God is doing what God can to overcome all evil, it cannot be done without the participation of other beings. In the meantime, God suffers

and rejoices alongside the world, working to influence the world in the direction of God's will.

PROTEST THEODICY

Protest theodicy is exactly what the name implies: a protest against the usual practice of theodicy. Namely, it is a protest “against philosophies and theologies that do not take the historical particularity of evil seriously enough” (J. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest” 3). Most theodicies, it maintains, either downplay the position of evil in the world or deny it outright; this, protestors feel, is unacceptable. The various forms that evil takes throughout history “scar the world forever,” and must be addressed (J. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest” 3).

Protesting theodicy takes a very honest look at human history and seeks to evaluate the goodness of God based upon what can be seen from our past. Hegel maintains that history is “the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed” (qtd. in J. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest” 7). It is in close proximity to this slaughter-bench that protestors—and chiefly among them, John K. Roth—stand as they examine the problem of evil.

The bloodiness of human history is undeniable. If a theodicy is to be considered valuable, it must hold up in light of this bloodshed. The question, then, is raised: Why has God allowed history to unfold along the course it has?

Protest theodicy works on the presupposition that God is indeed omnipotent; a God who is otherwise is “hardly worth bothering about” (J. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest” 11). Given the obvious amount of evil at work in history, it is the third of our four-part

definition of theodicy that is called into question by protesters: is God really as loving and moral as we claim? “Most people,” Roth writes, “want a totally good God or none at all. [...] the desire runs strong to separate good and evil neatly. Life is easier that way” (“Theodicy of Protest” 7). However, reality is not that simple. Good and evil are intertwined, even in the person of God. History makes this plain to see. There is much that is good, but also much that is bad, to be laid at God’s feet.

Calling upon human freedom to explain the source of evil is rejected by protesting theodicy. In fact, the nature of freedom makes it even clearer that God is to blame: “our freedom is both too little and too much,” according to Roth (“Theodicy of Protest” 9). It is too little in that our ignorance can be greatly destructive, and in that extreme social structures require massive force at the cost of too many lives to change their evil tendencies (here Roth appeals specifically to the efforts against Nazi Germany; “Theodicy of Protest” 9). Similarly, a choice between two horrendous options is no choice at all, and our “freedom” is merely a show. Our freedom is too much when it allows us to enact atrocities against one another, as evidenced year after year in the death of countless innocents, in wars and genocide, in all the perversities that humanity can invent. “We have more power and more freedom than is good for us,” and yet we have too little (J. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest” 10). Were God truly good and truly responsible, human freedom would be more in proportion to human ability to handle it.

Protesting theodicy seeks to go beyond simply casting blame on God; it is about looking at life with honesty. Roth affirms that “[l]ife is one damned problem after another,” but protest theodicy is an attempt to find a religious response that can make sense out of this life (“Theodicy of Protest” 12).

God as seen in this light is a bit of a wild card—capable of great good, but also capable of evil. God is not simple. God has promised great things to come, but makes no guarantee of a timeline. In the meantime, we must hope for the good and protest the evil; we must, like Job, be willing to argue with God, to let God know when things are not fair. “To have hope in God,” Wiesel writes, “is to have hope against God” (qtd. in J. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest” 16); Roth and Rubenstein maintain that Wiesel “remains at odds with God, because the only way he can be for God after Auschwitz is by being against God too” (322).

This is what protest theodicy is: being for God, but also against God; it is both trust and argument. We may cry out to God, but the all-too-often silence of God means that we must step in and take action on our own behalf, because we cannot fully trust God to act for us. Truly we must take a stake in the responsibility for the world in which we live, and we must do our best “to relieve suffering, to create joy, and to make friends out of enemies” (J. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest” 36). This is the end goal of a protesting theodicy.

Theodicy, as we see, is not a simple matter, and so simple answers cannot be given. The various positions of philosophers begin deeply in the nature of God and indeed fully encompass God’s nature. With ideological dissent about the attributes of God comes differing theodicies, as each focuses particularly on what he or she holds to be most true. None of these theodicies has quite everything right, yet none has it completely wrong either. Theodicy does not lend itself to that kind of clear absolute.

Chapter Four

Theodicy Influenced by Shoah Studies

The disciplines of Shoah studies and Judeo-Christian theodicy have been brought together before; after all, the depth of evil exhibited in Auschwitz and other concentration and death camps demands that the theodical question be answered. Since the Nazi atrocities came to public attention, the Shoah has become the defining event in the discussion of evil (Davis, *Encountering Evil* xiii). In light of this, how can we trust in God? And so Jews and Christians have tried to answer this question, wedding together Shoah and theodicy.

There is, of course, no one answer to the question, nor one way to go about answering it. Some look to the Nazi leaders and the ways in which they turned National Socialism into more a religious movement than a strictly political ideology (see Brearley). Others seek to question the ways in which we do Christian theology and Christian worship, and how we talk about the redemptive death of Jesus in the face of such immense, and some would say unredeemable, suffering (see Knight and Frede-Wenger). There are those who even question the validity of the theodical question in the post-Shoah world (see Grob's presentation of Greenberg's and Levinas' thoughts).

In this search to address the horrors of the Shoah with the questions of theodicy, some will turn to survivor narratives, as I am wont to do. It seems to me that the likeliest place to inquire into the Shoah is in the words of those who lived through Nazi-created hell. Most of these survivor narrative-driven explorations of theodicy, however, limit

textual support to an episode or two from any given narrative; these authors call on a few instances from the camp experience and use these to support their theodicies.

SPITTING ON PRAYER

John Roth looks specifically at the issue of prayer after the Shoah. “It could be argued,” Roth writes, “to pray after Auschwitz is childish, irrational, and absurd, if not irresponsible and abhorrent” (“Deliver Us from Evil” 245). The question is raised: How can we pray to a God who does not answer, or simply does not hear, our prayers? How, in particular, do we handle prayers of thanks and of petition, both for ourselves and for others? The events of the Shoah seem to suggest that such prayers are misguided, even unethical.

To illustrate these questions and to put them into relief, Roth draws on an event narrated in *If This is a Man*. In the summer of 1944, the Nazis had erected two large tents in the center of Auschwitz; with the coming cold, these needed to be torn down and room for their occupants made within the huts. This meant one thing: selection. It mattered not which prisoners were sent to the crematoria chimneys, only that sufficient space was created to house those left alive. Levi was allowed to live. He describes the evening after the selection:

Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk in the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen.

Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking any more? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?

If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer. (Levi 129-130)

Levi knows that it is chance that he has survived; there is no reason he should not have been among the soon-to-be-dead. Yet he hears Kuhn, praying to God, thanking God for God's deliverance, and it strikes Levi as wrong. God has nothing to do with it. Kuhn's prayer, as Roth describes it, displays only selfishness and ignorance; how can Kuhn rightly pray thanks for his survival when all around him sit those who have been condemned, those who seemingly should have been allowed to live? He cannot, and so Levi writes of his disgust at hearing such a prayer.

This is one of a few instances in which Levi speaks directly of God or religious matters; for the most part, Levi remains silent on such topics. This is not, though, to say that they were not important in camp life. Elie Wiesel tells the story of the observation of Rosh Hashanah within the camp (63-65); it is likely that Levi would have seen it and been part of it as well, in some fashion. Prayer still existed within the camp. This is a powerful fact.

Prayer is doubly affected by evil: “Evil prompts prayer; evil destroys prayer’s credibility” (J. Roth, “Deliver Us” 247). Roth, from his protest perspective, stands with Levi: Roth, too, would spit at Kuhn’s prayer were he God. And yet, because of the example set by the inmates of Auschwitz—and other camps, to be sure—prayer cannot be discounted. Indeed, perhaps their example demands that we pray; in response to the question of how we can pray after Auschwitz, Johann-Baptist Metz replied that “[w]e can pray *after* Auschwitz, because there were people who prayed *in* Auschwitz”—and not only may we pray, but we must (emphasis in original; qtd. by Manemann in his response to J. Roth, “Deliver Us” 263).

And so we do pray, but all the while knowing that “divinity does not necessarily answer or even hear prayer in the ways people prefer or expect” (J. Roth, “Deliver Us” 253). In the meantime, Roth insists, we must know that most often, deliverance comes from human hands (“Deliver Us” 254). We pray, but we must also act.

Lang, too, uses this scene to support her interpretation of Levi’s work, although she interprets it differently. For her, this is Levi making the kind of judgment he claims to leave to the reader (264; see also Levi, Afterword 210). Levi “refuses to exonerate Kuhn,” for the prayer shows a lapse in Kuhn’s morality; Kuhn forgets the sanctity of human life and becomes “a contributor to the Nazi attempt at annihilation” (Lang 264-265). For this is precisely the Nazi game—the dehumanization of the Jews, making them immoral beasts, so that their genocide might be justified. For Levi, Lang argues, to maintain one’s morality is of utmost importance, as illustrated by his reaction to Kuhn.

GOD ON THE GALLOWS

One of the most memorable passages from *Night* is Wiesel's witnessing of a hanging within the camp. It is a particularly haunting scene, and it seems to be a natural place for those interested in theodicy to turn. Wiesel describes two instances of prisoners being hanged; in this second execution, three gallows have been erected in the central square. All the prisoners are gathered together, standing side by side in the sterile rows in which they are always arranged.

The SS bring out the victims: two men, and a young boy, a "sad-eyed angel," who are to be killed for taking part in a plot to revolt (Wiesel 61). The whole camp is forced to watch as these three are hung:

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

The three necks were laced at the same moment within the nooses.

"Long live liberty!" cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

"Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

[...] The two adults were no longer alive. [...] But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive ...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. [...]

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

"Where is God now?"

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows ...”

