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ARCHETYPE AND METAPHOR: AN APPROACH TO THE EARLY
NOVELS OF ELIE WIESEL

Middle Tennessee State University

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Archetype and Metaphor: An Approach
to the Early Novels of Elie Wiesel

Ellen Brown French

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Archetype and Metaphor: An Approach
to the Early Novels of Elie Wiesel

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Abstract

Archetype and Metaphor: An Approach to the Early Novels of Elie Wiesel

by Ellen Brown French

This dissertation explores the development of Elie Wiesel's art as seen in his early novels. Since the late 1950's when the publication of Night first brought Wiesel to the attention of critics, his work has continued to command the respect of international critics and scholars. In fact, Wiesel has emerged in the United States as a leading spokesman for the survivors of the Holocaust, espousing a point of view that has wide appeal for its philosophical and humanitarian bases. The present study approaches Night, Dawn, and The Accident as a trilogy linked by a single structural pattern of development, a single protagonist, and a single metaphoric and symbolic system.

The study consists of four chapters. Chapter I examines the forces that shaped Elie Wiesel and influenced his aesthetic and moral perspectives. It discusses the bases for his need to communicate his insights into the contemporary Jewish experience.

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Chapter II traces the development of the archetypal pattern that frames the story of Wiesel's hero, Eliezer, as he moves from childhood to manhood. The study reveals the traditional movement of the hero through the monomythic passages of life leading from innocence to an encounter with radical evil to emergence as a man who has left illusion behind him to embrace life as it is.

Chapter III examines the metaphoric and symbolic system through which the archetypal stages of the monomyth are expressed. Wiesel develops a cluster of carefully modulated images, symbols, and metaphors that provide narrative and dramatic unity and that add a further dimension to the story of Eliezer. In addition to the recurring metaphors and symbols, Wiesel includes episodic symbols that illuminate the Jewish values of the hero.

Chapter IV confirms the unity of Wiesel's art with his philosophical position. Wiesel has wedded experience to myth and has conveyed his vision of the meaning of that experience in metaphor and symbol. The story of Eliezer is a significant addition to contemporary letters and merits a place in the enduring literature of the Western World.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Wiesel's Personal Background, His Philosophic Outlook, and His Work

The central theme of contemporary European Jewish literature is the havoc wrought by World War II, specifically the suffering imposed by Nazi Germany in its effort to attain Teutonic racial purity, an imposition that fell with particular severity on European Jews, six million of whom perished. Because of the enormous loss of life in the Jewish community--and because of the specific manner in which many Jews died--the experience has been called the Holocaust, a word that denotes destruction by fire and that connotes a sacrificial burnt offering. Journalists and historians have focused their attention on the Holocaust, seeking to document all aspects of the events that transpired. Philosophers have probed for the meaning behind the events, and novelists have recreated the horrors of the Holocaust in their fiction. Numerous survivors have written personal memoirs to bear witness to the truth as they knew it and to keep faith with those who perished. One of these survivors with a story to tell--with many stories to tell--is Elie Wiesel.

Eliezer Wiesel was born into the home of observant Jews, Shlomo Elisha and Sara Feig Wiesel, on September 30, 1928. He had two older sisters, Hilda and Beatrice, and was later to have another sister, Tzipora. The Wiesels lived in Sighet, a small town in northern Rumania in the province of Transylvania. Elie attended school in Sighet and later went to high school in Debreczen as an external student, which is to say that he studied at home and went to Debreczen once a year to take the examinations. "That means," he says, "I really made an effort only one month a year, the last month of the exams. Otherwise, I spent some ten or twelve hours a day studying Torah."¹ Wiesel's mother was a cultivated woman, the daughter of a Hasidic rabbi. His father believed not only in traditional Jewish learning but also in the value of modern studies, and he insisted on a secular education for his son that included psychology and modern Hebrew. Enclosed in his small world, Elie seems scarcely to have been aware of the larger world or of the political events that were to have such a profound effect on his life.

While Wiesel was still a small boy, the balance of power in Europe shifted following the German-Russian rapprochement in August, 1939. Rumania lost large sections

¹ Harry James Cargas, ed., Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel (Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 67.

of territory to its neighbors, for "Germany and Italy, acting as arbiters, in the Vienna award of 1940 gave . . . a part of Transylvania to Hungary."² For a few years the government of Hungary protected its Jewish population, but when a strong collaborationist government came to power in 1944 under the leadership of General Dome Sztojay, the "Germans did much as they wished . . . and they rounded up Hungary's Jews, except for those in the capital, and sent them to forced labour camps or to gas chambers."³ The tragic events that followed for the Jews of Sighet form the basis for Wiesel's novel Night and affect all of his subsequent fiction.

Wiesel writes from the perspective of one who has himself passed through the fire, who has grappled with the problems of post-Holocaust adjustment, and who has found a way to live again. He sees himself as an authentic man, an authentic Jew, one who, in the words of Robert G. Olson, has arrived at "an accurate appraisal of the human condition."⁴ As such, Wiesel accepts his past and, as he says, "assumes the entire destiny of . . . [his] people."⁵ In this respect

² Charles and Barbara Jelavich, The Balkans (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 102.

³ C[arlile] A[ylmer] M[acartney], "Hungary, History of," The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia, 1974 ed.

⁴ An Introduction to Existentialism (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 134.

⁵ Conversation, p. 8.

Wiesel agrees with the position of his fellow Jew, Martin Buber, who says: "In the destiny of an authentic person, the destiny of his people is gathered up."⁶ Wiesel's destiny as a Jew and as a writer is that of a witness-messenger. As both an authentic Jew and a messenger, he "speaks on behalf of everybody."⁷ As a witness, Wiesel speaks for those who can no longer speak for themselves. "Each of us," he says, "carries a long procession of ghosts."⁸ Thus, Wiesel is concerned with being a faithful witness for his "ghosts"; his responsibility is to transmit truth, their truth.

Wiesel himself is a modern Job asking the question: why suffering? For him, God is not dead; but there are questions He does not answer. Because of God's silence and because of modern man's suffering, we live, says Wiesel, in a time of darkness:

. . . so much darkness that we want to bring some light to it or, at least, to give an intensity to the darkness. There is so much suffering that we try, at least, to evaluate it and see where it comes from, if not to redeem it.⁹

⁶ Good and Evil (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 33.

⁷ Conversation, p. 8.

⁸ Conversation, p. 21.

⁹ Conversation, p. 91.

According to Robert Alter, "there is a spiritual urgency in all . . . [Wiesel's] works"¹⁰ that grows out of Wiesel's continuing evaluation of the suffering imposed on contemporary man.

Wiesel's evaluation sometimes takes the form of words, sometimes of silence. "Nothing but substance must be said, nothing but the essential," says Wiesel.¹¹ "We have no more time, no more patience to play around with words. The feeling is really of anguish."¹² The anguish results, in the first instance, from Wiesel's reverence for words. Harry James Cargas comments that "Wiesel fears telling only the partial truth," recognizing the "potential sacredness" and the "potential sacrilegiousness" of words.¹³ In the second instance Wiesel's anguish results from his fear that he may not speak adequately for his "procession of ghosts."

Like many another writer, Wiesel is concerned not only with words but also with silence, but for him silence may be either constructive or destructive. For Wiesel the silence of the victims of the Holocaust was constructive,

¹⁰ "Probing Pain for a Definition of Man," rev. of Legends of Our Time, by Elie Wiesel, Saturday Review, 19 October 1968, p. 31.

¹¹ Conversation, p. 92.

¹² Conversation, p. 92.

¹³ Conversation, p. 97.

that of the accomplices destructive.¹⁴ There is also for Wiesel the mystical silence of prayer: "God's voice is heard in silence," he says.¹⁵ Different still is the silence between words:

This is not the ascetic silence that means withdrawal from language. On the contrary, the emphasis is on language; the emphasis is on transmission. Certain words carry their silence with them. They have the weight of silence and you can judge a text: the Biblical text is great and eternal because it has eternal silence in it. . . .

This is the measurement, the resonance in words, but even more it is the zone between words.¹⁶

Wiesel has published seven novels that dramatize the horrors and the consequences of the Holocaust. In his first novel, Night, 1960, Wiesel moves his protagonist through episodes drawn from his own experience as a teen-age prisoner in various Nazi concentration camps. All his other novels deal with the problems of isolation, identity, and post-World War II adjustment of the individual to society. In his second work, Dawn, 1961, the protagonist is an eighteen-year-old underground terrorist fighting the British in Palestine for a Jewish homeland. In The Accident, 1962, the same protagonist lives in New York as a journalist.

¹⁴ Conversation, p. 8.

¹⁵ Conversation, p. 48.

¹⁶ Conversation, p. 49.

In The Town Beyond the Wall, 1964, Wiesel explores the problem of "the face in the window," his metaphor for those who looked on the suffering of the Jews but did nothing to help them. In The Gates of the Forest, 1966, he focuses on the partisan resistance movement, its loyalties and tragedies. In A Beggar in Jerusalem, 1970, the action takes place in Israel during the Six-Day War. The story focuses on the Israeli victory in reuniting the divided city of Jerusalem and, specifically, on bringing the Western Wall under Jewish control. In The Oath, 1973, set against the background of a pogrom, Wiesel returns to his earlier themes of Jewish suffering and the madman as wise man.

Wiesel's nonfiction includes Jews of Silence, 1972, published following a visit to the Soviet Union; it reports on the vigor of Jewish life, particularly that of Jewish youth, in the repressive atmosphere of the USSR. One Generation After explores the effects of the Holocaust on the next generation of Jews. With the publication in 1972 of Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters, Wiesel began a project to "publish seven volumes tracing the Jewish experience from the book of Genesis through the 19th century with Souls on Fire as the capstone."¹⁷ Souls on Fire grew out of Wiesel's lectures on Hasidism delivered at

¹⁷ John B. Breslin, "Elie Wiesel, Survivor and Witness," America, 19 June 1976, p. 538.

the Sorbonne, University of Paris, and at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA in New York. The second volume in the series, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends, appeared in 1977. In it Wiesel incorporates tales from the Midrash and other Jewish lore drawn from the Biblical record beginning with Adam and ending with Job. Wiesel has also written a cantata, "Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again," a song of hope for the coming of the Messiah. Written in blank verse, and set to music by Darius Milhaud, the "Ani Maamin" is, according to one reviewer, "powerful verse based on the Old Testament."¹⁸

In addition to Wiesel's need to bear witness and to "fathom the unfathomable,"¹⁹ he writes also as a bridge-builder. He sees the possibility of developing a community of interests and a sympathetic understanding between Jews and Christians, despite the enormity of the events that have transpired. He comments:

But before that meeting can take place, certain words must be said. I think Jews must say, first, certain words which hurt Christians--that Auschwitz would not have been possible without Christianity. John XXIII understood this. The fact that Hitler was never excommunicated, the fact that, I think, over twenty percent of the SS killers were practicing Christians; the fact that Pius XII never spoke up means that

¹⁸ Eli M. Oboler, rev. of "Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again," by Elie Wiesel, Library Journal, July 1974, p. 1824.

¹⁹ Lothar Kahn, "Elie Wiesel: Neo-Hasidism," in his Mirrors of the Jewish Mind: A Gallery of Portraits of European Jewish Writers of Our Time (New York: Thomas Yozeloff, 1968), p. 176.

Christianity's role, or the Christian Church's role--both Protestant and Catholic--was so dominant in the fact that so many Jews could have been killed. All that has to be said. I think the Christians must recognize it as John XXIII did.

Once all this has been articulated, I think there can be a common meeting ground, provided one does not try to convert the other. Conversion is not a solution; authenticity is the solution. If the Christians give up their dream to convert Israel (Israel never tried to convert the Church) [sic] then I'm sure we can find some common ground.²⁰

But even beyond his need to bear witness and his role as a bridge-builder, Wiesel writes as a prophet-seer to warn against another Holocaust. Such a disaster would be universal, he fears. He says:

Some madman, some insane criminal will seize power somewhere . . . and he will push the button. The chain reaction will be of such terror that the world will go to pieces. Mankind will come to the end of its road.²¹

In his writing Wiesel addresses the ethical, moral man whom he hopes to awaken. "It is the mild and gentle people Elie Wiesel is properly obsessed with reaching."²²

Wiesel began to write as a journalist and later engaged in creative writing at the encouragement of Francois Mauriac,

²⁰ Conversation, p. 34.

