

Wiesel Words

by Theodore Dalrymple (November 2016)



An old friend of an old friend of mine is now eighty-three years old. I too have known him for nearly fifty years, though only slightly. For the last four years he has become utterly fixated on or obsessed by Negationism, the denial that the Holocaust ever took place. In those four years he has accumulated a considerable library on the subject, perhaps five hundred books. In a certain way he has even become erudite: he is able without difficulty to refer with great precision to any of these books which, of course, all confirm each other. He continues to buy new ones, each confirming what he already thinks he knows. The Holocaust is but a myth, concocted by an age-old conspiracy to dominate the world.

He was once a man of considerable charm and intelligence. He had a good singing voice and was an amusing raconteur. In his youth he had been a good athlete. Wherever and whenever he could be, he was helpful to others. He was also generous to a fault.

He always had a slight tendency to a paranoid view of the world, though. He ran a small business which, while it kept him from starvation, could hardly have been described as successful. He was inclined to ascribe its lack of success to

them, that is to say those who deliberately stood in his way and prevented him from getting on in life for reasons best known to themselves – envy, perhaps, though there was little enough to envy. It was perfectly obvious, however, even to the casual observer such as I, that the real reason for his lack of success was his complete disorganisation. There was a charm in this (I have always found the super-efficient rather intimidating and usually not very likeable), but the disorganised are seldom successful in activities that require organisation, which seems to be a faculty quite apart from intelligence. Indeed, there are some who are so disorganised that one suspects them of not really wanting success, as Hamlet didn't really want to kill Claudius.

My friend's friend is now so obsessed by the subject that he pores over his books like an alchemist of old poring over formulae of transmutation of base metal into gold, and from which it is all but impossible to distract him. Every conversation now turns within moments to the obsession of his brain; so much so that my friend is reluctant to speak to him anymore. Others are the same, but my friend is still fond of him and does not like to think of him spending his last few years in total isolation because of a madness that is driving everyone away. It is difficult, though, for his friend gets angry with him when he fails to take his ideas seriously. Doesn't he realise that what he is talking about concerns the whole future of the world? In a way – but only in a way – it is touching that so old a man should care so passionately for the future of the world.

How is one to interpret this sudden obsession in his twilight years? How should one speak to him or even think of him? Is he to be reprehended or to be pitied, inasmuch as paranoid ideas at so advanced an age are often a harbinger of terminal mental decline? On the other hand, he shows no sign of any such terminal decline: indeed, he is as sharp as a good barrister with a brief. He is immediately aware of any attempt to distract him from his one track, which he interprets as frivolity on the part of the person who tries to distract him. And trying to persuade him of the error of his opinions is obviously pointless. He incorporates without hesitation or difficulty all and any contrary evidence into his paranoid system: photographs can be falsified, documents forged, testimonies made up, and so forth. A good paranoid system is more impregnable than Fort Knox.

And yet I know him not to be a bad man in any ordinary sense. Moreover, he never

to my knowledge does anything to spread or propagate his views, much less act upon them in any practical way. For him Negationism is a pure past-time, even if he does not recognise it as such. Of course, he tires his family out with his monomania, as monomaniacs always do, and alienates his friends away to whom he will speak of nothing else. When he dies he will no doubt be remembered for the last phase of his life, as if it revealed who he most truly was.

I asked my friend what he, the old man, would say if he were confronted by someone who had actually witnessed and experienced the Holocaust at first hand – by Elie Wiesel, for example (who died recently). My friend said that he would almost certainly be polite, not wishing to contradict his interlocutor outright, and might even accept that something terrible had gone on, though he would later deny it or minimise its importance. He would later say, for example, that terrible things happened and were done in a war; that his interlocutor had been unlucky, that he had exaggerated, and finally that he had lied. At all events, his fundamental world-view would not have been altered by the encounter.

It so happens that my own attitude to Elie Wiesel was not entirely straightforward. I had not read any of his books when my wife and I happened to be in Buenos Aires when he paid a visit there. He had already been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and so, in awe of the award of any Nobel Prize (I had not yet met Nobel Prize winners for economics), we expected some kind of illumination from the public lecture that he was advertised to give and which we decided to attend.

We were quickly, sadly and deeply undeceived. Nor were we the only ones: the audience, which was obviously a highly-educated one, grew restless under Weisel's seemingly unprepared, but nevertheless well-worn, torrent of sickly platitudes, most of which struck an unpleasantly sentimental or folksy note that might have just been appropriate for a village meeting but here was of an almost insulting superficiality. Indeed, several people in the audience walked out in a protest, or at least in disgust. We did not because we are not the walking-out type: we stay to the end even of abominable films or, as is *de rigueur* these days, productions of *Hamlet* in modern dress.