That night the soup tasted of corpses. (Wiesel 61-62)

This is a passage that will linger with the reader beyond the close of the book. This is the image with which the cover of the Bantam printing of *Night* is illustrated, these three dangling corpses. Where is God? God is here ...

God is here, on the gallows—but how? Does this somehow-death of God mean “once the boy is hanged, then any God worth anything must be hanged with him? That after experiencing the death of the angel, surely one can no longer believe and trust in divine salvation? That nothing is the same any longer, even God and one’s relationship to him?” (Morgan 33). The questions are raised, but the answers are lacking.

Morgan points out the import of this scene, saying that it is “an emblem, as it were, of the rupture between past and future,” but does not follow up on his claims beyond the assertion that this is a theme that plays out in much of Wiesel’s work (33). This is a shallow treatment of a deep subject, and it reads as if Morgan is trying to give the illusion of depth while still remaining on the surface. He does not give credit to the heady weight of the subject he presents.

Tiefel also draws upon this scene in his discussion of Shoah interpretation. He rightly notes that the reader “does not know whether for the author the death of this child implies the death of God,” but without lingering on this point, he immediately moves to a Christian response: “But the Christian [...] might also say of his Lord, ‘Here He is,’” and point to Jesus hanging on the cross (146). The Christian knows not only that “his Lord” died on a different sort of gallows, but also that God always identifies with the suffering

and indeed shares in that suffering (Tiefel 146-147). This incident in *Night*, for Tiefel, illustrates an important point, that while the suffering inflicted during the Shoah may not be explained, God still shared in it.

In looking at “Holocaust Interpretations and Religious Assumptions,” this is the only direct example Tiefel gives of Shoah narrative—a two-paragraph treatment of this scene. He is too quick, though, to give a Christianized answer. He does not particularly allow Wiesel to speak for himself in this matter, and in this, does not do justice to Wiesel and other survivors.

To say that theodicians do not turn to Shoah narratives in looking at the problem of evil would be to lie. To say, rather, that they do not look at these narratives to the fullest extent they might would be closer to the truth. While it can be helpful to use a scene from Levi’s or Wiesel’s narrative to support one’s theodical point, there seems to be still lacking a position which creates a theodicy out of the whole of these narratives. Narratives remain illustrations, rather than foundations, and so there is something still missing in the marriage of Shoah studies and theodicy.

Chapter Five

Autobiography Studies

INTRODUCTION TO AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography is relatively new to the scene of literary criticism; it is only within the last sixty years that autobiography has become the subject of criticism (Olney, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment” 7). Autobiographies have been around for most of the history of literature, although often under different guises, but until the past century, they were not taken as seriously as works of other genres, and so were not subject to the microscopes of literary critics.

This has changed, however. The past few decades have seen a new interest in autobiography, in part as it becomes more popular with both authors and the general public, and in the genre-specific aspects of autobiographical writing. Because of the newness of the autobiographical discipline, it is useful to begin by looking briefly at the history of autobiography, at the range of definitions of the genre, and at the purpose of such writing.

History of Autobiography

The history of autobiography as a distinct genre is slightly muddy. There is no one work that can be declared the first autobiography; rather, pinpointing the earliest autobiography depends in part upon how one defines the term. Some say the first was written in 1834. Others argue for Rousseau’s *Confessions*, written in the 1760s. Or it could be Augustine’s *Confessions* of the fourth or fifth centuries—or even as early as one

of Plato's letters, written in the fourth century BCE (Olney, "Autobiography" 5-6).

Perhaps one could argue for autobiography even before this point. Certainly autobiography has become more prevalent and recognizable in form in the centuries since the Enlightenment.

Autobiography as a genre, even taken from its latest proposed date of birth, is still significantly older than the literary criticism of autobiography. Autobiography did not begin to draw critical attention until 1956, when Georges Gusdorf wrote his "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," the first foray into critical literature on autobiography (Olney, "Autobiography" 7-8). Gusdorf may have been the first to write about the subject, but he was not alone in giving attention to the genre.

Criticism of autobiography developed simultaneously along several paths. James Olney, for example, was not yet aware of Gusdorf's work when he began looking at autobiography or when he published a book on the subject in 1969. And when Gusdorf wrote another article in 1975, he did not know of Olney's work, which ran along similar lines (Olney, "Autobiography" 11). Gusdorf and Olney showed a certain affinity in their critical writings, but each wrote without knowledge of the other's work.

In the 1960s and 70s, critical work continued to question and examine autobiography, and most notably, this is when Philippe Lejeune entered the scene, making a splash with his *The Autobiographical Pact* in 1975 (Olney, "Autobiography" 17). This is what might be termed the classical era of autobiography criticism; the critics who wrote in these decades are those who are cited time and again by more recent studies, and the critics themselves read and referenced one another.

Even with this classical age, though, the extent of critical autobiography studies is limited. Indeed, given its short history, this cannot but be so. Autobiography as a target of literary criticism is still open to broad interpretation in everything from definition and style to purpose and legitimacy.

Defining Autobiography

Because autobiographical critics are still treading new water, “each feels compelled to begin with a new definition of the genre” (Howarth 84). There are, then, nearly as many definitions as there are academics writing about autobiography. As each definition is made in part to further a critic’s argument, they range in complexity.

The basic definition of autobiography relies on the Greek origins of the word: *autos*, *bios*, and *graphein*, respectively meaning “himself,” “life,” and “to write” (Metzger 7, 39, 16). The combination, then, refers to “the story of one’s life written by [one]self” (Spender 115). Autobiography, under this definition, is a sub-genre of biography, and is so classified by the Library of Congress (Mansell 117). It is primarily part of the life-writing genre.

On the other end of the definitional spectrum are the more specific. Philippe Lejeune, for example, defines autobiography as a “[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune, “Autobiographical Pact” 4). This definition helps delineate the pseudo-autobiographical from what Lejeune would consider the true autobiography. In particular, his definition means that diaries are not

autobiographical (they are not written retrospectively), nor are memoirs or personal essays (they usually do not cover the whole of an individual life).

Autobiography is sometimes compared to self-portraiture; most notably, Howarth makes the analogy of autobiography as self-portrait his particular focus. Indeed, the autobiography is a sort of written self-portrait. However, the autobiographer has perhaps a more difficult task than the painter: what the autobiographer “sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch. [...] [T]he autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny” (Gusdorf 35). The autobiographer, like the artist of a self-portrait, composes the work in question, both in the sense that he or she creates the work, and that he or she is that which makes up the work. The autobiographer is both the composer and the composed (Howarth 85). This issue of the subject of autobiography is one that is of particular interest and shall be addressed in more detail shortly.

The Purpose of Autobiography

It seems to me that there is one question we humans are fond of above others: What’s the point? Why do we do the things we do? It is natural, then, that this is applied to the field of autobiography as well. Why do we write autobiography? What is its purpose?

There are various ways of wording the answer, but the general consensus is that we write autobiography in an attempt to make some sense of our lives—after all, “[i]n its broadest sense, the theme of autobiography is *life*, since the story cannot legitimately end

in death” (Howarth 88). Life is the theme and source of autobiography, but not just life in general, or any random life, but one life in particular: that of the author.

This examination of the author’s life often comes by way of “personal justification” (Gusdorf 39). The author seeks to defend who he or she has become by writing of the events and experiences that have shaped him or her. This defense may be taken in the negative sense of the word, or the neutral, but either way, the autobiography is used as a means to explain the author’s current life; the author writes “not only what happened to him at a different time in his life but above all how he became—out of what he was—what he presently is” (Starobinski 78-79; see also Renza 271). Even when writing about the past, the author, in a sense, still writes about the present.

Autobiography is also in part a “discourse of self-restoration,” which is why, stereotypically, it is men and women on their deathbeds who decide to pen the stories of their lives (de Man 925). Given the fact that every one of us will eventually die, some feel compelled to find a way to survive beyond their physical lives. Autobiography is one way of doing this. Writing an autobiography allows one to tell one’s story to future generations, so that one can “live” even after one’s death.

The autobiographical urge, then, seems to be a natural function of two desires. On the one hand, we write to make sense of and find purpose in life. On the other, it is to live far beyond our “threescore and ten” in some capacity (*King James Version*, Psalm 90:10). We write to live, then, even if not all of us live to write.

SUBJECT

Arguably the most important piece of the definition of autobiography is the subject: the *autos* of the Greek root, the “real person” of Lejeune’s definition. The subject of an autobiography coincides with its author, and this raises some interesting issues. What does it mean that the author is the subject of a literary work? How does this affect the position of the author, and that of the subject?

After proffering his definition of autobiography, Lejeune delves into the nature of the subject in such a work. Most famously, he talks about what he calls the autobiographical pact. The autobiographical pact is the affirmation that the author is the narrator, who is the protagonist. These three are the same, and thus the reader can be assured that he or she is reading autobiography (Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact” 14). Most obviously, this happens in a first-person narrative where the author’s name on the title page is the same as the name of the protagonist.

But even after it has been established that the subject is also the author, and thus that the work in question is indeed autobiographical, questions remain about the nature of the author-subject relationship. Yes, author equals subject, but most often, autobiography is the narrative of the author’s history, and so author does not quite equal subject. Rather, the author-in-the-past is the subject. It is the author’s former self about whom the author writes, and whose experiences and thoughts and worldview the author seeks to recreate.

The author, though, is no longer the same person he or she was in the past. Indeed, there is necessarily some distance between author and subject, even if the subject is the author-yesterday. The author-yesterday only existed yesterday, and is at least slightly changed in becoming the author-today, so that “the I who recounts is no longer

the one that is recounted” (qtd. in Renza 276). This presents an interesting scenario, because the farther away the author-as-subject is temporally from the author, the greater those changes are likely to become. The author proper knows his or her own personal history, knows the path he or she has taken through life, and knows what is, at the time of writing, the end result. He or she knows, in fact, more than the author-as-subject knew at the time about which the author is writing—sometimes a good deal more.