²¹ Conversation, p. 36.

²² Conversation, p. 57.

who became one of Wiesel's "most intimate friends and allies" and his "patron in literature."²³ Mauriac wrote a moving account of his first meeting with Wiesel in his Foreword to Night. In addition, Mauriac dedicated his book, The Son of Man, to Wiesel.

Wiesel was first published on this continent in Canada in the Roman Catholic magazine Jubilee. Ironically, his work was recognized by the non-Jewish public before it was by his fellow Jews. Commenting on this fact, Wiesel notes that writers have not been highly esteemed in Jewish culture: "Who writes books? Someone who has nothing else to do."²⁴ In addition, Wiesel blames the "diaspora reflex," which is a "sense of insecurity" among Jews and an inability to "trust their own judgment."²⁵ However, he notes, "Once the non-Jewish world listened to me and read me, the Jews too began reading my work."²⁶

Wiesel differs from other survivors of the Holocaust in his presentation of the events through which he lived.

²³ Elie Wiesel, "'Whatever I Have Learned in My Life Is Questions,'" in Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology of Fiction, Poetry, Autobiography, and Criticism, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 277. The article is the text of his remarks on his acceptance of an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Manhattanville College in 1972.

²⁴ Conversation, p. 33.

²⁵ Conversation, p. 33.

²⁶ Conversation, p. 33.

His work is not primarily an analysis of human behavior as is Elie Cohen's Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp. Nor is it simply a narrative of what such a life was like, as is Gerda Weissman Klein's All But My Life, nor yet a simple recounting of experience, as is Martin Gray's For Those I Loved, which includes a section on his life in the Warsaw Ghetto and his subsequent escape from Treblinka. Rather, Wiesel draws from his personal experience selected episodes that he carefully develops with the techniques of fiction. Mauriac notes: "This personal record coming after so many others and describing an outrage about which we might imagine we already know all that is possible to know, is nevertheless different, distinct, unique."²⁷ Wiesel, himself a "scarred survivor . . . a witness to the unbearable and poet of the unspeakable,"²⁸ goes one step further than his fellow witnesses by bringing his protagonist through the trauma of post-war adjustment to a point where he can begin to live again. Thus, Wiesel not only structures and interprets the experience of the past, he also points the way to the future.

The present study examines Night, Dawn, and The Accidental as a trilogy linked together by a common theme and

²⁷ Francois Mauriac, Foreword, Night, by Elie Wiesel, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Avon Books, 1960), p. 8.

²⁸ Paul Greenburg, "Censorship With High Motives," Nashville Banner, 3 July 1978, p. 12, col. 4.

character and by common metaphors and symbols. Night was first written in Yiddish and published in Argentina. Later, Wiesel rewrote the eight-hundred-page novel in French, reducing it to one hundred thirty pages. As rewritten, Night is a tightly organized narrative that grips the reader with its power, transporting him to the hell of Auschwitz where he is conducted through the world of the living dead. Night covers the one-year span between the coming of the Germans to Sighet and the arrival of the United States Army at Buchenwald. Wiesel's child protagonist Eliezer moves from a sheltered life in his village home through the loss of his home, his family, his name, and his God, to emerge from his prison experience more spiritually dead than alive.

In Dawn, Wiesel portrays the same protagonist, now known as Elisha, as he comes to grips with life in the post-war world. Caught in the struggle for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he executes an innocent British hostage in retaliation for the execution by the British of a Jewish underground fighter. Dealing with the events of only one night, Dawn explores the protagonist's change from victim to executioner and the meaning of that change.

The Accident, published in French as Le Jour, completes the trilogy. In The Accident, Wiesel continues his study of the problems of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust as his protagonist faces the urban complexity of New York City,

where, in complete despair, he attempts suicide. However, as he slowly recovers from "the accident," he rediscovers as well a reason for living.

Man confronting his destiny in the Holocaust and in the post-war world is the theme of all Wiesel's fiction. The unique quality of his writing derives from his particular world view, from his experience as a prisoner, and from the subsequent demands of freedom. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the nature and meaning of the experience of Wiesel's protagonist as he moves through this ironic bildungsroman. This exploration follows Northrop Frye's dictum that, in order to understand a work, one must first of all concentrate on the structure: "Go for the structure, not for the content."²⁹ We will explore the trilogy by way of Joseph Campbell's analysis of the convention of the monomyth. Says Campbell:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which may be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.³⁰

Chapter Two examines the mythic journey of Wiesel's protagonist as it is embodied in the archetypal structure of

²⁹ Quoted by A. C. Hamilton, "Northrop Frye: The Visionary Critic," The CEA Critic, November 1979, p. 4.

³⁰ The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949; rpt. Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1969), p. 30.

the trilogy. Chapter Three explores the meaning of the mythic quest-journey through an analysis of the metaphoric and symbolic system the author employs. Chapter Four places Wiesel's work in the larger context of Western literature as a whole, identifying as well that which is unique in the work. The chapter fuses the unity of author and work, of philosophy and art, that Wiesel the man and Wiesel the author bring us in his "letter to the world."

Chapter II

The Mythic Narrative: A Reading of the Trilogy

Elie Wiesel's insights into the contemporary Jewish experience find expression in the development of his hero, Eliezer, whose story is told in Night, Dawn, and The Accident, the trilogy that opens the Wiesel canon. A close reading of the material reveals that Eliezer's development unfolds according to the conventions of the mythic quest-journey as he moves from boyhood to manhood. Joseph Campbell says:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which may be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.¹

Campbell also states that while "the passage of the mythological hero may be overground, incidentally," but "fundamentally, it is inward," and the knowledge gained represents "psychological" rather than "physical" victory.²

¹ The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949; rpt. Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1969), p. 30.

² Campbell, Hero, p. 29.

The hero or heroine of the quest-journey, according to Campbell, is one "who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms," and who returns from his quest to share his knowledge with others.³ The psychological basis for the journey is the human need to "define or 'prove' . . . [oneself]--to suffer the agony of adult life, to gain its rewards," says David Adams Leeming.⁴ Ideally, the hero of the quest-journey seeks "three kinds of fulfillment: individual, sexual, and social," according to Northrop Frye.⁵ This examination of the adventures of Eliezer traces his passage from innocence to experience, discovering in the process that he undergoes each phase of the three-fold quest.

Fiction that follows the universal pattern of the quest-journey may celebrate a hero from any level of society and "may be classified . . . by the hero's power of action," says Frye.⁶ When the hero's fictional world embodies the everyday world of the common man, a world "holding the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience,"

³ Campbell, Hero, pp. 19, 20.

⁴ Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1973), p. 184.

⁵ Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 148.

⁶ Frye, Anatomy, p. 33.

his is the world of realism, and he is a hero of the low mimetic mode, as classified by Frye.⁷ If, however, the hero's power of action is diminished or becomes limited to less than that of the common man and, in addition, if "we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the ironic mode."⁸ From the realism of the low mimetic mode, according to Frye, "irony . . . is born."⁹ Frye notes that during the last century serious fiction has moved more and more in the direction of the ironic mode¹⁰ as writers take for their purview what Joseph Campbell calls the "sickeningly broken figurations that abound before us, around us, and within."¹¹

"History is imaginative material to be synthesized into form," says Frye.¹² Form, in turn, becomes "a means of establishing order in the midst of chaos," according to Jacques Ellul.¹³ Elie Wiesel has surveyed the "broken

⁷ Frye, Anatomy, p. 34.

⁸ Frye, Anatomy, p. 34.

⁹ Frye, Anatomy, p. 41.

¹⁰ Frye, Anatomy, p. 34.

¹¹ Campbell, Hero, p. 27.

¹² Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 29.

¹³ "Modern Myths," in his The New Demons, trans. C. Edward Hopkins (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 89, footnote.

figurations" of his world and has written a trilogy that imposes order on the chaos of contemporary Jewish history and experience. In so doing he "assert[s] in myth" his vision of "man's search for identity" in the chaos of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Wiesel's story begins in the realism of the low mimetic mode but moves rapidly to tragic irony; his hero develops in the ironic mode common to much modern fiction. In Night, the first work of the trilogy, Wiesel dramatizes the tragedy of the Holocaust on the European Jewish community. In Dawn, his second work, Wiesel focuses on the moral problems of the battle to secure a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In The Accident, which completes the trilogy, the author examines the problems of adjustment to the post-Holocaust world and brings his hero to a measure of acceptance of life. Thus the trilogy concludes on a note of hope and can rightfully be said to end as romance.

Wiesel draws his material for Night from his own boyhood experience as a prisoner of the Nazis during World War II. Wiesel's vision finds artistic expression in the development of a character much like the boy he himself had been. This paper traces the adventures of Wiesel's hero

¹⁴ Laurence Goldstein, "Survivor's Heritage," rev. of the novels of Elie Wiesel, Nation, 17 October 1966, p. 392.

using the conventions of the quest-journey as it is analyzed by Campbell. As ironic myth, Night focuses on the denial of the hero's individual fulfillment, a denial that is the result of violence imposed by Nazi guards during Eliezer's years in a succession of German prison camps.

According to Campbell, "The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown."¹⁵ Wiesel's portrayal of his hero's encounter with the unknown represents the author's perception of the contemporary Jew moving through the passages of life and through the trials that accompany the various stages of initiation. Eliezer, the hero, moves through the archetypal narrative pattern as he leaves the known world to face the unknown.

The narrative pattern of ironic myth, contends Frye, imposes the mythic conventions of romance on realistic content; the story that emerges is an ironic parody of romance.¹⁶ The first romance convention of the monomyth is a childhood world that embraces a home environment from which the hero draws strength and encouragement for his dream of the future he envisions. Such a world is "associated with happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often . . . on an

¹⁵ Campbell, Hero, p. 30.

¹⁶ Frye, Anatomy, p. 223.

'innocent' . . . period of youth."¹⁷ In Night, Wiesel establishes such an idyllic world for his hero, Eliezer.

The reader first meets Eliezer as a young boy in his home in Sighet, Hungary, where he is preparing himself to become a rabbi. In the protective environment of his home he is spared the chores associated with the family business. The picture of Eliezer's home emerges as that of a close-knit Jewish family in comfortable circumstances according preferential treatment to the only son in order that he may be free to concentrate on his studies. Eliezer explains: "They said my place was at school."¹⁸ Thus, at the age of twelve Eliezer spends his days studying Talmud and his nights in the synagogue weeping, he says, over "the destruction of the Temple" (Night, p. 12). His only unhappiness arises from a desire to study the Zohar, a Cabbalistic system of mystical interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, a desire his father opposes for a boy so young. Even so, Eliezer finds a guide to Jewish mysticism in Moche the Beadle, the man-of-all-work at the synagogue. "It was with him," says Eliezer, "that my initiation began" (Night, p. 14).

¹⁷ Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 53.

¹⁸ Elie Wiesel, Night, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Avon Books, 1960), p. 13. All further references to this work in this study appear parenthetically in the text.

Not only is Eliezer preparing himself for the rabbinate, he has also dedicated himself to the loftiest ideal of the orthodox Jew: the hastening of the coming of the Messiah to earth. Together with his friend, Yerachmiel, he pledges undying loyalty to this objective. Eliezer reveals their pact in a flashback to this early period as it is recorded in Dawn:

If a man's soul is sufficiently pure and his love deep enough he can bring the Messiah to earth. Yerachmiel and I decided to try. Of course we were aware of the danger: No one can force God's hand with impunity. Men older, wiser, and more mature than ourselves had tried to wrest the Messiah from the chains of the future; failing in their purpose they had lost their faith, their reason, and even their lives. Yerachmiel and I knew all this, but we were resolved to carry out our plan regardless of the obstacles that lay in wait along the way. We promised to stick to each other, whatever might happen. If one of us were to die, the other would carry on. And so we made preparations for a voyage in depth. We purified our souls and bodies, fasting by day and praying by night. In order to cleanse our mouths and their utterances we spoke as little as possible and on the Sabbath we spoke not at all.¹⁹

Thus, in spite of war elsewhere in Europe, Eliezer's life is a pleasant round of family relationships, study in preparation for his chosen work, and nightly meetings in the synagogue. His world is a world where "the traders . . . [do] good business, the students . . . [live] buried

¹⁹ Elie Wiesel, Dawn, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Avon Books, 1961), p. 95. All further references to this work in this study appear parenthetically in the text.

in their books, and the children . . . [play] in the streets" (Night, p. 15). From this edenic world Eliezer is separated by forces beyond his control. Eliezer's concept of a divine destiny is juxtaposed in Night with the demonic world of the descent and with the subsequent denial of his individual fulfillment by his captors.

