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Elie Wiesel's Memoirs: a review essay

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Elie Wiesel's Memoirs: A Review Essay

Alan L. Berger (bio)

Elie Wiesel. *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* [Tous les fleurs vont à la mer] (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). 432 pages.

“To write your memoirs,” observes Elie Wiesel in this fascinating

autobiography of his early life, “is to draw up a balance sheet of your life so far.”¹ Nearing seventy, Wiesel is one of the central Jewish voices of the twentieth century. His is neither an ordinary existence nor an ordinary memoir. Rather, it is the extraordinary story of a brand plucked from the fire. *All Rivers Run to the Sea* treats the author’s life up to age forty. Within the span of this biblical generation, he lives several lifetimes, experiencing the nadir and zenith of Jewish history. From a painfully shy, “God-intoxicated” youth in the Carpathian Mountain village of Sighet, who lived under the sacred canopy of Judaism, feared Christians, studied the *kabbalah* and, with two companions, attempted to hasten the coming of the Messiah, Wiesel survives the *Shoah* and is thrust onto the world stage. He becomes a reporter for the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronoth*, a translator, a prize-winning author, a university professor, and an indefatigable champion of Jewish and global human rights. His Presidential and Congressional medals and the Nobel Peace Prize still lay in the future.

The book’s ten chapters include Wiesel’s observations on both the sacred and the secular, and the author’s point of view that there is an inextricable relationship between the two. For example, Wiesel offers a commentary on God’s suffering—“God could have, should have, interrupted His own suffering [as He is with the Jewish people in exile, so He suffers with them in Auschwitz] by calling a halt to the martyrdom of innocents” (105). The author also shares accounts of his various journeys in Western Europe, South and North America, and the time he spent in India, as a correspondent, attempting to re-fuse the shattered fragments of his religious worldview and to explore the meaning of suffering. In India, Wiesel finds no comfort in the doctrine of reincarnation as a response to suffering. “I can accept and bear my own suffering,” he notes, “but not that of others” (225). **[End Page 281]**

The memoir reveals that there is still a fundamental dimension of Wiesel’s life that reflects the shy pre-Holocaust youth more familiar with the Jerusalem of King David than the streets of Sighet. The tension between the believer that he was, and the survivor that he is, palpably

resonates in his memoir. Indeed, the author's pathos clearly emerges in his wistful observation, which could also be seen as a prayer: "Would that I could open my soul to prayer and aspire to purity today as I did in those days" (21). Consequently, Wiesel's stories present a narrative theology that is simultaneously reassuring and subversive as he views all of history through the prism of Auschwitz. Speech and silence, despair and hope, anguish and yearning are the defining parameters of his writing and teaching.

This essay takes stock of the autobiographer who himself is taking stock of his life up to this point. As a witness to the three defining moments of twentieth-century Jewish life: the Holocaust, the rebirth of the State of Israel (which Wiesel contends that he viewed from afar), and the religious re-emergence of the Jews of Russia, Wiesel speaks with great moral authority. Early on he distinguishes between those authors whose works are a commentary on their lives and those whose lives are a commentary on their works. Counting himself among the latter, Wiesel invites his readers to consider his various stories and the path he has traveled. Through the stories of his life, observes the Nobel laureate, "[the reader] may perhaps understand the rest a little better." But memoirs can both reveal and conceal. Thus, on the one hand, Wiesel records the odyssey that led him to become an intercessor (*melitz yosher*) on behalf of the Jews of the former Soviet Union and the interrogator of a Deity whose justice is found wanting. On the other hand, while...



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