For example, if I were to write my autobiography, I would tell of my childhood career aspirations. As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher (except for one afternoon where, after watching an episode of *The Muppet Babies* in which Kermit drove a taxi cab, I wanted to be a cab driver). Initially, I wanted to be a first-grade teacher. Then, sometime in late middle school or early high school, I realized that I could combine this pedagogical ambition with my love of history and become a history teacher. I would write about how, going into college halfway across the country from where I grew up, my plan was to get my history degree, and then move back home to pursue a master’s degree in education. I could write about this all with a good deal of irony, because I know now the twists my life has taken since then, and because I sit here, now fully across the country, and about to graduate not with an education master’s, but rather with master’s degrees in divinity and English. I could snicker at myself in such a way that was not possible seven years ago, or at various points of my adolescence and childhood, while I was forming my life plan, because I didn’t know then how differently my life would look.

There is a certain tension, then, between author and author-as-subject. The author “always knows more than his protagonist, yet he remains faithful to the latter’s ignorance

for the sake of credible suspense” (Howarth 87). At the same time, as others will emphasize, each of these multiple authors, the historically-located “I”s that make up the author, remains distinct; there is an “inability to make cohere all the jostled and jolted ‘subjects’ that he is,” so that while the autobiographer seeks to make sense of his or her life, it can never fully be done (qtd. in P. Smith 107). Although the fact that it is “I” who narrates the autobiographical story, it is always an ambiguous “I,” the same “I” that I am and yet not (Starobinski 79).

The subject of autobiography, then, is more complicated than it might first appear. Author equals subject, yes, but also no. For it is the author-in-the-past who is the true subject, and while the author seeks to faithfully render this subject to the reader, it can never be completely successful.

PERFORMATIVITY

The autobiographical subject is also a “performative subject;” that is, not only does autobiography retell the events of a life, but it also performs that life, recreating it in both the moment of writing and of reading (S. Smith 17). Modern autobiography stems out of a society in which each person is called to be a number of selves—the analogous wearing of different hats comes to mind—and each of these selves is connected to the whole, but the whole still lacks some amount of unification. And so we tell stories, the stories of our lives, for this is “one means through which people in the West believe themselves to be ‘selves’” (S. Smith 18). We write to make sense of that self.

This raises another question, though. Paul de Man writes, “We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces the consequences, but can we not suggest,

with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed” by the autobiography he or she pens (920; emphasis in original)? In other words, does life produce autobiography, or does autobiography produce life?

To put the answer in one word, yes. It is clear that autobiography stems from the experiences of a life, that “experience is transformed into literature,” but there is still some element by which that life is produced by the autobiography (Olney, “Autobiography” 10). Autobiography is written for an audience, and any time an audience comes into play, the idea of performativity also comes to the forefront. Life is lived experientially, which “is itself performative. The living of a life becomes the effect of the life as narrated” (S. Smith 21). Life creates autobiography creates life.

When we tell our stories, we use certain words and phrases to color what happens, to help others see events the way we saw and see them. This is an act of performativity. Autobiography is both self-presenting and self-narrating; in my autobiography, I write how I want to be seen, and thus I am shaped by what I have written.

While describing my career aspirations in my hypothetical autobiography, I might tell about a trip I took to Thailand during my undergraduate years. This trip was an upper-level English course, a three-week travel course in which one week was spent teaching English as a second language in a Thai high school. I would present two incidents in particular, one in that high school, and one that occurred during our tourist weeks, in an orphanage for young children.

In the first, I would describe some of my experiences in the Thai classrooms. Unlike some of the other students I traveled with, I did not have a steady set of classes to

teach for the week. Instead, I floated around from day to day, filling in wherever a teacher wanted me. And while my hotel roommates would spend some time each night writing lesson plans for their classes, I would draw a complete blank. Mostly I “taught” the students how to play Hangman and made them laugh by over-emphasizing my /r/s—“arrrrrrr, like a pirate”—to help them hear the difference between /r/ and /l/. My classes were sometimes fun, sometimes painful, but never inspiring.

I would also write, though, about the orphanage we visited. We had all brought some items, mostly blankets, to donate to the orphanage, and when we dropped them off, we played with the children for about an hour. They were for the most part under the age of ten, and I spent that hour chasing several of them around, playing tag, and being as giggly and goofy as they wanted me to be. I would tell of the video footage of this visit (one of our chaperones filmed hours upon hours of our trip): while the camera slowly pans around the concrete patio, with our students interacting quietly with the children—here showing them a camera, there pushing one on the swings—suddenly a body darts through the corner of the screen, in and quickly out again. This is me, running after the kids. And having a grand time with them.

I would write these stories in such a way that, after reading both, it would be clear where my heart lies: not in the classroom but with the children. My telling of these stories would be a performance of who I am, but in this performance, I would also be creating who I am, solidifying this preference. The process works both ways; we write autobiography “to create and in creating to be created” (qtd. in Gusdorf 44). We perform our lives on paper, and those paper-lives become real and, in some sense, perform us.

RECREATING MEMORY

Once a work of art is labeled “non-fiction,” certain assumptions are made about that work of art. Primary among these is the assumption that the work is true, namely, that it presents what happened in the way in which it “happened, in real life” (Mansell 115)—that if one could jump in a time machine, one could witness the original event and read along, as it were, and the written work would be true to the witnessed experience. We require of non-fiction the historical truth of the events described.

An author, in most cases, has only his or her own memory of the event in question from which to narrate an account. Sometimes, it is true, there are home movies of an incident, or more formal word-for-word transcripts of the goings on, but most of life is not recorded in such a precise way. Thus, the author is left with memory to fuel the autobiography.

Memory, however, is notoriously tricky. It is often thought that the best testimony in a criminal case is given by an eyewitness. Eyewitness accounts, though, are fairly weak evidence. Three witnesses to a crime could tell the story of what they saw, and it could produce three very different versions, because “memory is not like a videotape recorder—you don’t just record an event and play it back later” (“Eyewitness”). Memory, rather than presenting a past event to us, recreates it.

In writing the story of his or her life, then, the autobiographer must draw upon more than simple memory. To use our previous example, in my hypothetical autobiography, I could tell of that one day when I wanted to be a taxi driver like Kermit the Frog. This is all I remember of the experience: that there was such a day, and that the desire stemmed from an episode of *Muppet Babies*. To make this a more compelling

narrative, though, in my autobiography, I would flesh out the story. I would do a little bit of research, so that I could write that the episode in question was fittingly titled “What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?” I have no specific memory of how old I was at the time, but since it originally aired in 1984, I would assume that rather than watching it as a months-old infant, I had seen it in reruns in early 1991, and so I would begin the scene by saying that this happened when I was six (see “Muppet Babies” and “Episode 108”). I would probably talk to my parents, and remind myself of the topography of our living room in those days, so that I could give a more vivid picture of this experience. Reading what I would write, one might think that I have an extraordinary memory; in reality, I know that to paint a convincing and engaging picture, I need more than “I remember one day I wanted to be a cab driver like Kermie,” and so I create more to fill that void. Some have made this point even more strongly, saying that “writing from the pictures in one’s mind is valueless” (Mandel 50); memory should be the jumping-off point for autobiography, not its only source of information.

Autobiography, to define it anew, is memory set down in words, and so it must struggle with the difficulties and insufficiencies of both memory and words. Words are, as is memory, “a simulacrum, a verbal rendition” of a given event, but “certainly not [...] the entirety of the event” (Mansell 123). Words can only give an approximation of an experience, and the author must shape those words to give the closest rendition possible. The author of autobiography seeks to explore his or her past, bringing it into the present, as a sort of ghostly remainder of what was: “Autobiography is not simple repetition of the past as it was, for recollection brings us not the past itself but only the presence in spirit of a world forever gone” (Gusdorf 38).

Autobiography, then does not give us the time-machine experience, but a recreated, reformulated simulation of that experience, “a ghostly image of that life” (Gusdorf 38). Well-written autobiography gives the reader a depth of recreated experience that is not available from memory alone. Since autobiography is never just the plain and simple setting down of what happened, though, but rather an artistic rendering of that experience, there can always be called into question the “factuality” of autobiography.

Even as a relatively new sub-division of literary criticism, the examination of the critical aspects of autobiography is a rich field with only deeper and richer explorations to come. The range of topics addressed in autobiographical studies is far broader than what I can represent here, and even this abbreviation encounters much discussion and debate. Clearly, there is more to autobiography than what first meets the eye, and indeed deserves more credit than was given it in centuries past.

Chapter Six

Primo Levi

MEET PRIMO LEVI

The details given about Primo Levi in the “About the Author” section of *If This is a Man* are short and to the point: he was born in 1919, was deported to Auschwitz in 1944, and died in 1987. In between these major events, he was trained and worked as a chemist, fought against the Fascist regime, and published some books. While these are all true, and important, details, there is more to the man.

Levi was born in Turin, Italy, in 1919. He attended the University of Turin and received his Bachelor of Science in chemistry in 1941, *summa cum laude* (Levi, *Survival* 106). In the years following, he began working with the anti-Fascist resistance and was captured by the Fascists in December 1943. Upon interrogation, Levi admitted to being a Jew and was sent to a detention camp the following month (Levi, *Survival* 13-14).

When the German troops arrived in February 1944, Levi was loaded into a cattle car like so many others and shipped off to Auschwitz, a place whose name was “without significance for [him] at that time,” although all too soon, he and the others would know the full horrors that were in store for them (Levi, *Survival* 17). The trainload of Jews was quickly sifted through, and Levi was ushered into the work portion of the camp. He was issued ill-fitting clothes and tattooed with his new name: he was “baptized” 174517 (Levi, *Survival* 27).