Campbell states that "the first stage of the mythological journey-- . . . the 'call to adventure'--signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown."²⁰ Further, the agent of destiny may be a "malignant agent."²¹ For Wiesel's hero, the malignant agent of destiny appears in the form of German soldiers who order the Jews of Sighet to prepare for evacuation. Thus Eliezer's adventure begins against the background of Nazi persecution of the Jews. The ironic effect of the persecution is heightened when the first arrests occur on Passover, a Jewish holy day commemorating the deliverance of the Jews from Egyptian slavery more than three millenia ago.

According to Frye, the beginning of the adventure often brings "a sharp descent in social status, from riches to

²⁰ Campbell, Hero, p. 58.

²¹ Campbell, Hero, p. 58.

poverty, from privilege to a struggle to survive, or even slavery."²² Eliezer's graphic portrayal of the preparations for evacuation illustrate this aspect of the monomyth. He describes the scene:

The women were cooking eggs, roasting meat, baking cakes, and making knapsacks. The children wandered all over the place, hanging their heads, not knowing what to do with themselves, where to go, to keep from getting in the way of the grown-ups. Our backyard had become a real market place. Household treasures, valuable carpets, silver candelabra, prayer books, Bibles, and other religious articles littered the dusty ground beneath a wonderfully blue sky; pathetic objects which looked as though they had never belonged to anyone. . . .

The street was like a market place that had suddenly been abandoned. Everything could be found there: suitcases, portfolios, briefcases, knives, plates, banknotes, papers, faded portraits. . . . They had lost all value. (Night, pp. 25, 27)

The effect is one of finality, of a breaking forever of the bonds that tie Eliezer to his home. He describes his last hours there:

We had spent the day fasting. . . . That evening our mother made us go to bed very early. . . . I was up at dawn. I wanted time to pray before we were expelled. . . . I looked at our house, where I had spent so many years in my search for God; in fasting in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah; in imagining what my life would be like. (Night, pp. 27, 28)

²² Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 105.

The evacuation of the Jewish quarter of Sighet begins on Pentecost, the Jewish harvest festival celebrating God's bountiful provision for His chosen people.

Eliezer's "call to adventure" begins with the journey into the unknown and the mythic crossing of the first threshold beyond which lies "darkness, the unknown, and danger."²³ For Eliezer the journey requires four days and nights in a cattle car ending with the crossing of the frontier into Poland and the arrival at the concentration camp of Auschwitz. The guardians of the threshold are sinister forces--German officers who maintain control while prisoners assigned to unload the newcomers from the prison transport carry out the orders. Entering the cars with flashlights and truncheons, and striking out to right and left, they shout: "Everybody get out! Everyone out of the wagon! Quickly!" (Night, p. 38). As Eliezer descends, in front of him are the flaming chimneys of the concentration camp, while the air is filled with the odor of burning flesh.

Frye notes that the hero's prevailing mood as he descends to the lower world is terror, along with a sense of "growing isolation"²⁴ and of "alienation and

²³ Campbell, Hero, p. 77.

²⁴ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 129.

loneliness."²⁵ It is a nightmare world, "the world that desire totally rejects . . . the world of the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion."²⁶ At one pole of this "demonic human world is a society held together by . . . loyalty to the group or leader which diminishes the individual . . . at the other is the sacrificed victim," the scapegoat.²⁷ The demonic world of Auschwitz into which Eliezer's oppressors violently thrust him makes the prisoners the innocent scapegoats. Clearly, in Eliezer's story the German officers stand as the "demonic human world," while the Jewish prisoners are the sacrificed victims, the symbolic scapegoats.

Ritualized "severance . . . from the attitudes, attachments, and life patterns of the stage being left behind"²⁸ faces Eliezer immediately after his entry into Auschwitz. The savage greeting given the arriving prisoners signals the brutal life that lies ahead:

You shut your trap, you filthy swine, or I'll squash you right now! You'd have done better to have hanged yourselves where you were than to

²⁵ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 115.

²⁶ Frye, Anatomy, p. 147.

²⁷ Frye, Anatomy, pp. 147, 148.

²⁸ Campbell, Hero, p. 10.

come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you at Auschwitz? . . .

Do you see that chimney over there? See it? Do you see those flames? . . . Over there--that's where you're going to be taken. That's your grave, over there. Haven't you realized it yet? You dumb bastards, don't you understand anything? You're going to be burned. Frizzled away. Turned into ashes. (Night, pp. 40, 41)

Eliezer's separation from his mother and sisters is an extension of the ritual of severance forced on him by the prison guards. Eliezer describes the moment:

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

Eight short words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short simple words. Yet that was the moment I parted from my mother. . . . For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sisters moving away to the right. Tzipora held Mother's hand.

I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair, as though to protect her. . . . And I did not know that at that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. (Night, p. 39)

Petrified with terror, Eliezer clings to his father as he watches his mother and sisters depart.

Campbell identifies the role of the father in the quest narrative as that of "the initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world."²⁹ The father functions as a helper and guide, an adaptation of the "supernatural helper" that Campbell identifies.³⁰ The

²⁹ Campbell, Hero, p. 136.

³⁰ Campbell, Hero, p. 136.

"radical readjustment" of the hero's "emotional relationship to the parental images"³¹ combines, says Campbell, with the learning aspects of the initiation experience. Fulfilling his role as helper and initiating priest, Eliezer's father comforts him and encourages him to endure. For example, he encourages Eliezer to stretch his slender ration rather than to devour it all at once (Night, p. 54). He comforts him with a small present--"half a ration of bread"--he had obtained (Night, p. 84). He lies to Eliezer after being struck down by a guard ("It doesn't hurt") to assuage his son's seething hatred (Night, p. 50). He helps him avoid freezing to death on the last terrible march (Night, p. 102) and a little later rescues him from a would-be strangler (Night, p. 114).

As Eliezer turns away from the parting with his mother, he is marched steadily toward a flaming ditch. The atmosphere is one of "unimaginable nightmare," he says (Night, p. 41). As he confronts more deeply the demonic world, a truck loaded with little children feeds the gigantic flames before him. "Babies! Yes, I saw it--saw it with my own eyes . . . those children in the flames," he cries out (Night, p. 42). Believing his own death to be imminent, Eliezer intones the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, with the other men: "Yitgadal veyitkadach shmé raba

³¹ Campbell, Hero, p. 136.

. . . May His name be blessed and glorified" (Night, p. 44). Yet scarcely has he uttered the prayer before his group is turned away from the flames and ordered instead to a barracks near by. Eliezer describes the indelible shock of these moments:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. (Night, p. 44)

Frye comments that when the hero descends to the demonic world there is usually a "break in consciousness"³² leading to a change of identity often characterized by a change in name;³³ but "every aspect of fall or descent is linked to a change of form in some way."³⁴ Moreover, the terror and cruelty that characterize the night world depict primarily ritualized action--"the presence of some kind of ritual"³⁵ within a "mythological universe."³⁶ The catastrophic events of the first night in camp alter Eliezer so

³² Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 129.

³³ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 106.

³⁴ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 105.

³⁵ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 113.

³⁶ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 56.

drastically that he becomes, as he says, "a completely different person. . . . The student of the Talmud, the child that I was, had been consumed in the flames. There remained only a shape that looked like me" (Night, p. 47). The new identity becomes explicit in a change of name: "I became A-7713. After that I had no other name," he says (Night, p. 53). The name change is a ritual metamorphosis, and the diminishing of the individual lies in the fact that Eliezer has become only a number, A-7713, existing among thousands of other numbers who have all been denied an individualized identity.

"Once having traversed the threshold," says Campbell, "the hero . . . must survive a succession of trials."³⁷ For Wiesel's hero the trials in the concentration camp are primarily physical, but they lead to spiritual trials as well. The first test Eliezer faces is trial by hunger, a trial that comes early to prisoners in the concentration camp. Eliezer's problem is twofold: not only is the food ration meager, it is also ceremonially unclean. His first reaction to non-kosher camp food is to refuse it. He comments: "They brought us soup: a plate of thick soup for each person. Tormented as I was by hunger, I refused to touch it" (Night, p. 53). The incident represents an

³⁷ Campbell, Hero, p. 97.

attempt to hold on to the old life in a changed universe where an ability to adapt to the new conditions will be crucial to the hero's survival. One of Eliezer's relatives eases for him the transition to the new conditions of life: "Eat! It doesn't matter what or when. Eat everything you can. The weak don't hang about for long here" (Night, p. 55). Implicit in the advice of the relative, who functions here in the role of an oracle, is the fact that the world of the concentration camp does not regard ethical or spiritual values; only brute strength that serves the state at hard labor has value. It is a lesson Eliezer learns at once. Food quickly becomes the most important element in his life:

I now took little interest in anything except my daily plate of soup and my crust of stale bread. 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. (Night, p. 63)

The passage strikes a poignant note as Eliezer's dream of bringing the Messiah to earth is supplanted by the more immediate goal of staying alive.

To trial by hunger is added torture by beating. "Torture is, in itself, an expression of initiatory death," says Mircea Eliade. "To be tortured means that one is cut in pieces by the demon-masters of initiation, that one is put

to death by dismemberment."³⁸ Eliezer describes his ritual dismemberment as he becomes an innocent victim of the guard's violent outburst: "He leapt on me like a wild animal, hitting me in the chest, throwing me down and pulling me up again, his blows growing more and more violent, until I was covered with blood" (Night, p. 64).

On another occasion Eliezer is beaten for seeing too much, receiving twenty-five lashes after discovering the guard with a young girl. "That's for your curiosity," says the guard. "You'll get five times more if you dare tell anyone what you saw" (Night, p. 70).

Eliezer must also face trial by hard labor. He tries to evade this trial by refusing to volunteer for specialized work details, hoping instead for an assignment to work in the open fields. Nevertheless, he is assigned, he says, "to another unit . . . where, twelve hours a day I had to drag heavy blocks of stone about" (Night, p. 80). With the coming of winter, the exhausting work is complicated by the bitter cold:

The days were short, and the nights had become almost unbearable. In the first hours of dawn, the icy wind cut us like a whip. We were given winter clothes--slightly thicker striped shirts. . . . The stones were so cold that it seemed as

³⁸ Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Events and Archaic Mysteries, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 207.

though our hands would be glued to them if we touched them. (Night, p. 88)

As his trials continue, Eliezer undergoes a further aspect of "ritualized severance." Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year--traditionally a time of joyous celebration--begins for Eliezer with a crisis of religious faith and closes with a "selection"--an inspection of prisoners by the SS enabling them to "select" for immediate transport to the crematorium those no longer able to work. Eliezer's doubts of the love and care of God for His chosen people had been growing for months, but on surveying the broken men around him as they gather to chant their prayers, he openly expresses his anger to God:

What are You, my God . . . compared to this afflicted crowd, proclaiming to You their faith, their anger, their revolt? What does Your greatness mean, Lord of the Universe, in the face of all this weakness, this decomposition, and this decay? Why do You still trouble their sick minds, their crippled bodies? (Night, p. 77)

"Blessed be the Name of the Eternal!" the chant begins, but instead of praying, Eliezer asks himself: "Why . . . should I bless Him?" (Night, p. 78). A catalogue of grievances against God rises in his mind: thousands of burned children, the crematoria, the torture and death he has seen. How can Eliezer pray what he really feels? "Blessed art Thou, Eternal Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races

to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory? Praised be Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar?" (Night, p. 78). Engulfed in his perception of God's injustice, Eliezer ceases to pray. Before God the young man stands silent who had "believed profoundly that upon one solitary deed, one solitary prayer, depended the salvation of the world?" (Night, p. 79). Explains Eliezer:

I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone--terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied for so long. I stood amid that praying congregation observing it like a stranger. (Night, p. 79).

The crisis of faith Eliezer undergoes this New Year's Day marks a significant lessening of his religious faith; it marks also a further slipping from him of his chosen work.