I remember walking through the streets of the city when it was all over, my wife and I discussing our unfavourable impression of Wiesel. Dinner is taken very late in Buenos Aires and before ten o'clock you are bound to be the first people

in the restaurant, regarded as bizarre or of incontinent of appetite by the waiters, so we had plenty of time for reflection. We said that unless we had known better, we should have thought that Wiesel was a fraud.

We knew this to be unjust, of course, a libel of the mind as it were, but it was not easy for us to rid ourselves of the impression. His delivery had seemed to us unctuous and his manner as if he felt so assured of adulation that he had felt no need to prepare anything special for the occasion. What, after all, could the *Porteños* be expected to know, tucked away as they were at the bottom of the world?

It was only years later that I read Wiesel's first book, *The Night*, a lapidary account of his deportation from Sighet in Transylvania, first to Auschwitz and then to Buchenwald. The climax of the book is the death march between the two as the Red Army advanced, an experience so terrible (he was 16 years old at the time) that all other subjects must have seemed trivial or frivolous to him ever afterwards. One begins to see the sense, or rather the meaning, in Adorno's famous remark that after Auschwitz it would be barbarous to write poetry. This cannot literally be the case, of course, for life cannot be a long descant on the vilest episodes in human history (for which title there have been several contenders since, for as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it in a poem, *No worst, there is none*, the diabolic imagination of Man being as infinite as his creative imagination); but certainly one feels the shame of complaining of one's little inconveniences in a world in which such things can happen and have happened.

I must say that I was surprised to read in *The Night* of Wiesel's tranquil existence in Hungarian-occupied Transylvania right up to the time of his deportation in 1944. Surely some rumour of the catastrophe must have reached Sighet before then to disturb his early religious studies? Apparently not; everyone was confident that the war was coming to an end and that they had escaped its worst consequences and that life would continue as before.

Any straggler on the death march, anyone who could not keep up with the rest of the bedraggled column, was immediately shot. In one unforgettable passage, Wiesel relates how the son of a much-loved Rabbi does not stay behind to help his father (to whom he had previously been devoted), but marches straight ahead, leaving his father where he stumbles. Fortunately, the father never becomes aware of his son's willing abandonment of him; and I doubt that there has ever

been a more powerful testimony than this story to Man's instinct for survival. There are those, no doubt, who would use such a story to illustrate what Man *truly* or *ultimately* is, that is to say a selfish egotist concerned only for himself: but I see no reason why behaviour on the death march should be counted more real than that, say, at a garden party at Buckingham Palace or at a degree convocation. Can anything that exists be ontologically more real than anything else?

No story, it seems, could have been worse than that of this son who abandons his father under the impulse to survive. In Buchenwald, however, Wiesel's own father is on the point of death and calls out to Wiesel so that he should not die alone. But Wiesel refuses to go to him because he knows that if he does so, an SS man will beat him severely. He therefore does nothing, says nothing, when his dying father is beaten because he is making a noise. Worst of all, perhaps, most piercing, is the following, after his beloved father's death:

I did not cry, and I felt bad at being able to do so. But I had no more tears. And deep inside, if I had dug deep into my weak consciousness, I would perhaps have found something like: free at last!

By free, of course, he meant free to consider only his own survival without having to consider that of his father as well: his father, an old man at fifty, being clearly a liability rather than an asset in the struggle for survival.

As anyone who has had evil or even only discreditable thoughts will know, it is a continuing burden to have had them, all the more so in such circumstances. No wonder Wiesel writes nothing of his experience for several years afterwards. But it was hardly surprising that, once he had started to do so, he interpreted everything in the light of it. Which of us would not do the same?

I therefore excused him his performance in Buenos Aires and even felt guilty, as he had after the death of his father, at my own uncharitable thoughts. No doubt his lamentable performance was the result of having said the same thing over and over again, or something very similar for decades. But the urgency to say it would never leave him.

I subsequently found myself wondering how he would react to my friend's friend, as a guide as to how I should react. But of course, a man who has suffered greatly, incalculably, does not thereby become a moral authority. I should have

to work things out for myself. Does a man's great age excuse or extenuate the odiousness of his views, albeit harmless in practice to others? Was he to be pitied, scorned, ignored, hated?

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