For ten months, Levi endured living hell: near-starvation, unsanitary conditions, hard work, harsh punishment for even the smallest of offenses, and the hovering fear of

illness or selection. Indeed, the selection came in October, and he yet again was allowed to live—or perhaps more aptly, he was not chosen to die (see the chapter “October 1944,” *Survival* 123-130). Meanwhile, the Russians drew nearer, resulting in both air raids and some amount of hope on the part of the prisoners. Levi writes that by January, they could even hear the thundering booms of Russian artillery (*Survival* 151).

That same month, January 1945, Levi contracted scarlet fever and was confined to the infirmary—a place subject to more frequent selections, and where the survival rate was even lower than that of the camp at large (*Survival* 151). He was placed in the infections ward, with the promise of forty days’ isolation ahead of him. On the fifth day, though, Levi was warned of an impending evacuation: all prisoners would be transported from Auschwitz (*Survival* 152). The Russians were too close for German comfort.

The evacuation came on January 18, 1945, and Levi was too ill to leave with them. Instead, he endured ten days of sickness, with no personnel to care for him or the others in the infirmary. The camp was left without power or water. Levi and the others had to scrounge for food and potable water; they had to resort to melting filthy ice and snow to survive. For Levi, they were “ten days outside both world and time,” and only by determination and cooperation with a few of the healthier patients did he survive (*Survival* 156). And then, on January 27, the Russians arrived (Levi, *Survival* 172). Auschwitz was liberated; Levi was free.

It took Levi several months to make his way back to Turin (the story of which he tells in *The Reawakening*). Feeling “compelled to write as soon as [he] returned to Italy,” he had the manuscript of *If This is a Man* written within a few months (Levi, Afterword 209). A version was published in October 1947; it was not well received and was largely

forgotten until 1958 (Druker, “Primo Levi” 48; Gordon 49). It was republished in a slightly different form in 1958, and this version has become a classic, and is lauded as his “most influential” work (Morgan 30). However, it took time to reach this status, and Levi’s narrative was not widely read in the decade following its printing (Morgan 30).

While he worked as a chemist and manager of a paint factory in the years after the war, Levi also continued to write (P. Roth 175). Encouraged by the later success of *If This is a Man*, he next wrote *The Reawakening*, which was published in 1963 (Levi, Afterword 209; Morgan 35). The third autobiographical account of his Auschwitz experience was printed in 1985 as *The Drowned and the Saved* (Druker, “Primo Levi” 48). In addition, Levi wrote numerous poems and novels, largely dealing with the life and themes he encountered in the camp.

Levi married a woman named Lucia, and except for his forced removal, lived his whole life in the apartment his parents had inhabited and in which he was born. He was surrounded by family: his mother lived with Levi and his wife, and within a few streets of his apartment lived his mother-in-law, his son, and his daughter (P. Roth 176-177). In April of 1987, Levi died of a fall down a flight of stairs. Was it suicide? Some seem certain that it was; others are less sure, saying that it was an “alleged suicide” and more confidently simply referring to the event as Levi’s “untimely death” (Morgan 35; Druker, “Primo Levi” 49). However it happened, Levi’s death means that the world has lost one more courageous voice, one who was willing to speak of the unspeakable, name the unnamable, and demand that we never forget what happened to him and millions of others.

SURVIVAL IN AUSCHWITZ VS. IF THIS IS A MAN

Primo Levi stands as one of the foremost authors of Shoah survivor texts, and yet he is, in a sense, misrepresented by the American printers of his works. For some reason, his titles are weakened as they are printed for the American public. For instance, an article originally published in an Italian newspaper was re-titled when it was translated into English; while Levi's title translates literally as "The Black Hole of Auschwitz," it was printed as "The Dispute Among German Historians" (Druker, "Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*" 59). The power and graphic visuality of the Italian is lost in the new title.

Likewise, Levi's best-known work, *Survival in Auschwitz*, has been re-titled for the American printing—re-titled and, I would argue, mis-titled. The title Levi gave his narrative is *Se questo e un uomo*: literally, *If This is a Man*. Levi seems to have a knack for picking powerful titles; *If This is a Man* gives an incredible image of the narrative that is to follow. Yes, it is a survival account, and so *Survival in Auschwitz* is a technically correct title. However, Levi does not explore themes of survival within the camp; rather, he focuses on the humanity of those held in the camps. Levi's narrative "offers no happy endings [*sic*], but instead promises to interrogate the definition of man" (Druker, "Ethics" 530); his telling of the camp life questions the very humanity of those trapped within the barbed wire fences and by the SS guards. These titles give quite different thematic impressions of the narrative itself.

We are not to judge a book by its cover, but a title can be an important part of a literary work. To me, *If This is a Man* is a title truer to Levi's experience—he did, after all, choose this title deliberately. It is for this reason that I refer to Levi's work by the

literal translation of the Italian title rather than using the less appropriate title given to the American printing of his account.

SUBJECT

Levi began writing *If This is a Man* only months after his release from Auschwitz; in this way, then, he as author is about as temporally close to the subject of his work as is possible in a true autobiography, keeping in mind that Lejeune discards diary because it is not a “retrospective prose narrative” (“Autobiographical Pact” 4). Separated from Levi-as-subject by less than two years, Levi-as-author has a certain benefit of immediacy in his writing.

But still, the Levi who is writing is not the same Levi who entered Auschwitz early in 1944—indeed, the Levi who was liberated was not even the same Levi who was imprisoned. Not only are the three separate in time but also in circumstance. Levi enters the camp simply as a *Häftling*, a prisoner, a grunt laborer to be used and abused. Before the end of his time in Auschwitz, though, he gains some prestige. Levi was, after all, trained as a chemist, and when Buna, the synthetic rubber factory attached to the camp system, needed chemists, he steps forward to offer his experience. He is examined by the civilian head of the polymerization department, and, several months later, it is announced that Levi would work inside the laboratory; he is now a “specialized worker” (Levi, *Survival* 104-107, 138-139).

Levi is entitled to a few small privileges—a new shirt and underwear—but more importantly, working in the laboratory means that he is sheltered from the harshest of the winter weather that quickly approaches; the temperature inside is a “wonderful” 65°

Fahrenheit (Levi, *Survival* 140). The laboratory also provides a new source of supplies to “organize”—to steal and trade on the camp’s black market for the soup and bread that is so scarce. Life as a specialized worker is at least to some degree easier than life as a laborer.

In the laboratory, Levi is lifted from the harshest conditions of Auschwitz. The most pressing needs—food, shelter, warmth—are provided for him, and so he can detach himself from the immediacy of camp life. He is still a victim—let us not forget that even with this menial amount of comfort, Auschwitz was still Auschwitz—but he is able to be “both engaged and detached simultaneously” (Morgan 36). The narrative is “the recollection of a privileged victim, even the early stages when he was yet to be privileged,” and this, then, is the position from which Levi writes the whole of his experiences (Morgan 36).

As a survivor, Levi has a powerful tale to tell of the Shoah and of Auschwitz in particular. However, the grimmest, most horrific tales can never be told, for they belong to those whose voices have been taken from them, even as their very lives have been taken. The truest story of the Shoah belongs to those who perished in the crematoria, burned to cinders so that very little remains to give evidence of their existence.

Levi, in his way, tries to speak of and for the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, those who would not live to see life outside the camps. Levi recognizes that “the drowned have no story,” and so he writes their story for them (Levi, *Survival* 90). They are, after all, the truest witnesses to the Shoah, the only ones who experienced the whole cycle of Nazi degradation (Bachmann 80-81). But Levi was not one of the drowned; he can only know a certain amount of truth about their existence. Levi never writes of the gas chambers or

the crematoria (Gordon 49). Perhaps this is in part a protest “against language’s ability to signify gas chambers (an inexpressible absurdity)” but it is certainly as well due to the simple fact that Levi neither experienced this aspect of Auschwitz nor talked to anyone who had (Lyotard 14). Surely Levi-as-author had heard reports of the mechanisms of the gas chambers and crematoria, but Levi-as-subject knew only the rumors and fears they inspired.

Levi-as-author faces a two-fold challenge in writing of his former self. The first comes in that Levi writes his autobiography from the perspective of a privileged victim, now freed. This necessarily creates a filter through which his early days in the camp are seen; Levi was an ordinary laborer longer than he was a specialized worker, yet the latter is the lens through which he must ultimately see the camp, for this is his final experience. The second challenge comes where Levi tries to speak for those whose realities cannot be fully known; to speak for those who died in the camps seems imperative, yet cannot be fully accomplished while remaining true to the experience of the camp, for the end of the *Musselmänner*’s lives cannot be known.

PERFORMATIVITY

Life produces autobiography, and autobiography produces life. It seems paradoxical, and yet it seems natural at the same time. The performativity of a text can be best and most fully explained by using example, and so we turn once again to Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man*.

When one begins to read the critical literature on Levi, one quickly notices that Levi’s written tone of voice is commented upon above all else: as one critic writes, “[o]ne

of the most striking aspects of Primo Levi's writing is the voice of reason that characterizes his literary descriptions of the Nazis and the Nazi genocide" (Lang 255). Levi writes in a very clean, simple style—no fancy words, no profusion of adjectives, just, as one might say, the cold, hard facts.

This precise, almost-detached language makes some amount of sense when Levi's background as a chemist is taken into consideration; according to some, Levi claims "to be writing in something like a 'scientific' style" born of his training (White 115). Indeed, Levi maintains that his scientific background helped him survive Auschwitz, and so his writing would reflect this opinion (see Levi's chapter "The Intellectual in Auschwitz," *The Drowned and the Saved* 127-148). But his "rational voice" comes from more than just his scientific training (Lang 261). Levi has chosen a very specific role for himself and for the writing of his autobiography: that of the witness.