The special New Year's gift from the SS to the prisoners is a "selection," a euphemism, we noted, for speedy transport to death in the crematory. Eliezer narrates the process: "An SS man would examine us. Whenever he found a weak one . . . he would write his number down: good for the crematory" (Night, p. 81). To avoid selection, everyone had to keep himself looking as healthy as possible. The head of the block counsels his men: "You must help your own chances. Before you go into the next room, move about

in some way so that you give yourselves a little color. Don't walk slowly, run! Run straight in front of you!" (Night, p. 82). Eliezer runs and is spared. "He couldn't have written you down," says his friend, Yossi; "you were running too fast" (Night, p. 83).

New Year's is followed ten days later by Yom Kippur, the most solemn of all Jewish High Holy Days. It is a day to fast, to repent, to give to charity. Wiesel's vignette of a congregation of skeletons soberly debating whether they should fast as their religion commands or whether they should abstain from fasting under their present circumstances is unforgettable: "To fast would mean a surer, swifter death. We fasted here the whole year round. The whole year was Yom Kippur. But others said that we should fast simply because it was dangerous to do so" (Night, p. 80). Lawrence L. Langer comments on the irony in this passage: "No participant in this discussion could appreciate more intensely than the innocent, horrified spectator-reader the scathing irony, not to say the insane logic of this situation: starving men choosing not to eat."³⁹ Eliezer, however, does not fast; he argues: "There was no longer any reason why I should fast. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my bowl of soup, I saw in

³⁹ "The Dominion of Death," The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975), p. 82.

the gesture an act of rebellion and protest against Him" (Night, p. 80). Yet the rebellion is costly for Eliezer: "In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void," he says (Night, p. 80).

As winter deepens, the reduced rations, the exhausting work, and the bitter cold make Eliezer's tenuous hold on life even more precarious. At the coldest part of the winter Eliezer is hospitalized with an infected foot, and, before he can recover from surgery on it, the camp is evacuated before the advancing Russian troops in a death march that becomes Eliezer's most severe test. Evacuated at dusk during a heavy snow storm, the prisoners march westward guarded by SS troops with dogs. Eliezer describes the scene:

I was simply walking in my sleep. I managed to close my eyes and run like that while asleep. Now and then someone would push me violently from behind, and I would wake up. The other would shout: "Run faster. If you don't want to go on, let other people come past. . . ."

An endless road. Letting oneself be pushed by the mob, letting oneself be dragged along by a blind destiny. When the SS became tired, they were changed. But no one changed us. Our limbs were numb with cold despite the running, our throats parched, famished, breathless, on we went. . . . We had forgotten everything--death, fatigue, our natural needs. Stronger than cold or hunger, stronger than the shots and the desire to die, condemned and wandering, mere numbers, we were the only men on earth. At last the morning star appeared in the gray sky. . . .

The commandant announced that we had already covered forty-two miles since we left. It was a long time since we had passed beyond the limits

of fatigue. Our legs were moving mechanically, in spite of us, without us. . . . Around me everything was dancing a dance of death. (Night, pp. 99, 100)

After two days and nights the running men reach Gleiwitz where, before they are loaded on to roofless cattle wagons, they are issued a ration of bread. "We threw ourselves upon it," says Eliezer. "Someone had the idea of appeasing his thirst by eating the snow. Soon others were imitating him. As we were not allowed to bend down, everyone took out his spoon and ate the accumulated snow off his neighbor's back" (Night, p. 109). The episode portrays absolute physical and human deprivation. Yet Eliezer endures. In doing so, he proves himself superior to the physical trials of initiation. But Eliezer's ritual dismemberment and spiritual death are complete; his descent is total.

The death of Eliezer's father, the final rite of severance in this stage of Eliezer's journey, breaks the last link binding Eliezer to his childhood. His father's death also removes from Eliezer's life the presence of an "initiating priest";⁴⁰ Eliezer must now assume the role of an adult. Campbell comments that the father's role of introducing the son to the larger world involves not only

⁴⁰ Campbell, Hero, p. 136.

his son's learning to live in the world but also a "radical readjustment of his relationship" to his father. The son who has learned his lessons well "is the twice-born: he has become himself the father . . . competent . . . to enact the role of initiator, the guide" into the meaning of life.⁴¹ Eliezer, in assuming the role of protector and helper to his father during the death march, moves through the "radical readjustment" by becoming the one who offers encouragement. Eliezer's care for his father illustrates the reversal of roles which identifies him as an adult, and after his father's death, he himself becomes in mythic terms the father. The child has become father to the man. Yet for Eliezer the "dark night of the soul" has only begun. Ahead of him lies the blackness of spiritual despair and its power. Free of prison and the concentration camps, he is not free of the spiritual wounds inflicted upon him there.

"What is in question is always a death to something which has to be surpassed," says Eliade on the significance of ritual death. "One dies to be transformed and attain a higher level of existence."⁴² Physically, Eliezer is no more than a skeleton of his former self. "From the depths of the mirror," he says, "a corpse gazed back at me" (Night,

⁴¹ Campbell, Hero, p. 137.

⁴² Eliade, pp. 217, 218.

p. 127). The corpse-like deadness reflects the changes within Eliezer. He is dead to his childhood and to his religion. More importantly, he is dead to the sense of his mission of bringing the Messiah to earth by personal piety. The episode reveals the denial of his individual fulfillment, yet Eliezer's survival is itself a triumph over the physical tests of this phase of the mythic journey. He has endured.

As the hero emerges from each level of his journey, he leaves behind some aspect of his old identity and forms a new one. According to Frye, a simple device for indicating the new identity is a change of name.⁴³ Just as Eliezer became A-7713 when he entered prison, he now assumes a new identity with a new name, Elisha, that characterizes the second phase of his mythic journey.

The second stage of the quest, according to Campbell, is "the perilous journey . . . into the crooked lanes of . . . [one's] own spiritual labyrinth."⁴⁴ Leeming says that in this stage the hero withdraws for "meditation and preparation. Anyone in search of personal destiny must use intellect and spirit. . . . This is a major step in the losing of the self to find the self."⁴⁵ It is a "positive act,"

⁴³ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 106.

⁴⁴ Campbell, Hero, p. 101.

⁴⁵ Leeming, p. 7.

a "spiritual rite of passage."⁴⁶ Elisha withdraws for meditation by entering the Sorbonne at the University of Paris as a philosophy student. He explains:

The study of philosophy attracted me because I wanted to understand the meaning of the events of which I had been the victim. In the concentration camp I had cried out in sorrow and anger against God and also against man, who seemed to have inherited only the cruelty of his creator. I was anxious to re-evaluate my revolt in an atmosphere of detachment, to view it in terms of the present.

So many questions obsessed me. Where is God to be found? In suffering or in rebellion? When is a man most truly a man? When he submits or when he refuses? Where does suffering lead him? To purification or to bestiality? Philosophy, I hoped, would give me an answer. It would free me from my memories, my doubts, my feeling of guilt. (Dawn, p. 24)

At the heart of Elisha's search for answers to his questions lies the key to self-knowledge and beyond that to an understanding of life.

It often happens, however, that the hero's quest for self-knowledge is interrupted by an intruder. Leeming comments that "the hero is frequently tempted by demons of the sensual and material world, who represent those forces that deter most of us, finally, from an experience of the inner self."⁴⁷ The tempter that deters Elisha from pursuing his

⁴⁶ Leeming, p. 119.

⁴⁷ Leeming, p. 119.

studies in philosophy enters the story in the person of Gad, who appears suddenly at Elisha's door one evening. So striking is Gad's appearance and demeanor that Elisha perceives him to be a Meshulah, "a mysterious messenger of fate to whom nothing is impossible" (Dawn, p. 27). Gad identifies himself as a messenger from "the Movement," a Jewish terrorist group seeking to wrest from the British a Jewish homeland in Palestine. According to Gad, "the Movement needed fresh recruits and reinforcements. It needed young men who were willing to offer it their future. The sum of the futures would be the freedom of Israel, the future of Palestine" (Dawn, p. 30). Gad asks Elisha to "give up everything and go with him to join the struggle" (Dawn, p. 30). Gad dramatizes for Elisha a British peace-keeping force of one hundred thousand men--complete with paratroopers, police dogs, tanks, planes, and tommy guns--reduced to fear by the one hundred members of the Movement. Elisha sees in the interview, first of all, an opportunity for brotherhood in his historic homeland. He ponders:

I saw in . . . [Gad] a prince of Jewish history, a legendary messenger sent by fate to awaken my imagination, to tell the people whose past was now their religion: Come, come; the future is waiting for you with open arms. From now on you will no longer be humiliated, persecuted, or even pitied. You will not be strangers encamped in an age and a place that are not yours. Come, brothers, come! (Dawn, p. 30)

In the second place, Gad suggests that Elisha will find romance. Elisha comments: "Hour after hour Gad spoke to me of the blue nights of Palestine, of their calm and serene beauty. You walk out in the evening with a woman, you tell her she is beautiful and you love her" (Dawn, p. 29). Most important of all, Gad tells Elisha that their efforts will result in a "homeland . . . where every human act . . . [will] be free" (Dawn, p. 29). Gad has, in effect, offered Elisha the three kinds of realization that are the objects of the quest: social, sexual, and individual fulfillment. In addition, the offer opens an alternative route to the realization of Elisha's early dream of bringing the Messiah, a dream that had seemed to die under the rigors of his harsh imprisonment. For Zion was to Elisha "a sacred ideal, a Messianic hope, a prayer" (Dawn, p. 30) to be achieved by fasting, prayer, purification, and self-denial. He hears for the first time from the lips of Gad that Zion is also "a place on the map . . . a cause for which men . . . [kill] and . . . [die]" (Dawn, p. 30). In response to Gad's offer, Elisha gives up his search for answers to his questions and follows him to Palestine to play his part in the realization of the Messianic hope.

The irony in this episode inheres in the discrepancy between the realities of guerrilla fighting and the romanticized aspects of military victory that Gad has emphasized.

The fighting and dying are lost sight of in the promised fulfillment of Elisha's aspirations of the quest. In luring Elisha from his quest for self-knowledge, Gad fills the role of a demonic intruder who deters Elisha from his chosen course. In focusing his attention on the romanticized aspects of the struggle for a Jewish homeland, Elisha is self-deceived. In Night, Eliezer was the innocent and unwilling victim of the Nazis. In Dawn, Elisha is free to choose his fate; as a result of his choice, the self-knowledge he gains proves to be far different from that which he could possibly have foreseen.

Upon his arrival in Palestine, Elisha undergoes six weeks of political indoctrination and guerrilla-warfare training to prepare him for his new role. His early fighting experiences center around group attacks on British troops and installations. Although the attacks are successful in terms of achieving their objectives, their impact on Elisha is devastating. The bloodshed sickens him. He cannot ignore the screams of wounded and dying men, nor the attempts of British soldiers to escape the withering gunfire with "legs running like frightened rabbits" (Dawn, p. 44). He hates himself, and nausea overcomes him. He recalls:

I remember the dreaded SS guards. . . . Day after day, night after night they slaughtered the Jews in just the same way. Tommy guns were scattered here and there, and an officer, laughing or distractedly eating, barked out the order:

Fire! Then the scythe went to work. A few Jews tried to break through the circle of fire, but they only rammed their heads against its insurmountable wall. They too ran like rabbits . . . and death mowed them down. (Dawn, pp. 44, 45)

Elisha sees himself as though he were clothed in the field-gray uniform of an SS officer. He sees the same forces at work with only the roles reversed: there, German soldiers were the killers, and the Jews were the victims; here, Jewish guerrillas are the killers, and the British are the victims. Elisha's participation fills him with self-loathing. Even so, Elisha discovers that it is easier to be part of a group operation than it is to be the executioner of an innocent British hostage.