Levi made a conscious choice to live as a witness to the horrors of Auschwitz. In the afterword to the Touchstone printing of *The Reawakening*, Levi answers some of the questions he was often posed regarding his experiences and writing; one of these questions the lack of desire for revenge portrayed in Levi's works. Levi answers that he is not inclined to hatred, and that in his writing, he "deliberately assume[s] the calm, sober language of the witness, neither the lamenting tones of the victim nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge" (Levi, Afterword 210).

The voice of the witness, as Levi describes it, is very similar to the voice of the scientist, then: both seek to represent a given situation in a way that is tinged with as little emotion as possible. In this, Levi is quite successful, and it is surely part of why *If This is a Man* is "generally recognized as a classic of Holocaust testimony" (White 123).

This stark performance also lends itself to a “dramatic contrast [between Levi’s writings and] the terrors he is describing” (Druker, “Primo Levi” 52). There is an elegance to this simplicity, for it forces the reader to supply the underlying emotion that is subtly there but not allowed to be explicit (White 123). It is perhaps comparable to Jonathan Edwards’ sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” While the text of the sermon uses vivid imagery to compare the sinner to a spider being held over the fires of hell by a wrath-filled God, historical accounts of the preaching of this sermon tell that Edwards “had not a loud, strong voice; but appeared with such gravity and solemnity, and spake with such distinctness, clearness and precision” (Marsden 223; qtd. in Marsden 220). Without impassioned gesturing or great shouting, Edwards was effective in communicating his words for what they were. By maintaining a similar simplicity of voice, Levi allows his experiences to produce chilling emotion beyond what words can express.

Levi chose to be a witness when he began writing *If This is a Man*, and in that role he has been wildly successful. His writing provides powerful witness to the events of the Shoah. At the same time, though, it is his autobiography that truly makes him a witness. Had he never put pen to paper, had he never pursued publication, the world would never have heard of Primo Levi. He would remain yet another anonymous survivor, and the anonymous cannot stand as witness.

If This is a Man has made Levi a witness, for it has thrust him into the world’s spotlight and allowed him to speak and write further about what happened to him and millions of others. Levi wrote his autobiography to be a witness, and the autobiography

has subsequently both allowed and required him to be that witness. Life created autobiography, and autobiography created life.

MEMORY

In its Touchstone edition, *If This is a Man* has been categorized as history/autobiography. If the reader puts great stock in such labels, she or he comes to this narrative with certain expectations: namely, that Levi is describing the truth about Auschwitz, in all detail. Yet we have already seen that memory is not as reliable as we might believe.

This, then, poses an interesting problem for Levi's autobiographies. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi writes of fellow Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry:

[W]e exchanged several letters, having recognized, or more accurately, come to know, each other through our respective books. Our memories of "down there" coincide reasonably well on the plane of material details, but they diverge on one strange fact: I, who have always maintained that I preserve of Auschwitz a total, indelible memory, have forgotten his appearance; he declares that he remembers me [...] Indeed, he says that for a few weeks we lived in the same hut and that he did not forget me because the Italians were so few as to constitute a rarity, and furthermore, because in the Lager, during the last two months, I basically exercised my profession, that of chemist, and this was even a greater rarity. (130)

If Améry remembers Levi, but Levi does not remember Améry, then one of their memories is at fault; either Améry holds onto a mistaken memory or Levi's is not as infallible as he believes.

One rather hesitates to doubt Levi's assertion here, but at the same time, it is hard not to doubt. Very few memories are as perfect as Levi indicates his to be; this is not to say that he might not have such total memory recall, but the odds are against him. And then again, if one does not remember something, if one has forgotten that thing, one does not always remember that one has forgotten. It may be that a certain memory slides away or is repressed without conscious knowledge of this happening.

It certainly seems that Levi has a better memory than most; certainly his is better than mine. He includes very little dialogue in *If This is a Man*, but the majority of what he does include is not in his native language; rather, he records commands and brief discussions that were made in the camp dialect, a German tinged with Yiddish, or occasionally in Polish. Levi had some understanding of German, but, as an Italian, hardly knew Yiddish existed until his Auschwitz days (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 100).

Levi writes of the process of having *If This is a Man* translated into German, and specifically, of the places in which he directly quotes the Germanic dialect spoken by the prisoners. In using these phrases, Levi hoped to portray a "retroversion to the language in which events had taken place and to which they belonged. More than a book, it should be a tape recording" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 173). In this vein, Levi had faithfully written the phrases as he remembered them acoustically, with the result that his renderings were not always proper German. When his translator objected to such

wordings, Levi responded that “‘down there’ we said exactly this” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 172).

On one occasion in particular, Levi was able to pinpoint what made the German he remembered improper German. In telling the story of Kraus, Levi repeats a sentence spoken to Kraus: “Langsam, du blöder Einer, langsam, verstanden?” Literally, this translates as “Slow, you stupid one, slow, understood?” which Levi admits “did sound a bit strange” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 101). However, as he later read up on Yiddish, he found that what seemed like a mis-remembered German phrasing was actually a Yiddish influence on the camp language (*The Drowned and the Saved* 101). Levi’s memory was vindicated. Levi does indeed seem to be justified in claiming an impeccable memory of the events of Auschwitz.

A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

It is interesting to note that almost all of *If This is a Man* is written in the present tense. White notices this tendency, and in speaking of Levi’s description of the October selection, writes that “although the time spoken about is in the historical past, the passage is put in the present tense, and thus situates the reader in the time of the text” (116). It is as if Levi is reliving the memories as he writes them, and wants to bring the reader right along with him. The present tense, coupled with Levi’s inclination to describe group scenes in plural, certainly gives the reader the sense that he or she is, if not in Levi’s place, standing beside him:

We climb down, they make us enter an enormous empty room that is poorly heated. We have a terrible thirst. The weak gurgle of the water in

the radiators makes us ferocious; we have had nothing to drink for four days [...] we are tired, standing on our feet, with a tap which drips while we cannot drink the water, and we wait for something which will certainly be terrible ... (Levi, *Survival* 22)

This plurality continues beyond what the reader might expect; it ensnares the reader so that she or he is uncomfortable, just as the “we” are uncomfortable. The reader becomes one of the “we” Levi describes.

This present tense formation, however, is not used for the entirety of the narrative. The present-tense telling is framed by events in the more typical past tense. The first chapter is told in past tense, and the second begins the same: “Then the lorry stopped, and we saw a large door, and above it a sign, brightly illuminated (its memory still strikes me in my dreams): *Arbeit Macht Frei*, work gives freedom” (Levi, *Survival* 22). It is here, as he arrives at Auschwitz, that Levi switches tenses and continues with the description quoted in the previous paragraph.

The present tense continues almost to the end of the story, until shortly before Levi’s last ten days in the camp. He writes of the execution of a man who is hanged for having taken some part in the revolt that blew up one of the crematoria. Levi’s narrator speaks to the Nazis: “Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing more to fear; no acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment” (*Survival* 150). After this, he reverts to past tense: “Alberto and I went back to the hut, and we could not look each other in the face. [...] Because we also are broken, conquered [...] and now we are oppressed by shame” (*Survival* 150). This ends the

penultimate chapter; the final chapter describes Levi's illness and liberation, and it, as well, is written in past tense.

It is as if Levi wants to especially highlight those in-between times: the times in Auschwitz when he could still recognize himself in himself. In the end, he becomes like the others, broken and weak. After a long present-tense telling, the past-tense ending gives the impression of a more faded memory; present tense makes the action more immediate, more powerful. The reader is there, then, while it is happening. The past tense reads like something that has been told to Levi—not his memories directly, but the stories of himself that have been told to him. At the least, it reads as though these memories are less vivid, more distant. Perhaps it comes back to the question reflected in the title: which is the man Primo Levi: the one who is whole, even as he is being dehumanized, or the broken and sick Levi who struggles to keep himself alive in the absence of the cruel, dominating forces of the SS and the Auschwitz camp administration system?

ENDINGS

Howarth reminds the reader of autobiography criticism that autobiography must be about life, since an autobiography necessarily cannot end in death (88). He uses this to talk about theme, but his observation has implications beyond how he applies it. To me, it has great importance on the endings of autobiographies, or rather, where the autobiographer chooses to end his or her story.

An autobiography obviously cannot tell the entire story of a life; there is no way to write of one's own death. Nearly 15 years after Lejeune first wrote that autobiography is the story of "[one's] individual life, in particular the story of [one's] personality," he

still upholds his definition (Lejeune, "Autobiographical Pact (Bis)" 120). How can one tell the story of one's life, though, if one cannot tell the end?

If Lejeune will not give up on his definition, then neither shall we. Our focus, then, becomes the latter part of Lejeune's definition: autobiography is the story of a personality. Personalities are delineated by boundaries; the terms I use to describe myself and my personality exclude me from being the things that I do not say that I am. Looking at boundaries, then, is a means of seeing personality. Especially because autobiography cannot end in the subject's death, the end point chosen for an autobiography becomes part of the definition of that subject's personality.

Primo Levi tells his story through a very limited span of time: *If This is a Man* begins on December 13, 1943, and ends just over a year later, on January 27, 1945. The story of his life, in this autobiography, is the story of his experience of Auschwitz. The final paragraph of the narrative gives a quick recount of where some of the other characters were at the time of writing, but the truer ending seems to come just before this: "The Russians arrived while Charles and I were carrying Sómogyi a little distance outside. He was very light. We overturned the stretcher on the grey snow. Charles took off his beret. I regretted not having a beret" (172).

This is the final image of the camp, this carrying of yet another dead body into the cold winter scenery, where this friend could not be buried, but only dumped out onto the snow, where Levi does not even have a hat to tip in respect to his liberators. Going back to his title, Levi seems to ask once again, "Is this a man?" The American printing of Levi's text has been re-titled *Survival in Auschwitz*, but this image calls into question yet again the accuracy of such a title. Levi survived, technically, in the fact that he was alive

when the Russians arrived. But is survival more than just life? Levi suggests through his story that it is, and that, in this sense, he did not truly survive in the camp, not as the man he once was and could have been.

All of Levi's tightly-written prose seems to revolve around his titular question: Is this a man? Who is the man who survives a place like Auschwitz, and who can tell its story? Is a man such as the men described in the text really a man, or has his humanity been stripped from him? Levi pulls everything together with this one question, but it is a question he does not—and cannot—answer.

Chapter Seven

Elie Wiesel

MEET ELIE WIESEL

Elie Wiesel is perhaps the most famous survivor of the Shoah; certainly it is he who is most frequently taught in classrooms across the United States. He was born in 1928, in Sighet, a town in the Transylvania region of Hungary (Wiesel). In 1944, when the Nazis gained control of and increased their presence in Hungary, Wiesel was rounded up with his family and first forced into a ghetto, then carted off to Auschwitz (Wiesel 9-28). He was fifteen years old.

As the cattle cars emptied at the Auschwitz station, confusion reigned. The prisoners were told to line up and had to pass inspection before being herded into the camp. Wiesel managed to stay close to his father. Together, they were sent to the left, to be disinfected and processed into Auschwitz; Wiesel's mother and sisters—the rest of his family—were sent to the right (Wiesel 27-31). Wiesel would never see them again.

In the intake process, Wiesel was stripped of his name; for the rest of his time in Auschwitz, he was simply A-7713 (Wiesel 39). He was assigned a bunk in one of the blocks, and a place on one of the labor crews. He slowly found his way in the life of the camp.

Wiesel, like Levi, experienced the air raids and bombings that came with the advance of the Allied troops, including a bombing directly in the vicinity of the camp (Wiesel 56-58). He also writes of the selection of October 1944, and while Wiesel was cleared, his father's number was taken down in the selection. By proving himself still

useful, though, Wiesel's father was able to spare himself death by cremation (Wiesel 66-72). Both survived another Auschwitz hazard.

Winter came, and with it, the new year. In mid-January, 1945, Wiesel's foot became infected, swollen and painful, and he had to go to the infirmary because he could no longer work in such a condition. The doctor performed surgery to remove a large amount of pus from the sole of Wiesel's foot, and promised a full recovery within a fortnight (Wiesel 74-76).

Before those two weeks had passed, though, Wiesel heard the news: Auschwitz was to be evacuated. The Russians were only a few days away, and Hitler would not allow any of the Jews their liberty. One of Wiesel's neighbors in the infirmary was convinced that those who remained in the camp would be eliminated; he warned Wiesel, "Don't let yourself be fooled with illusions. Hitler has made it very clear that he will annihilate all the Jews before the clock strikes twelve [...] I've got more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He's the only one who's kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people" (Wiesel 76-77). Wiesel decided not to take that chance; he left the hospital, and he and his father evacuated with the majority of the camp.

From Auschwitz, the prisoners were marched at an ever-increasing pace, first to Gleiwitz, then were moved by train to Buchenwald (Wiesel 81-98). In Buchenwald, Wiesel's father was struck with dysentery, and Wiesel remained by his side for a week. The elder Wiesel died on January 29, 1945 (Wiesel 102-106).

On April 10, the SS announced that Buchenwald would be evacuated that very day. Instead, the resistance movement within the camp acted, and fought off the Nazis. The SS fled, leaving the camp in the hands of the prisoners. That evening, the Americans

reached the gates. Wiesel was once more a free man (Wiesel 108-109). Three days after his liberation, though, Wiesel was struck with food poisoning and hovered on the brink of death for two weeks (Wiesel 109).

After his recovery, Wiesel moved to Paris, where he made his home for over a decade (Wiesel). He placed upon himself a ten-year vow of silence and did not write during this time (Brown v). To break his silence, Wiesel wrote *Night*; he wrote in French, his adopted language, and the book was published in 1958. *Night* is considered his “most influential” work, though since then he has authored more than 40 other books, in the form of novels, plays, dialogues, biblical reflections, and a two-part autobiography (Morgan 30; Rubenstein and Roth 319).

Wiesel moved to the United States and has been a professor of humanities at Boston University since 1976 (Wiesel). In 1985, he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, and he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 “for being, in the words of the committee, ‘a witness for truth and justice’ who has ‘climbed from utter humiliation to become one of our most important spiritual leaders and guides’” (Bachmann 83). Wiesel is still alive, and still teaches at Boston University.

SUBJECT

The question of subject is raised once again by *Night*, especially because Wiesel waited ten years before writing of his Auschwitz experience. The Wiesel who authors his autobiography is in a different place, both geographically and temporally, from the Wiesel about whom he writes. It is the temporal distance with which one is primarily concerned when one speaks of Wiesel’s subject.

Night is very much a narrative, akin to the world of fiction in its style and form, which is perhaps why some have called it a “fictional-autobiographical” work (Morgan 31). Whereas Levi maintains a sparser style throughout his autobiography, Wiesel includes some reflection on the events as they happen. For example, as young Wiesel and his father are being slowly processed into the camp, Wiesel describes the scenery around him, the smoke rising from the chimneys in the distance, a pit in which small children were being burned (28-30). In the midst of this, between “Two steps from the pit we were ordered to turn to the left and made to go into a barracks” and “The barracks we had been made to go into was very long,” Wiesel breaks in (31, 32). He writes,

Never shall I forget that night, that first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night [...] Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreathes 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. (32)

This interlocution takes place in the moment between a left-foot step and a right-foot step, between going into the barracks and standing in the barracks.

At this point in the narrative, Wiesel is a fifteen-year-old boy who “believed profoundly” (Wiesel 1). It seems unlikely, then, that it is this boy who proclaims the murder of his faith, especially in such final terms—forever. Others would make this point more strongly, saying it is “[c]ertainly not the boy” who makes this statement (Morgan 35). It reads more like an aged judgment, one which has required and been proven by some amount of time. This, then, is Wiesel-the-author stepping in to comment on the importance of the events as they are happening to Wiesel-the-subject.

Wiesel-the-subject, though, is not a static subject. *Night* begins with a Wiesel who profoundly believes, while it ends with a Wiesel who can barely recognize himself (Rubenstein and Roth 319; J. Roth, “From Night to Twilight” 59-60). At the end of the narrative, Wiesel describes his reflection in a mirror as “a corpse” staring back at him (109). Of course, logically this corpse is Wiesel, but yet it is not quite; Wiesel writes of this reflection in the third person: “The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me” (109). Wiesel is and yet is not this corpse; his subject, then, is somewhere between his fifteen-year-old self and this skeletal remnant.

COMPLEXITY OF WITNESS AND WEAKNESS OF WORDS

Shoah survivors are faced with a two-fold instinct: to tell of their sufferings, and to remain silent. Wiesel reflects on this duality, saying, “We do try to put the experience into words. But can we? That is my question. Language is poor and inadequate. The moment it is told, the experience turns into betrayal” (qtd. in Ozsvath 198). Words are not enough to tell the story, and yet the story must be told, both for the truth to be known and

to honor those who lost their lives in the course of the Shoah, “to remain faithful” (Rubenstein and Roth 320).

Words are all we have, and so they must make do. Wiesel must make them do—and he does. His writing in *Night* has been called both “sparse and lean” and “almost a parable,” ideas that sound rather contradictory, for a parable implies some richness that would be counter to leanness of style (J. Roth, “From Night to Twilight” 59; Morgan 34). Then again, parables usually do involve a minimal number of words. The words Wiesel uses, like the words of a parable, are chosen carefully, resulting in a clean, simple appearance that hides a wealth of emotion underneath.

Many Shoah narratives are driven by a need to bear witness, it seems, and Wiesel’s is no different. Wiesel argues that “one can write about the Holocaust [...] only if one is not a writer but a witness” (Bachmann 83). But this witness is complex. It must honor the victims without re-victimizing them; it must tell of experiences “beyond our imagination” in such a way that they can be captured by that same imagination (Morgan 34). And so Wiesel writes prose that hits the ear like poetry—but like poetry that should never have to exist:

Some talked of God, of his mysterious ways, of the sins of the Jewish people, and of their future deliverance. But I had ceased to pray. How I sympathized with Job! I did not deny God’s existence, but I doubted His absolute justice. (Wiesel 42)

Bread, soup—these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time. (Wiesel 50)

And, in spite of myself, a prayer rose in my heart, to that God in whom I no longer believed. My God, Lord of the Universe, give me strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahou's son has done. (Wiesel 87)

There is poetry in the words, in the short paragraphs and shorter sentences Wiesel uses to describe his life. One can hear at once the dullness of the words, the monotonous voice in which they are spoken, and the powerful emotion that lies underneath, the terror that flattened the tone and the lingering pain that takes the edge off life. It is painful, horrible poetry and it is the only way to represent even the smallest of the horrors of Auschwitz. Wiesel somehow manages to take weak, inadequate language and turn it into stabbing, throbbing beauty.

ENDINGS

The final lines of *Night* are sparse and haunting. After suffering through food poisoning as a free man, Wiesel writes,

One day I was able to get up, after gathering all of 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 me, has never left me.

(109)

After Auschwitz, this is all that remains of Elie Wiesel: a corpse with such an expression in his eyes that it can never be forgotten, though Wiesel does not describe it precisely.

This truly is night, the darkest one's life can get. There is no ray of light left.

There is a profound choice that Wiesel has made in ending his autobiography in this way. Shoah survivors have written of their lives in different ways, and many choose to go beyond Wiesel's ending. Sonia Schreiber Weitz, for example, writes of her liberation, and of a period of hospitalization, but she moves even past that and tells of a rehabilitated life, one in which she can learn to be herself once more. It is a much brighter ending, one in which hope abounds, and the promise that things can get better.