When Elisha learns that he has been chosen to execute the kidnapped British soldier at dawn, he is stunned. "I felt as if a fist had been thrust in my face," he says. "The earth yawned beneath my feet and I seemed to be falling into a bottomless pit, where existence was a nightmare" (Dawn, p. xviii). Elisha's distress increases as the night wears on. He contrasts what he has become with what he had hoped to be:

I was eighteen years old. Eighteen years of searching and suffering, of study and rebellion, and they all added up to this. I wanted to understand the pure, unadulterated essence of human nature, the path to the understanding of man. I had sought after the truth, and here I was, about to become a killer. (Dawn, p. 35)

Although Elisha has killed before in group operations, he sees the execution of the British hostage as murder; "I would look into his face and he would look into mine," he says (Dawn, p. 45). Elisha knows that to commit murder is to break the sacred Law given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai binding on every Jew: "Thou shalt not kill."⁴⁸ In addition, murder violates the five-point Noahic Covenant to which all men are responsible.⁴⁹ Elisha's old teacher had explained to him long ago that no man has a right to commit murder, "because in doing so he takes upon himself the function of God" (Dawn, p. 42). Then, too, in murdering the hostage Elisha will bind himself "for all eternity by the tie that binds a victim to his executioner" (Dawn, p. x). Moreover, Elisha sees the execution of the hostage as an act that will make him a killer forever:

There are not a thousand ways of being a killer, either a man is one or he isn't. He can't say I'll kill only ten or only twenty-six men; I'll kill for only five minutes or a single day. He who has killed one man alone is a killer for life. . . . I don't want to be a killer. (Dawn, p. 90)

Clearly, killing the hostage is fraught with grave consequences for Elisha.

⁴⁸ Exodus 20:13, Holy Bible, King James Version (New York: American Bible Society, n.d.), p. 66.

⁴⁹ Genesis 9:1-17, Holy Bible, p. 7.

Elisha's friends in the Movement have a much different view, however, of the approaching execution of the British hostage. For them, "this is war," and their advice to Elisha is "don't torture yourself" (Dawn, pp. x, xvii, xix). "You torture yourself too much, Elisha," says Ilana, another member of the group (Dawn, p. 87). The more often their advice is repeated, the clearer it is that for them the moral restrictions of the Mosaic Law have been suspended because of the war. Ilana explains to Elisha the necessity for violence:

We say that ours is a holy war . . . that we're struggling against something and for something, against the British and for an independent Palestine. . . . And our actions, seen in their true and primitive light, have the odor and color of blood. This is war, we say; we must kill. . . . And what else can we do? War has a code, and if you deny this you deny its whole purpose and hand the enemy victory. . . . That we can't afford. We need victory, victory in war, in order to survive . . . to remain afloat on the surface of time. (Dawn, p. 89)

Elisha notes the sing-song quality of her comments: "there was neither passion or despair nor even concern in her intonation" (Dawn, p. 90). To Ilana and others in the Movement the need for victory overshadows all other moral considerations. While Elisha assents to the need for victory, he cannot accept with equanimity the assumption that "the purpose, the end, this was all that would last" (Dawn, p. 90).

Gad also articulates the values the Movement has embraced in order to secure victory. "Murder," he notes, "will be . . . our duty."

It's cruel--inhuman, if you like. But we have no other choice. For generations we've wanted to be better, more pure in heart than those who persecuted us. You've all seen the result: Hitler and the extermination camps in Germany. We've had enough of trying to be more just than those who claim to speak in the name of justice. When the Nazis killed a third of our people, just men found nothing to say. If ever it's a question of killing off Jews, everyone is silent; there are twenty centuries of history to prove it. We can only rely on ourselves. If we must become more unjust and inhuman than those who have been unjust and inhuman to us, then we shall do so. We don't like to be bearers of death; heretofore we've chosen to be victims rather than executioners. The commandment Thou shalt not kill was given from the summit of one of the mountains here in Palestine, and we were the only ones to obey it. But that's all over; we must be like everybody else. Murder will be not our profession but our duty. . . . You will have only one purpose: to kill those who have made us killers. We shall kill in order that once more we may be men. (Dawn, p. 41)

The dialectic that Gad engages in to justify the use of violence to achieve political goals shows clearly the dichotomy between traditional Jewish values and those embraced by the Movement--values, incidentally, that the Movement's leaders perceive to be those of the governing society.

Frye notes that a game of cards is a frequent device in descent narratives to cast a sense of fatality or to

indicate the random choice of victims.⁵⁰ In Dawn, this element of the mythic narrative is developed in a scene in which the five guerrillas guarding the hostage drink tea and comment on the random nature of death. All of the five tell their stories as they "looked into the golden liquid in . . . [their] cups as if . . . [they] were searching in it for the next step . . . and the meaning of events" (Dawn, pp. 55, 56). Joab says his life was spared when he feigned death. Gideon says he was saved from death by concentrating on the idea that God was watching him. After having been picked up for questioning, Ilana was freed because a bad cold had changed the timbre of her voice. Gad, unable to decide which one of three prisoners to execute, was saved from committing suicide when the prisoners themselves decided which of them should be the victim. Elisha recounts that he was being choked to death by a guard when the guard was struck by Elisha's ridiculous appearance and burst into laughter. "It's funny, isn't it," says Elisha, "that I should owe my life to an assassin's sense of humor?" (Dawn, p. 61). Each one, as it turns out, has been near death and has been spared by coincidence. The episode functions to emphasize the random nature of death and how it reduces or denies moral responsibility for individual acts of violence.

⁵⁰ Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 24.

In war, it is clear, death is the result of many variables, none of which is controlled by the individual. Indeed, the same random choice of a victim is at work in the selection of the present hostage: any British officer would do; "fate willed that our victim should be Captain John Dawson," Elisha says (Dawn, p. xiv). The message to Elisha is that if the hostage is to be spared, fate will intervene.

While Elisha would like to accept the views of his comrades, his attempt to deny his own values creates for him a moral crisis. Elisha's inner struggle is dramatized in an all-important scene in which Elisha confronts the ghosts of his past.

Frye comments that the ghost device is used in "some forms of ironic fiction" as an indication of a "disintegrating personality."⁵¹ In addition, a ghost may even be "the silent companion of a hero's descent."⁵² Elisha encounters not one ghost, but many--the ghosts of all those who have "contributed to the formation of . . . [Elisha's] permanent identity" (Dawn, p. 75). Elisha fears they have come to sit in judgment upon him. "They do not wait until an action has been achieved, a crime committed. They judge in advance," he says (Dawn, p. 93). Elisha pleads with the ghosts not to judge him harshly. He tells them that he and

⁵¹ Frye, Anatomy, p. 50.

⁵² Frye, Secular Scripture, p. 115.

his comrades are trying "to force God's hand" that the Messiah may come (Dawn, p. 96). He begs his father:

Don't judge me. Judge God. He created the universe and made justice stem from injustices. He brought it about that a people should attain happiness through tears, that the freedom of a nation, like that of a man, should be a monument built upon a pile, a foundation of dead bodies. (Dawn, p. 93)

This bitter passage articulates the moral dilemma caused by the ambiguities in human existence as Elisha sees them.

The ghosts explain that they have not come to judge Elisha but to be present, because "an act so absolute as that of killing involves not only the killer but, as well, those who have formed him" (Dawn, p. 79). At this point, Elisha comes to understand even more clearly the gravity of the act he is about to perform: "In murdering a man I was making them murderers," he says (Dawn, p. 79). The ghost episode, with its emphasis on individual responsibility for one's acts, stands juxtaposed to the tea-drinking episode with its insistence on the random nature of death and the absence of individual responsibility for violence occurring as an act of war. Elisha resolves the conflicting demands made upon him and brings himself through his crisis by choosing to obey orders. He explains to his former teacher, one of the ghosts:

If I were to refuse to obey orders I should betray my living friends. And the living have more rights over us than the dead. You told me that yourself. Therefore choose life, it is written in the Scriptures. I have espoused the cause of the living, and that is no betrayal. (Dawn, pp. 94-95)

Having reached a decision to choose life, Elisha takes the weapon and goes resolutely down to the underground room for the confrontation with the hostage. His action is, of course, a further spiritual descent into the abyss of doubt and despair.

In spite of Elisha's efforts to defend his action as right and just, he is unable to resolve the moral ambiguity: to choose life for the Jews is to choose death for the hostage. Elisha discovers, also, that he cannot hate the hostage who, in turn, shows pity, compassion, and understanding to the troubled Elisha. Dismayed, Elisha discovers that God is present even here: "Perhaps He was incarnate in the liking with which . . . [the hostage] inspired me. The lack of hate between executioner and victim, perhaps this is God" (Dawn, pp. 108, 109).

The following lines emphasize the tragic irony of Elisha's situation:

Without hate everything my comrades and I were doing would be in vain. Without hate we could not hope to gain victory. . . . [My people's] tragedy, throughout the centuries has been their inability to hate those who have humiliated and from time to time exterminated them. Now our only chance lies in hating . . . in learning the

necessity and the art of hate. Otherwise . . . our future will only be an extension of the past, and the Messiah will wait indefinitely. (Dawn, p. 122)

Thus, to kill without hatred is to deny the validity of the Movement and his role in it. Elisha's twisted logic--that the Messiah can come only when actions founded in hatred bring Him--serves to emphasize his moral confusion. So great is his inner conflict that in murdering the hostage he asserts that he has killed himself: "That's it, I said to myself. It's done. I've killed. I've killed Elisha" (Dawn, p. 126). Even so, his "identification with the suffering living brings Wiesel's Godforsaken and conflicted hero . . . to maturity," says Helen First.⁵³

Elisha's new maturity brings with it the knowledge of the potentiality for evil in the human heart--specifically, in the heart of a young Jewish idealist. This new knowledge is the key to Elisha's fear as he faces the future. The journey into the "crooked lanes"⁵⁴ of his own soul discloses a capacity for violence that he was unaware of as a young student seeking to understand life. This "spiritual rite of passage,"⁵⁵ the understanding of the universality of

⁵³ "Curl Up and Read," Seventeen (May 1962), p. 84.

⁵⁴ Campbell, Hero, p. 101.

⁵⁵ Leeming, p. 119.

evil, marks the end of Elisha's descent and prepares the way for an eventual ascent from the darkness of his soul.

Having plumbed "the depths of his being and . . . [having discovered] the Temple in ruins" (Dawn, p. 64), Elisha's soul lies dead. As "a soldier . . . a fighter for freedom . . . who had sacrificed his peace of mind--a possession more precious than life itself--to his people's right to the light of day, to joy, to the laughter of children," Elisha now recognizes that he has murdered not only John Dawson but himself as well (Dawn, p. 94). The significance of his statement, "I've killed Elisha," lies in his realization that the meaningful principles in his life have been destroyed. He is, in effect, dead to the future. The social fulfillment he had sought in the brotherhood of the Jewish community cannot be achieved, for his comrades in the Movement imposed upon him the role of executioner, "and an executioner I would remain," he says, "even after the backdrop had changed, when I was acting in another play upon a different stage" (Dawn, p. 90). Moreover, as a murderer, Elisha believes he will be permanently denied a loving relationship, an important aspect of the mythic quest. He comments: "The noblest woman in the world would hesitate to touch the skin of a killer, of a man who would have the label of killer his whole life long" (Dawn, p. 91). Further, in breaking the sixth commandment he has taken upon himself "the function of God" (Dawn, p. 42).

John K. Roth comments on this aspect of Elisha's action:

Elisha's aim is God's eclipse: by taking the prerogative to determine who shall die and who shall live; by deciding that human deeds alone can create and inhabit promised lands, and then only if they show enough strength to shatter resistance and defend encroachments.⁵⁶

In addition, Elisha admits he will be "bound together for all eternity by the tie that binds a victim to his executioner" (Dawn, p. x). The dream of bringing the Messiah is gone forever. It is clear that Elisha's destiny has been altered not only in time by the demonic intruder, Gad; it has been altered for eternity as well by his own decision to kill John Dawson.

Just as the first phase of the mythic hero's journey ends in physical exhaustion, so does the second phase end in moral and spiritual desolation. But just as life goes on even when one's strength is gone, so life goes on even after all meaningful living is impossible. Burdened with his new self-knowledge, Wiesel's hero crosses the threshold into the third phase of the quest-journey--a phase, according to John Vickery, that brings "resolution to the quest."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ A Consuming Fire: Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), p. 66.

⁵⁷ "The Golden Bough: Impact and Archetype," in Myth and Symbol: Critical Approaches and Applications, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 192.

Again a change of name foreshadows the passage to come:
Elisha becomes Eliezer.