Wiesel denies his reader any such hope. One who is familiar with Wiesel's biography knows of a successful post-Auschwitz life, but this cannot be presumed from *Night's* ending. Indeed, if one knew nothing of Wiesel other than this narrative, one might think that he remains this corpse. Across his canon, Wiesel writes his stories in such a way that "even their endings resist leaving his readers with a fixed conclusion" (J. Roth, "From Night to Twilight" 64). He does not allow his readers any certainties or any room to make assumptions. Rather, he leaves them in the dark, at midnight, at the bleakest point of *Night*.

Elie Wiesel has carefully crafted his autobiography; in everything, he focuses his reader on the horrific details of Auschwitz, preparing for that dark final moment, when he stands as a living corpse. He does not phrase it the same way, but Wiesel, like Levi, is exploring the nature of humanity, of what constitutes a man. While he seems to doubt that it is the intense believer he was at fifteen, the stark image he leaves the reader with guarantees that neither is it the haunted corpse staring back from the mirror.

Chapter Eight

Compassionate Theodicy

While the free-will defense and process and protest theodicies are the most prominent strains of thought in speaking of the problem of evil, there are others that are gaining attention. In particular, the atheodicy or antitheodicy of D. Z. Phillips is attracting both support and criticism as it seeks to address theodicy in the shadow of immense evil without minimizing evil or re-victimizing those who have fallen in evil's path. Phillips' philosophy is often called moral antitheodicy, because he "reject[s] theodicy on the basis of moral considerations, seeking to show that one *ought not* to engage in the practice of theodicy" (Simpson 154; emphasis in original). Phillips argues that the entire enterprise of theodicy is based on flawed premises and faulty assumptions about the nature of God and religious belief.

Phillips' position lends itself well to a study of evil held under the spotlight of the Shoah. This antitheodicy, then, becomes the basis of what I call a compassionate theodicy, and what I see to be the proper response to the pain and suffering of this world. It is my reading of Shoah literature, in particular the works of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, that have led me to this point, and my theodicy is thus heavily influenced by critical aspects of their autobiographies.

THE CASE AGAINST THEODICY

D. Z. Phillips makes it clear that his primary focus in the exploration of evil is on those who have suffered, that they might not be hurt again through philosophical and

theological discourse. These discourses, Phillips argues, “should be done in fear: fear that in our philosophizings we will betray the evils people have suffered,” and he explains that “[b]etrayal occurs every time explanations and justifications of evils are offered which are simplistic, insensitive, incredible or obscene” (*The Problem of Evil* xi).

Whenever theodicy downplays or justifies evil, it has betrayed the sufferer. It is through this lens that Phillips views theodicy, both in evaluating other theodicies and in forming his own. Ultimately, Phillips believes that “theodicy fails to do justice to the things of the world”—that is, that theodicy, in its usual form, cannot reconcile evil with the way God seems to have created the world (“Theism without Theodicy” 147).

In looking at theodicy in light of the way our world is, Phillips finds several problems with the theodical project. He calls these problems “bee stings,” taking this appellation from Wittgenstein’s parable of the bees. Wittgenstein writes that one can sensibly thank bees for the honey they have provided, but not for their kindness, “since in the next moment they may sting you” (qtd. in Phillips, “Theism” 148). One, in other words, can appreciate their kind act, but not a generic kindness, because the bees lack this characteristic. Similarly, Phillips believes, the project of theodicy “attempts to say of God, ‘Look how kind he is,’ but the next minute each argument, of this kind, will sting you” (*The Problem of Evil* 51). He lists several particularly common bee stings from which theodicy suffers.

Certain theodicies propose that suffering is necessary to the moral responsibility of humanity. Suffering, they argue, fosters such moral responsibility, because the suffering of another allows one to act on the sufferer’s behalf. This responsibility is good, and so suffering is justified on this basis. If this is true, the Good Samaritan could say as

he stepped up to help the injured man, “Thank you, God, for another opportunity for my moral development” (Phillips, “Theism” 148). This position, though, makes suffering instrumental to human moral growth—without suffering, we could not grow (Phillips, “Theism” 148; Phillips, *The Problem of Evil* 58-60). In making evil and suffering instrumental to this process, one has allowed the sufferer to be used; the Good Samaritan uses the man he helps in order to better himself. The one who is suffering becomes just a stepping-stone, and so the evil that has been done to him or her does not really matter.

In tandem with this, another version of theodicy argues that suffering is necessary not for those who might help the sufferer but the sufferer him- or herself. In this view, humanity was created spiritually and morally immature, and suffering is the path that leads to maturity. This is the theodicy of Irenaeus and John Hick (see Hick). These theodicies still maintain the instrumentality of evil, though they have shifted the focus to the suffering individual (Phillips, “Theism” 148; Phillips, *The Problem of Evil* 56-58). In retaining this instrumentality of suffering, however, they have ignored the fact that “people are sometimes defeated by circumstances,” and this is another of the bee stings (Phillips, “Theism” 150). If we deny this, we are also denying an appropriate sense of compassion for the overwhelmed (Phillips, “Theism” 150).

Phillips’ fourth bee sting comes in more general form: it comes from the claim that “suffering is always beneficial to the sufferer” (“Theism” 149). Phillips believes that when philosophers are not engaged in philosophy, they do not still hold this position, but for some reason they find it necessary to theodicy. Yet when one holds this up to any particular instance of suffering, one sees how it fails: “What is the value of suffering like that in *King Lear*? What was the value of the *degradation* that belonged to the sufferings

in the concentration camps?” (qtd. in Phillips, “Theism” 149; emphasis in original).

There is no answer—indeed, there is no value to such suffering, yet theodicy wants to maintain there is.

There is also the prevalent thought that suffering is caused by the bad choices of the sufferer. This is built on the theological basis that freedom is preferable to not-freedom, so that the ability to make bad decisions is integral to human life. Evil and suffering come when one has not made the choices one should; pain is punishment. Further, the sufferer is then given the chance to act rightly and responsibly in facing the consequences of his or her decision (Phillips, *The Problem of Evil* 71-72). Yet it is clear that suffering is not always caused by poor decisions; the story of Job illustrates this quite well.

This position gives rise to another bee sting, which comes when the theodicitist resorts to “ignorance concerning free will” (Phillips, “Theism” 149). A certain situation is presented in which someone is suffering because of what appear to be poor choices. The question, though, is whether or not the sufferer had a genuine choice in the matter that has now caused the suffering—could she really have made a different choice, or was he forced into the decision (Phillips, “Theism” 149; Phillips *The Problem of Evil* 72-77)? When the answer cannot be known, the question is simply set aside, and the justice of suffering as punishment is affirmed.

Christian philosophers and theologians often anthropomorphize God, giving God the characteristics of humanity. God becomes, in many ways, a bigger, better human. If this truly is our God, Phillips argues, this God “must be judged by moral standards already available to us” (“Theism” 151). Yet God gets away with many actions we would

never sanction in a human. Nor is God always characterized in this way: “The anthropomorphite abandons anthropomorphism when the going gets tough” (Phillips, “Theism” 151). In other words, when those situations arise that cannot be explained in anthropomorphic terms, the theodicist simply steps back and says that God has plans of which we cannot know, that they are far greater, and that God’s ways are not our ways (Phillips, “Theism” 151). The theodicist, in essence, has abandoned what he or she has previously set forth.

Finally, there is the bee sting that comes from the argument that “God cannot send unlimited suffering to anyone, since there is a limit to what anyone can stand” (Phillips, “Theism” 152). It is true that there is a limit to suffering, but that limit is death. Is it not grotesque to offer some comfort in the fact that at least suffering will not last forever, because if nothing else, one will die of those sufferings? This line of thought denies that there is a sort of living that is worse and more painful than death; death is seen as the ultimate limit, and before that, suffering is not and cannot be limitless (Phillips, *The Problem of Evil* 78-81).

These bee stings are for Phillips an indicting statement against the venture of theodicy. Theodicy has a tendency to affirm the instrumental necessity of evil, and that evil serves some good purpose in God’s plan for humanity. Phillips, though, firmly maintains that “suffering is not for anything” (“Theism” 158). Theodicy, it also seems, does not take human life seriously enough, or does not take evil seriously enough, or the freedom of choice. Theodicy, then, just cannot do what it sets out to do.

REPLACING THEODICY

For D. Z. Phillips, among others, the very premise of the project of theodicy is flawed; we simply cannot explain evil in such a way that it does not make victims anew of those who suffer. Instead, perhaps we simply need to accept the reality of evil and suffering, to join Beckett in saying, “You’re on earth; there’s no cure for that” (qtd. in Phillips, “Theism” 156). However, there is a delicate balance between this recognition that evil is a fact of life and the human desire and necessity to fight evil.

Each of us has been given a life, for better or for worse, and “[a]cceptance of life as God’s gift involves opposing [the] inhumanity” that humans seem to have a special talent for showing to one another (Phillips, “Theism” 156). Gratitude for life involves allowing others their freedom as well, and requires compassion for the other—though this certainly is no easy task. This, then, becomes the focus in questioning evil: not explaining or justifying it, but showing compassion for and helping the sufferer.

Phillips is certainly not alone in this emphasis. C. Robert Mesle believe that “theodicies wreak harm by encouraging us to undertake a futile search for hidden meaning in our pain and suffering, when what we should be doing [...] is working against the sources of our pain” (qtd. in Simpson 160). Mesle emphasizes this need to do; it is part of the gift of life, for “we have hands and God does not. Or rather, when hands are needed, God must rely on the hands of creatures to do that work” (Mesle 14). It is the believer’s responsibility to translate gratitude for life into compassion for those who suffer—into “fighting against everything in the world, and in oneself, that regards other people, and that world, as creatures to be exploited, possessed and used for one’s own

selfish purposes” (Phillips, *The Problem of Evil* 185). Our gratitude is also our call to action.

ENTER LEVI AND WIESEL

At this point, we turn back to the Shoah narratives, for it is ultimately to them that theodicy must answer. While neither Levi nor Wiesel write a formal theodicy, the questions their respective autobiographies raise, both within the text and through the text, imply much about the nature of theodicy and what it must do. It is their words, then, that must be allowed to guide our theodicy.

Is This a Man?

The theme of Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* is fairly clear—coming straight from the title, Levi addresses the humanity of the prisoners of the Lager. He sees through several lenses, though, as he speaks not only for himself, but seeks to speak for those who perished within the camps as well. These *Musselmänner*, he writes explicitly, are barely human, even before their deaths: “One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death” (Levi, *Survival* 90). The implicit question that runs throughout the narrative, though, wonders how far above this the rest of the prisoners are. Where is the line between human and animal?

This is what Levi witnesses, through and because of his autobiography: the degradation of men to something less. Levi stands both within and without this category. Standing within, even Levi reaches the point of brokenness and despair. Had he not caught ill, would he have become another *Musselmann*, another who gave up hope for

life? Would he have died on the march to the next camp? They are futile questions, but the immediacy of the present-tense recollection of these events suggests that this was a possibility.

Levi's story ends on a rather grim note: a dead body dumped onto the cold, hard snow, and Levi himself without a hat even to tip in respect to his liberators. This seems like a basic sign of courtesy, the tipping of one's hat (albeit a courtesy that is being lost in a culture that is not as prone to hat-wearing), and Levi has been forced below the level of showing this respect. Who was he then? Is this a man?

The Corpse in the Mirror

Elie Wiesel, like Levi, bears witness through his autobiography, and his witness gives very similar details and images to the ones that Levi offers. Wiesel's poetic leanness of language, though, delivers his story in a way that captures the emotion and imagination differently than Levi can. Wiesel's words haunt.

In *Night*, Wiesel begins as a fifteen-year-old boy, a child, an innocent. This presents an additional level of challenge to theodicy—what kind of theodicy can be presented given the suffering of children? Does it make any sense to say, for example, that Wiesel's experience in Auschwitz was deserved because of some previous sin? No; there is nothing he could have done in fifteen short years to make this a just punishment. Is there sense in assuring a young boy that his suffering will ultimately be good for him—or for someone else who has a chance to help him? This sounds insensitive beyond belief.

A corpse in the mirror: this is the final image with which Wiesel leaves his reader. Liberated from Auschwitz, having faced death in numerous ways, young Wiesel looks at

his reflection for the first time in months and rather than his own face, he sees a corpse, with an expression in his eyes that he will never forget. This becomes a challenge to theology and theodicy: what do we say, what do we do, standing before this corpse? How do we react? What words do we offer? Can anything ever make this right?

THEODICY AFTER AUSCHWITZ

As a society, we Westerners are not comfortable with silence; we have somewhere lost the ability to just be together, comfortably quiet. When someone confides in us, or shares a story of hardship, we immediately seek to say the right thing, to offer comfort, to make things better for that person. We must realize something, though—we can't make it better, not with words. Rather, we must go to the sufferer in compassion, and be present in the moment with him or her.

In his foreword to *Night*, François Mauriac tells how he met Elie Wiesel, interviewed him, and heard his story. At the end of this meeting, he writes,

What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? [...] If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each one of us belongs to Him. This is what I should have told this Jewish child. But I could only embrace him, weeping. (x-xi)

Mauriac, like so many others, feels obligated to words, to having the right thing to say. As a Christian, he especially feels the need to bring Jesus into the picture, to assure Wiesel that there is someone who understands what he has gone through. Mauriac wishes he had those words at the time of meeting Wiesel.

I am immensely glad he did not. The weeping embrace that he gave Wiesel—that was entirely the most appropriate response Mauriac could give to Wiesel’s story. Words risk making a victim of the sufferer again and again, and they can rarely, or never, do justice to the pain that remains, even after decades. Instead of words, Mauriac acted in compassion, and that is precisely the answer we need to give to pain.

Phillips goes through great lengths to show how we must not speak in the face of Levi’s and Wiesel’s experiences. Were we to succumb to any of the bee-sting responses, we would, in essence, be telling these men that we know their lives better than they do, that we can explain what they cannot. That, somehow, we have the answers they lack. As Wiesel writes elsewhere, “Auschwitz has no answer. Any response, whether human or theological, is a bad one,” and yet too often, we try to give answer to this unanswerable (qtd. in Bowen 489). This is not only insensitive and the opposite of compassionate, it is adding more evil to the world, for we have ignored the hurting and given credence to evil.

If we are to do justice to these non-men, to these walking corpses, and all the millions of others who did not survive, then, we have a two-fold task: to reach out in compassion and to fight evil where we can. When suffering is brought to us, when we stare it face-to-face, we can reach out with a hug and tears of sympathy and understanding. We can bear crosses for one another while knowing that we cannot completely take that cross for our own. We can stand side-by-side, hand-in-hand, in solidarity with those in pain.

At the same time, we can and must be active. We must be aware of how our words reflect and impact our thought patterns. We must stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, and fight for the innocent. When we see injustices being done

around us, we cannot stand to the side, but rather must speak and act out against these things. We must seek to make this a better world, a world where there is less room in which evil can reign. A world in which Levi's and Wiesel's experiences need not be repeated, in any variation or form. In the meantime, we must stand with and for the sufferer, and proclaim with Levi and Wiesel: this is not who we were meant to be.

Chapter Nine

Wedding Academics and Practicality

ACADEMIC VS. PRACTICAL THEODICY

I have a close friend with whom I often discuss things of an academic nature. Early in the writing process, he and I were talking about theodicy and the ways I see Levi and Wiesel addressing theodicy, albeit indirectly. I explained to him my thoughts on compassionate theodicy, and he asked some questions to clarify what he heard me saying. At one point during this conversation, he leveled what I consider to be a serious accusation at compassionate theodicy. Is it not, he asked, rather a cop-out? Is this not a veiled way of saying that one does not want to wrestle with the difficulties of relating God and the presence of evil?

I wanted to immediately say no, to defend myself in this, but made myself wait before I answered. In thinking it through, I think his claim can have merit; a focus on compassion may be an easy way out of dealing with the logical problem of evil. However, I do not think that it must.

Theodicy is, in my opinion, a two-sided venture. There is, on the one hand, the practical response to evil: in my case, compassionate theodicy. When faced with situations of suffering, the appropriate response is one of caring compassion, to answer the calls of Levi and Wiesel, and to be a loving presence. There is, though, also a necessary element of academic theodicy. This is the more formal presentation, along the lines of Davis, Roth, and Griffin. In terms of academic theodicy, I align most closely with the process views of Griffin. This is not to deny that the others have places where their

theodicies ring true to me; process theology, however, makes the most sense out of how I see the world and what I believe about God. In the end, though, academic theodicy is simply not well equipped to give love to those who need it.

Academic and practical theodicies are mutually necessary; neither by itself fully addresses the problem of evil. Academic theodicy alone is cold and insensitive to the needs of the sufferer. Practical theodicy alone is an avoidance of the intellectual need for a theology that addresses the logical and biblical pictures of God. Together, however, they support one another and allow one to see the full picture of the problem of evil.

Process Meets Compassion

Process theology places heavy emphasis on the active role of humanity in the world. Because God's power is via persuasion, rather than force, God cannot simply make things different—cannot with a word or wish eliminate poverty, prejudice, and pain. God must instead work through humans, “sharing with us a vision of the better way, of the good and the beautiful;” it is up to us to make this vision a reality (Mesle 13-14).

To work for God, then, is to work for change in the world, change that is necessary to alleviate the influences of evil in the world; for some theologies, “to be obedient to God is to preserve the status quo. Process theology denies the existence of this God” (Cobb and Griffin 9). God seeks what is good and just, and at least as often as not, it is counter to the systems in place throughout the world: “The world is not the way God wants it to be. [...] Poverty, hunger, and violence are *not* trials intentionally put into the world by God for our education. They are evils against which God is struggling and against which God calls us to struggle” (Mesle 79). We are to act in the world in such a

way that these systems are overturned, that prejudice gives way to love, that suffering and pain can be brought to an end.

The practical application of this call to action is that we stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed, those who suffer—we stand together, and stand against evil. When we work to make God’s vision a reality, we are showing the kind of compassion towards the sufferer that is demanded by Phillips, Levi, and Wiesel. This action-oriented theology can stand beside Wiesel’s living corpse, offer a hand, and ask, “how can I help?” It can look Levi in the face and say, “let me help you be the man you were created to be.” This is a place where academics and practicality meet, and fuse together the principles of compassion and love with theological justification and God-commanded support.

AT THE ALTAR

The journey towards finding a fitting theodicy is rarely a simple venture. The philosophical side of this, while immensely important, seems too disconnected from the reality of evil as it manifests itself in the lives of the people I love and those I have come to love vicariously through the stories I read and hear. Philosophy must play a role in theodicy—indeed, it is integral to the enterprise—but it needs to be tempered with the painful life experiences that abound in this world.

Autobiography abounds with such painful lives, especially when one begins to look into the autobiographies of those who survived the Shoah. These men and women tell their tales with such deliberateness that they demand attention. Even though literary criticism of autobiography is yet a young discipline, it gives that sort of intense attention

these narratives require. While any reading of Shoah survivor narratives will speak to the nature of evil and suffering, a reading that is guided by the principles of autobiography criticism will, and has, reveal a deeper level of challenge to and dialogue with the theodical project.

This certainly requires a broader approach to theodicy; one must have both an understanding of existing theodicies and an awareness of the current discussion of autobiography by literary critics before one can see how they might be successfully brought together. In the end, though, a critical appeal to Shoah autobiography has much to say about the nature of evil and suffering, and the marriage of the two can reveal more than either could say standing alone.

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