The third phase of the quest-journey forms the substance of The Accident, the third work in Wiesel's trilogy. The hero is now a man working as a New York-based correspondent for an Israeli daily newspaper. As one who has passed through both physical and spiritual trials, Eliezer enters what Campbell describes as "the ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome. . . . This is the crisis at the nadir . . . within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart"; this ultimate adventure "is commonly represented as a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul."⁵⁸ Eliezer's romantic relationship with a woman dramatizes this final phase of the monomyth. According to Campbell, "Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. . . . She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters."⁵⁹ Kathleen enters Eliezer's life in Paris, and her stunning beauty leaves him speechless. He describes the meeting:

Without a gesture, without a move, without saying a word, Kathleen and I looked at each other for a long time, as if to establish a direct contact.

⁵⁸ Campbell, Hero, p. 109.

⁵⁹ Campbell, Hero, p. 116.

She had a long symmetrical face, uncommonly beautiful and touching. Her nose turned up slightly, accentuating her sensuous lips. Her almond-shaped eyes were filled with a dark, secret fire; an inactive volcano. With her, there could be real communication.⁶⁰

Eliezer's first reaction to Kathleen is that he wants very much to know her, but he is afraid of being rejected. Her reaction to him, however, is a wish to know all about his past, a desire to hear him tell about the experiences that have made him what he is: to his friends, a "saint" (The Accident, p. 51); to himself, "a grave for the unburied dead" (The Accident, p. 53). The "real communication" Eliezer hopes for begins as he bares his soul to Kathleen. He tells her of "the nightmares that haunt him at night" (The Accident, p. 53) and of the deadening effect of the past on his life:

My most contemptible thoughts and desires, my most painful betrayals, my vaguest lies, I tore them from me and placed them in front of her, like an impure offering, so she could see them and smell their stench. (The Accident, p. 54)

Eliezer's self-contempt results because he survived imprisonment while so many others died. He tells her that:

suffering brings out the lowest, the most cowardly in man. There is a phase of suffering you reach

⁶⁰ Elie Wiesel, The Accident, trans. Anne Borchardt (New York: Avon Books, 1962), p. 31. All further references to this work in this study appear parenthetically in the text.

beyond which you become a brute: beyond it you sell your soul--and worse, the souls of your friends--for a piece of bread, for some warmth, for a moment of oblivion, of sleep. Saints are those who die before the end of the story. The others, those who live out their destiny, no longer dare look at themselves in the mirror, afraid they may see their inner image: a monster. (The Accident, p. 53)

Eliezer believes Kathleen will see him as he sees himself and will hate him. On the contrary, she responds with sympathy to him, and he becomes her lover. Eliezer describes their relationship:

We traveled a lot. The days were full, the hours dense. Time was once more an adventure. Whenever Kathleen watched a beautiful dawn, she knew how to make me share her enthusiasm; in the street she was the one to point out beautiful women; at home she taught me that the body is also a source of joy. (The Accident, p. 67)

Kathleen, however, views their relationship as an experiment: she wants very much to change Eliezer, to make him happy, to help him "taste the pleasures of life," to make him "forget the past" (The Accident, p. 66). Eliezer, on his part, believes that he cannot be changed: "You can't change a human being . . . you can't change someone's thoughts, someone's attitudes, someone's ties," he tells her (The Accident, p. 66). Thus Eliezer cannot make a commitment to Kathleen. He accepts intimacy but intimacy without commitment. After a year together, Eliezer and

Kathleen acknowledge that the experiment has failed, and their relationship ends.

Five years later Kathleen returns to Eliezer, her spirit broken by a disastrous marriage. She appeals to Eliezer to help her find a meaningful existence, and he agrees. But when she confesses her love for him, his response is cynical. He believes that "Love . . . makes everything complicated. While hate simplifies everything" (The Accident, p. 107). Eliezer loves Kathleen, too, but he wants no part of the complications and commitments that come with love. His rejection brings Kathleen to despair, and she begins to drink heavily. Moved by Kathleen's anguish, Eliezer finally learns a new dimension of suffering. "I knew that our suffering changes us," he states. "But I didn't know it could also destroy others" (The Accident, p. 15). At this point, "I told her that I loved her too" (The Accident, p. 108). Kathleen, however, is unconvinced of the integrity of his love. She responds:

You say you love me in the present but you're still living in the past. You tell me you love me but you refuse to forget. . . . The truth is I am nothing to you. You think I don't know? You think your silence is capable of hiding the hell you carry within you? Maybe you also think it is easy to live beside someone who suffers and who won't accept any help? (The Accident, p. 110)

Eliezer admits that he still lives in the past, as he explains to Kathleen:

With us--those who have known the time of death--it's different. There, we said we would never forget. It still holds true. We cannot forget. I think if I were able to forget I would hate myself. (The Accident, p. 111)

Clearly, Eliezer prefers to live in the past, with its memories of family members who perished in the concentration camps, rather than live in the present with Kathleen's love. Eliezer says, moreover, that there is another reason why he cannot commit himself to love: "Someday we would take off our masks. One of us would say: I was only playing. So was I, the other would answer. And there would be a bitter taste in our mouths. But then it was a pity this was only a game" (The Accident, p. 109). So fragile is his sense of identity that he cannot risk that possibility. Yet Kathleen is in despair, and "she wasn't playing," he says (The Accident, p. 109). He concludes, therefore, that he will have to leave Kathleen: he cannot accept her love because he is afraid to love in return. In addition, he has vowed never to forget--to keep alive the memory of those that perished. Even so, he enters into an agreement with Kathleen:

"And you'll let me make you happy?"
 "I'll let you make me happy."
 "And you promise to forget the past?"
 "I promise to forget the past."
 "And you'll think only about our love?"
 "Yes." (The Accident, p. 114)

The agreement is meaningless from Eliezer's perspective since he knows he cannot do what he has promised. He lies

to Kathleen; he has already decided to leave her. His attitude constitutes a refusal of the agreement even though he has verbally accepted it. Eliezer's refusal of Kathleen is, in effect, a refusal of the call to the mastery of life.

Campbell states that in the hero's quest-journey the refusal occurs because the hero clings to what he perceives to be his own best interest, his present goals and ideals.⁶¹ Yet the call is a crucial moment in the quest-journey, and its refusal carries the most dire consequences, according to Campbell:

Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless. . . . All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration.⁶²

New problems for Eliezer are not long in coming; the next night the accident occurs.

Crossing a busy street with Kathleen, Eliezer is struck by a taxicab and sustains multiple injuries that require extended hospitalization. Eliezer knows in his heart, however, that the accident could have been avoided. Out of

⁶¹ Campbell, Hero, p. 60.

⁶² Campbell, Hero, p. 59.

the corner of his eye he had seen the vehicle approaching and could have stepped outside its path. Thus Eliezer does not actively choose to live, the position he had eloquently defended as his rationale for executing the hostage. This moment, according to John Roth, "signals" the "breaking point."⁶³ Curt Leviant believes Eliezer "willed the accident because he found himself cornered into accepting life."⁶⁴

Eliezer's accident corresponds to a further element of the mythic adventure involving the ritual mutilation and dismemberment at the nadir of the night world. As ritual, the hero is not literally killed or dismembered, "but the corresponding thing in art still takes place, a vision of death which draws the survivors into a new unity."⁶⁵ Such ritual suffering is a prelude to the deliverance of the hero from his trials and from the isolation they create. This suffering may result also in "unusual wisdom or power."⁶⁶ Eliezer regains consciousness some days later to learn with regret that he has survived. He is attended

⁶³ Roth, p. 74.

⁶⁴ "Elie Wiesel: A Soul on Fire," rev. of A Beggar in Jerusalem, by Elie Wiesel, Saturday Review, 31 January 1970, p. 26.

⁶⁵ Frye, Anatomy, p. 215.

⁶⁶ Frye, Anatomy, p. 193.

by a skilled physician determined to cheat death and to deny it victory.

Campbell says that in the modern romance "the doctor is the modern master of the mythological realm, the knower of all the secret ways and words of potency. His role is precisely that of the Wise Old Man of the myths and fairy tales whose words assist the hero through the trials and terrors of the weird adventure."⁶⁷ In The Accident the function of the Wise Old Man is shared by Dr. Paul Russel, who ministers to Eliezer's broken body, and Gyula, who ministers to his broken spirit. From this abyss of "the dark night of the soul," Eliezer begins the long climb back, assisted by the doctor, by his friend Gyula, and by Kathleen to the point where he will again possess the power to choose life.

Dr. Russel probes Eliezer's mind at the same time as he tends his injuries. He focuses on Eliezer's apathy toward life in the questions he asks him: "What are you afraid of?" and "Why don't you care about living?" (The Accident, pp. 60, 73). Although the questions bring swift denials from Eliezer, they open the way for Dr. Russel to share the joy of saving human life. The concept is a revelation for Eliezer, who contemplates:

⁶⁷ Campbell, Hero, p. 9.

The joy of saving a human life, I thought. I have never experienced it. I didn't even know that it existed. To hold in your hands a boy's life is to take God's place. I had never dreamed of rising above the level of man. Man is not defined by what denies him, but by that which affirms him. This is found within, not across from him or next to him. (The Accident, p. 71)

The moment is an epiphany for Eliezer. While he had earlier played the role of God in terminating human life, he had never considered the other aspect of God's relationship to man: the giving of life. Dr. Russel continues to enlarge on his vision of life as possibility when he tells Eliezer:

What fascinates me in man is his capacity for living. Acts are just repetitions. If you had ever held a man's life in the palm of your hand, you too would come to prefer the immediate to the future, the concrete to the ideal, and life to the problems which it brings with it. (The Accident, p. 72)

Lothar Kahn states that the doctor represents "the principle of life. Where . . . [Eliezer] is powerfully attracted to death, the physician is certain of man's limitless capacity for living, of the ultimate victory over doom and death."⁶⁸ In guiding Eliezer to think of giving life by creating meaningful life for others, the doctor prepares the way for Gyula's role in Eliezer's recovery.

⁶⁸ "Elie Wiesel: Neo-Hasidism," in his Mirrors of the Jewish Mind: A Gallery of Portraits of European Jewish Writers of Our Time (New York: Thomas Yozeloff, 1968), p. 181.

As Eliezer's friend, Gyula points out that Eliezer could give meaning to his life by "creating meaningful life" for another. He also tells Eliezer how to solve the problems that have prevented him from creating a meaningful life. Gyula first tells his friend a story and then paints his portrait. Gyula's anecdote recounts his own brush with death in a swimming mishap off the French Riviera. Rescued and revived, he was bitterly unhappy at having been saved. But "later, this unsuccessful drowning made me sing and dance," he says, adding that: "Victory over death should give birth to happiness. Happiness to be free. Free to provoke death again. Free to accept freedom or reject it" (The Accident, p. 121). Gyula discerns the roots of Eliezer's unhappiness and communicates to him a message of hope drawn from his own experience: Eliezer too will one day sing and dance that he is alive.

Gyula's unveiling of the portrait forces upon Eliezer the moment of crisis. Eliezer stares speechless at his friend's creation: "I was there, facing me. My whole past was there, facing me. It was a painting in which black, interspersed with a few red spots, dominated" (The Accident, p. 123). A remarkable stream-of-consciousness conversation takes place as Eliezer reflects on the portrait before him:

"You see? Maybe God is dead, but man is alive. The proof: he is capable of friendship."

"But what about the others? The others, Gyula? Those who died? What about them? Besides me they have no friends."

"But you must forget them. You must chase them from your memory. With a whip if necessary."

"Chase them, Gyula? With a whip, you said? To chase my father with a whip? And grandmother? Grandmother too, chase her with a whip?"

"Yes, yes, and yes. The dead have no place here. They must leave us in peace. If they refuse, use a whip."

"And this painting, Gyula? They are there. In the eyes of the portrait. Why did you put them there, if you ask me to chase them away?"

"I put them there to assign them a place. So you would know where to hit." (The Accident, pp. 123, 124)

Campbell states that the most difficult task the hero faces may well be the "return and reintegration with society."⁶⁹ But some questors fail at this point: they cannot face the return. Yet "from the standpoint of the social unit," according to Campbell, "the broken-off individual is simply nothing--waste."⁷⁰ For Eliezer, the nightmare of his imprisonment continues to inhibit his social integration with the moral community of the living. Powerless in his own strength, Eliezer turns from his inner dialogue to hear his friend reinforce the call of the living:

It's a man's duty to make . . . suffering cease, not to increase it. One hour of suffering less

⁷⁰ Campbell, Hero, p. 383.

is already a victory over fate. . . . If your suffering splashes others, those around you, those for whom you represent a reason to live, then you must kill it, choke it. If the dead are its source, kill them again. . . . Man must keep moving, searching, weighing, holding out his hand, offering himself, inventing himself. . . . You should know that the dead, because they are no longer free, are no longer able to suffer. Only the living can. Kathleen is alive. I am alive. You must think of us. Not of them. (The Accident, pp. 124, 125)

The choice before Eliezer is clear: "I would choose the living or the dead. Day or night," he says (The Accident, p. 125).

Eliezer approaches the moment of decision strengthened by specific insights given to him by the doctor and Gyula. He has seen that there is joy in giving life; he has learned that life itself is good: one ought to sing and dance because he is alive. He has also learned that whatever denies life must be abandoned. These insights enable Eliezer to choose life: "Kathleen will be happy, I decided. I'll learn to lie well and she'll be happy. It's absurd: lies can give birth to true happiness. Happiness will, as long as it lasts, seem real" (The Accident, p. 126).

Campbell says that the resolution of the hero's conflict is represented in a mystical marriage.⁷¹ Eliezer does not say that he will marry Kathleen. Rather, he surrenders

⁷¹ Campbell, Hero, p. 109.

his self-imposed isolation, opens himself for the first time to a mutual commitment, and acknowledges his need for another. His decision is, in effect, a first step to interdependence. Immediately after, Gyula burns the portrait, reducing it to ashes and symbolically destroying the life-negating burden of the past with its haunting memories. Painful though it is for Eliezer, it is a liberating, ritualized severance from the nightmare of the past that is being left behind; it is a death to what must be surpassed in order "to be transformed and attain a high level of existence."⁷²

Wiesel does not resolve the moral dilemma expressed in the words "lies give birth to true happiness" any more than he does the earlier dilemma that "justice stems from injustice," or that "freedom . . . [is] built on a pile of dead bodies" (Dawn, p. 93). Eliezer's decision to choose life in spite of its annal ambiguities opens the way for social interdependence in a mutually constructive relationship with Kathleen. Happiness, justice, and freedom--all elements of the Messiah's reign--are seen as coming to birth in ways only God knows, because "He created the universe" (Dawn, p. 93). At this point Eliezer accepts a greatly diminished relationship to the Messiah: instead of seeking

⁷² Eliade, p. 218.

to bring the Messiah to earth by personal piety or by guerilla warfare, he will concentrate on diminishing the suffering of one individual: Kathleen. Thus, Eliezer attains all three elements of the quest: individual, social, and sexual.

Campbell states that the "hero-deed to be wrought today is not what it was. . . . The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul."⁷³ In Eliezer's story the "Temple in ruins" finally becomes the integrated hero, freed from his body cast and ready to leave the hospital. Both his body and soul will heal together because of his acceptance of himself and of another human being. The final scene finds Eliezer bathed in the tears of his new birth, while outside his window "the playful waves of the East River . . . [move] elegantly toward their date with infinity" in the boundless waters of the ocean (The Accident, p. 123). For Eliezer this is the first moment of peace and tranquility since he left the village of Sighet, his childhood home.

The presence of the narrative structure of the mythic quest-journey in Wiesel's novels enables him to relate the particular to the universal in his fiction. In so doing,

⁷³ Campbell, Hero, p. 388.

he places his Jewish quest-romance beside countless other romances, each one differing in its details but alike in its portrayal of the universality of human experience and of the human need to "battle past . . . [one's] limitations"⁷⁴ to "gain the rewards" of life.⁷⁵

The focus of this chapter has been to place Wiesel's early novels in the great tradition of Western literature, especially his use of narrative patterns that embody the mythic quest. In the next chapter we shall examine the literary devices that Wiesel employs in the trilogy to develop his major themes. In studying his skillful use of imagery, we shall discover the unique literary qualities of Wiesel's art that justify his deserving a notable place among contemporary writers.

⁷⁴ Leeming, p. 184.

⁷⁵ Campbell, Hero, p. 19.

Chapter III

Metaphor and Symbol in the Trilogy

We have seen that Eliezer's experience conforms to the archetypal stages of the monomyth. According to Carl Jung, "an archetypal content expresses itself first and foremost in metaphors."¹ René Wellek and Austin Warren express essentially the same viewpoint: "our own view . . . sees the meaning and function of literature as centrally present in metaphor and myth."² Cleanth Brooks also stresses the primacy of metaphor and symbol when he says that "literature is ultimately metaphoric and symbolic."³ In Night, Dawn, and The Accident, Elie Wiesel develops a cluster of carefully modulated metaphors, images, and symbols that provide narrative and dramatic unity and that

¹ "The Collective Unconscious, Myth, and the Archetype," trans. R. F. C. Hull, in "The Child Archetype," The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, IX, Part I (n.p.: Bollingen Foundation, 1959), n. pag.; rpt. Literature in Critical Perspectives: An Anthology, ed. Walter K. Gordon (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 512.

² Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956), p. 193.

³ "The Formalist Critics," The Kenyon Review, XIII (Winter 1951), 72-81; rpt. Literature in Critical Perspectives, p. 167.

add another dimension to the meaning of Eliezer's mythic passages.

Wiesel's first metaphors appear in his titles that themselves embody archetypal associations. According to Walter K. Gordon, "the collective unconscious makes certain associations between the outside world and psychic experiences," passing on these associations "from one generation to the next."⁴ Such associations when they are widespread from culture to culture are known as archetypal associations. One of the "common archetypal association[s]" is the relationship of darkness to "despair" and "the unknown."⁵ Thus, Wiesel's title Night is aptly chosen to depict the episodes portraying Eliezer's passages through physical trial and spiritual despair.

Wiesel intensifies the metaphoric quality of Night by arranging key episodes within the novel so that they occur at night. For example, as the action begins, Stern, the policeman in Sighet, arrives at dusk to summon Eliezer's father to a meeting of the council. The father returns at midnight, whereupon Eliezer is dispatched to awaken the neighbors with the news of the approaching deportation (Night, p. 22). The final meal that the family eats together also occurs at night on Sabbath eve (Night, p. 31).

⁴ Walter K. Gordon, ed., Literature in Critical Perspectives, p. 502.

⁵ Gordon, p. 502.

After the exodus from Sighet, Eliezer reaches Auschwitz at midnight (Night, p. 39). Within a few days Eliezer moves from the reception area to the main prison camp, running naked in the cold; once again it is midnight (Night, p. 51). It is night, too, on the eve of Rosh Hashana when Eliezer ceases to pray (Night, p. 79). The infamous death march to escape the advancing Russian Army begins on a snowy night (Night, p. 95); and the final leg of the journey, made in open cattle cars, also begins on "a night . . . long and never ending" (Night, p. 110). Eliezer's father, worn out by privation, dies at night. Thus, the metaphoric quality of Night is reinforced by the numerous episodes that occur at night in the story.

Dawn, on the other hand, focuses the reader's attention on the passage of time in a single night from dusk to dawn and to the events scheduled to take place at dawn. The author organizes the episodes around the passage of time to such an extent that it becomes an important unifying device in the story. Time is noted first in hours, then in minutes, and, finally, in seconds.

The story begins, for example, at dusk on an autumn evening as Eliezer--now known as Elisha--ponders the role of executioner he will assume at dawn and the effects of that role on his future (Dawn, pp. ix, x). Only an hour earlier he had learned that he had been designated to

execute the hostage (Dawn, p. xiv). At 8:00 p.m. the British announce on the radio that at dawn they will execute David ben Moshe, a convicted Jewish terrorist. At 8:15 the underground radio announces that, in retaliation for the hanging of David ben Moshe, the terrorists will execute the kidnapped British hostage, Captain John Dawson (Dawn, p. 34). After that, time drags by; "during the hour that followed nobody said a word" (Dawn, p. 56). Then, "to kill time," the terrorists speak of their memories (Dawn, p. 56). "The seconds dragged interminably by" (Dawn, p. 62). At midnight they tell the hostage that he will die "when sunrise comes" (Dawn, p. 64). At 2:20 a.m. the terrorists take hostage John Dawson his last meal. They note that the sun will rise "around five o'clock," that it is the longest night they have ever lived through, and that it seems to last indefinitely (Dawn, p. 84). At 4:00 a.m. Elisha takes the gun and goes downstairs to confront his victim (Dawn, p. 99). Immediately, Dawson asks what time it is and how long until sunrise. "In an hour," Elisha replies; he notes that time is not moving at its normal pace (Dawn, p. 108).

At 4:50 a.m. Elisha tells Dawson to get ready; at 4:52 he takes the gun from his pocket. The time is noted at 4:54 and again at 4:55. At 4:56 Dawson reminds Elisha to mail the note he has written to his son in London. At 4:58 Elisha offers Dawson a handkerchief for his eyes. At 4:59

the countdown begins in seconds: sixty, twenty, ten--Elisha raises his arm; five, two, one--he fires (Dawn, pp. 122-126). Such detailed attention to the passing of time dramatizes the slow-moving hours that, in turn, symbolize Elisha's reluctance to execute the hostage. The narrative ends with the sun rising on the horizon, the moment toward which the entire story has been focused.

In The Accident, while the passing of time is specifically noted, it seems less a unifying device than a strategy to move the story to its climax. However, with the exception of the accident itself, that occurs at night, all the episodes take place during the day. The-accident-that-is-not-an-accident and its aftermath move Eliezer's story to its denouement: a new day for Eliezer.

"The prevailing metaphor of modern fiction," says Weller Embler, "is the metaphor of violence,"⁶ a metaphor Wiesel employs as the universal framing device for his trilogy. He presents the metaphor in various ways, adapting the expression of violent behavior to the changing aspects of Eliezer's adventures. Wellek and Warren say that in a story the setting itself may be a metaphor.⁷ Wiesel's use of the metaphor of violence begins with his settings. As

⁶ Metaphor and Meaning (DeLand, Fla.: Everett-Edwards, Inc., 1966), p. 7.

⁷ Wellek and Warren, p. 188.

the trilogy opens, the world of the narrative reflects the international violence of World War II that both overshadows Night and influences the action in the story. For example, the Jews of Sighet listen to the news from London every evening on the radio (Night, p. 17). In the Spring of 1944 there is good news from the eastern front: the Russian Army is winning; the defeat of Germany is "only a question of time--of months or weeks perhaps"; people said, "Hitler won't be able to do us any harm, even if he wants to" (Night, p. 17). Sometime later, American planes bomb Buna (Night, p. 71). Still later, the advancing Russians force the Germans to evacuate the camp, moving their prisoners farther from the war zone. During the last night in Buna, "bursts of red light could be seen. Cannon shots split the night-time silence. How close the Russians were!" (Night, p. 94). Finally, as this aspect of Eliezer's adventure draws to a close, "at about six o'clock in the evening, the first American tank stood at the gates of Buchenwald" (Night, p. 127). World War II frames the action in Night; it also intrudes into the story, calling attention to the larger violence that engulfs the world even as the localized violence dominates the prison camp.

In Dawn as well as in Night, the action of the story is framed by war. The world of the novel reflects the Jewish struggle for an independent homeland in Palestine.

Once again the international situation intrudes into the story and influences it. The action in the novel is precipitated by a political decision in London when the British Cabinet rejects clemency for a captured Jewish freedom-fighter. In response, the terrorists plan the kidnapping and execution of a British officer because "violence is the only language the British understand" (Dawn, p. xvi). The hostage is victimized not for what he has done, but for who he is, just as Eliezer had been victimized earlier.

In The Accident the violence is reduced to a personal level--the physical injuries Eliezer sustains when the taxicab strikes him. The violence of the present, however, is overshadowed by the violence of the past, which continually intrudes into and influences the work itself. For example, the development of Eliezer's relationship with Kathleen is impeded by memories of his grandmother, a victim of the Holocaust.

"Don't touch me," I told . . . [Kathleen]. I was thinking of my grandmother and you cannot truly remember a dead grandmother if you aren't alone, if a girl with black hair--black like my grandmother's shawl--touches your arm. . . . Her body had not been buried, but entrusted to the wind that had blown it in all directions. (The Accident, p. 35)

Memories of the violent past interfere with Eliezer's recovery from the accident as recounted in the episodes of Shmuel the slaughterer and Moishe the smuggler (The Accident,

pp. 77, 78). In fact, Eliezer cannot sit down like other people and enjoy a simple hamburger. The past intrudes and nauseates him:

I cut off a piece and lifted it to my mouth. The smell of blood turned my stomach. I felt like throwing up. Once I had seen a man eating with great appetite a slice of meat without bread. Starving, I watched him for a long time. As if hypnotized, I followed the motion of his fingers and jaws. I was hoping that if he saw me there, in front of him, he would throw me a piece. He didn't look up. The next day he was hanged by those who shared his barracks: he had been eating human flesh. To defend himself he had screamed: "I didn't do any harm: he was already dead. . . ." When I saw his body swinging in the latrine, I wondered, "What if he had seen me?" (The Accident, pp. 14, 15)

Quite simply, the violence of the past has left such deep psychological wounds that adjustments to life in the present seem impossible for Eliezer until the accident. He explains:

It's too late. To change, we would have to change the past. But the past is beyond our power. Its structure is solid, immutable. . . . What a stupid time we live in. Everything is upside down. The cemeteries are up above, hanging from the sky, instead of being dug in the moist earth. . . . Now everything has been transferred there. Love, happiness, truth, purity, children with happy smiles, old people who walk slowly, and little orphans whose prayers are filled with anguish. That's the true exodus. The exodus from one world to another. . . . Nothing remains below. (The Accident, pp. 112, 113)

Clearly, the metaphor of violence dominates the created universe of Wiesel's trilogy.

Embler says that "all overt acts may be thought of as metaphor expressing an inner condition."⁸ To dramatize the violent inner condition of contemporary society and to provide a localized frame of reference for the action of the trilogy, Wiesel employs the metaphor of the prison that appears in one form or another in each aspect of Eliezer's experience. Interwoven with the prison metaphor is the hospital metaphor, which Embler says frequently appears in contemporary literature as "a place of refuge from the brutalities of the world."⁹ Taken together, the prison and the hospital form the shaping metaphors for the trilogy. Night, for example, is set in a German concentration camp. The setting for Dawn is Palestine, which Elisha describes as "one great prison" (Dawn, p. xv). A hospital furnishes the setting for The Accident and provides the background against which the action of the story is played out.

In Night, Eliezer is the victim of violence perpetrated by the dominant class in his society upon his minority group, his race. Thus, he is victimized, first of all, not for what he has done, but for what he is. The victimizing takes the form of dehumanization of the victim class which is then followed by acts of brutality against individual members of

⁸ Embler, p. 2.

⁹ Embler, p. 71.

the class. The Wiesels first lose all the rights of citizenship, followed promptly by the confiscation of their property, and then by the loss of their freedom. Once imprisoned, the grim terror of violence is visited upon them individually.

Violence comes to the Jews of Sighet with the uprooting from home and in the language and behavior of the Hungarian police. "They were our first oppressors," says Eliezer as he recalls their departure. "The police were striking out with their truncheons. 'Faster! Faster! Get on with you, lazy swine!'" they shouted (Night, p. 29). Once interned in the prison camp, Eliezer must cope with the ever-present brutality of the guards toward their victims. There is the forced separation of the family (Night, p. 39), followed by hard labor (Night, p. 84) and merciless beatings (Night, pp. 64, 69). There is brutal sexual exploitation of young prisoners by their guards, both of boys (Night, pp. 58, 59) and of girls (Night, p. 68). Everywhere there is the threat of death--sometimes by burning (Night, p. 42), sometimes by hanging (Night, pp. 73, 76), sometimes by selection for the gas chamber (Night, p. 82). The violence of the prison camp is mirrored in the violent winter weather: "An icy wind blew in violent gusts" (Night, p. 97).

Yet even in their concentration camps, the Germans maintain hospitals. Eliezer enters the hospital the first

time with an infected foot. His experience there underscores the truth of Embler's statement that the hospital in contemporary literature provides "a refuge from the brutalities" of prison life.¹⁰ Eliezer comments:

They put me in a bed with white sheets. I had forgotten that people slept in sheets.

The hospital was not bad at all. We were given good bread and thicker soup. No more bell. No more roll call. No more work. Now and then I was able to send a bit of bread to my father. (Night, p. 89)

Eliezer is hospitalized a second time at the end of his imprisonment. His first stay in the hospital had preceded his departure from Buna; his second, his deliverance from prison. Sheltered from further brutalities while he recovers, Eliezer discovers in each instance a haven of mercy in the midst of violence.

Assuming that Embler is correct when he says that "one of the purposes of art is so to use outward behavior that it shall serve as metaphor to describe inner feelings,"¹¹ then Wiesel has fashioned a damning portrait of contemporary man through his metaphors of the prison and the hospital. For he depicts the most brutal impulses as coexisting with a pseudo-humanitarianism, that is ultimately self-serving, in

¹⁰ Embler, p. 71.

¹¹ Embler, p. 2.

the character of the German masters of the concentration camps of World War II.

The action in Dawn occurs in the small slice of time between the close of World War II and the United Nations' decision on the future political status of Palestine. The British are in control of the country. The violence that occurs in Dawn depicts the Jews as protagonists and the British as victims. To be sure, the violence is in response to earlier violence, but Jewish leaders see the British as the contemporary manifestation of centuries of gentile oppression, culminating in the recent Holocaust. The philosophy that has enabled the Jews to move from victims of violence to perpetrators of violence is expressed in these words from the terrorists to the new recruits:

We have no other choice. For generations we've wanted to be better, more pure in heart than those who persecuted us. You've all seen the result: Hitler and the extermination camps in Germany. . . . When the Nazis killed a third of our people, just men found nothing to say. If ever it's a question of killing off Jews, everyone is silent; there are twenty centuries of history to prove it. We can rely only on ourselves. . . . Murder will be not our profession but our duty. In the days and weeks and months to come you will have only one purpose: to kill those who have made us killers. We shall kill in order that once more we may be men. . . .
(Dawn, p. 41)

The theory of Jewish violence quickly becomes the practice of violence. Elisha describes his first assignment as he and five comrades attack a British convoy:

We set mines on either side of the curve and moved into planned positions. . . .

The convoy arrived punctually upon the scene: three open trucks carrying about twenty soldiers. The wind ruffled their hair and the sun shone upon their faces. At the curve the first truck was exploded by one of our mines and the others came to an abrupt halt with screeching brakes. The soldiers leaped to the ground and were caught in the cross-fire of our guns. They ran with lowered heads in every direction, but their legs were cut by our bullets, as if by an immense scythe, and they fell shrieking to the ground. (Dawn, p. 44)

Only then does Elisha perceive that his behavior is like that of the despised Nazis. "I found myself utterly hateful," he says. "Seeing myself with the eyes of the past I imagined that I was in the dark gray uniform of an SS officer" (Dawn, p. 42).

As the violence escalates, martial law is declared, and with the kidnapping of John Dawson, matters come to a head. Elisha describes the situation:

John Dawson's kidnapping plunged the whole country into a state of nervous tension. The English army proclaimed a forty-eight-hour curfew, every house was searched, and hundreds of suspects were arrested. Tanks were stationed at the crossroads, machine guns set up on the rooftops, and barbed-wire barricades erected at the street corners. The whole of Palestine was one great prison, and within it there was another, smaller prison where the hostage was successfully hidden. (Dawn, p. xv)

The nausea and self-hatred Elisha feels as a member of a terrorist group turn to anguish when he learns that he has

been designated to murder the hostage. The inner turmoil into which this knowledge plunges him does not abate until he grasps--and accepts--an understanding of the violence he himself is capable of as an agent of death. Only then do "doubt and questioning and uncertainty" cease (Dawn, p. 123). He faces the unarmed hostage at close range and shoots him in the heart, the ultimate imposition of violence on the victim by the victimizer.

In Dawn, Wiesel makes explicit that violent inner feelings are as much a part of the contemporary Jew as of the contemporary gentile. The rationalization of Jewish violence in the light of history and the portrayal of Jewish terrorists as reluctant killers come through in the words of Gad, the terrorist recruiter:

For generations we've wanted to be better, more pure in heart than those who persecuted us. . . . We've had enough of trying to be more just than those who claim to speak in the name of justice. . . . We don't like to be the bearers of death; heretofore we've chosen to be victims rather than executioners. The commandment Thou shalt not kill was given from the summit of one of the mountains here in Palestine, and we were the only ones to obey it. But that's all over; we must be like everybody else. (Dawn, p. 41)

But according to Wiesel, violence is life-negating; Elisha not only kills the hostage, he also kills himself as he says, "That's it. . . . It's done. I've killed. I've killed Elisha" (Dawn, p. 126). For Elisha, the understanding

that he is like the Nazis and the acceptance of himself as a "bearer of death" constitute an escape from the illusion that he is purer or better than other men. And it is in this sense of awakening self-knowledge that Elisha comes to the dawn. Wiesel presents us here with a paradox: Elisha sees himself as self-murdered, but Wiesel tells us by his symbols that this self-knowledge is in fact the dawn of day for Elisha. In effect, Wiesel is saying that there is no emerging from night without self-knowledge, however shattering the revelation of the true self may be.

In The Accident Wiesel continues to use his earlier metaphors of violence, the prison and the hospital, but modulates them to express the specific emphases of this third and final phase of Eliezer's story. Following his being struck by a taxicab, Eliezer awakes to consciousness to find himself hospitalized and in a body cast from neck to toe. As noted earlier, the hospital metaphor carries with it the connotation of healing, of restoration, of "a refuge," in Embler's words, "from the brutality" of life.¹² The cast is Wiesel's modulation of the prison metaphor. As prison, the cast allows Eliezer even less freedom than the concentration camp or the house-prison in Palestine. Completely immobilized, Eliezer finds himself "alone as only

¹² Embler, p. 71.

a paralyzed and suffering man can be" (The Accident, p. 26). While he is hospitalized, Eliezer not only recovers from the accident, but he also recuperates from the psychic wounds inflicted by the violence of the past. At the conclusion of the story, the cast is removed one day and he leaves the hospital the next, free from the acute effects of physical and emotional violence. Once again, the hospital episode proves to be the prelude to a change in Eliezer's situation. He emerges from the prison-cast and from the hospital simultaneously--to Day. Wiesel's extended metaphors, such as the prison and the hospital, form the background and setting against which Eliezer moves from innocence to experience, from illusion to self-knowledge, and from isolation to interdependence.

Corresponding to the major movements of Eliezer's story in myth and metaphor is the extended image of the window. The symbolic significance of the window is revealed through an examination of the window imagery. Northrop Frye says:

Formal criticism begins with an examination of the imagery . . . with a view to bringing out its distinctive patterns. The recurring or most frequently repeated images form the tonality . . . and the modulating episodic or isolated images relate themselves to this in a hierarchic structure.¹³

¹³ Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 85.

An object becomes symbolic, says Monroe C. Beardsley, if it appears as a "recurrent image." Beardsley makes these further comments on the nature of the symbolic object:

What makes an object symbolic in a literary work is its being fixed as the focus of attention either for the speaker or for another character in the world of the work. What it symbolizes is a set of characteristics that it embodies or causes and that are pointed up by the action or the verbal texture.¹⁴

A brief catalogue of the recurrent window imagery discloses that action in each of the novels opens and closes with a window scene and that in between the window appears at key intervals in Eliezer's mythic passages.

The first window scene occurs the night the Wiesel family learns of their imminent deportation from Sighet. Shortly, someone knocks on the boarded-up outside window. By the time it is opened, no one is there. The second episode takes place on the family's arrival at Auschwitz as they look out of the railroad car through the window at the flaming chimney of the crematorium. The third window episode occurs at the end of Eliezer's imprisonment when he stares at himself in the mirror, a modulation of the window image. Dawn opens with the terrorist recruiter, Gad, looking out at the gray dawn over Paris. The climactic night

¹⁴ Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958), p. 408.

of Eliezer-Elisha as terrorist begins with his gazing out over Tel Aviv at dusk through the window, continues with his staring at himself in the mirror on the wall before looking out again in the darkness, and concludes with his watching the approaching dawn. In The Accident Eliezer and Kathleen look out the window together in New York. After he is injured, Eliezer refuses to look at himself in the mirror. A cluster of episodes follows that involve Eliezer and those who are associated with his recovery. And, finally, the climactic resolution of the story occurs at the unveiling of Gyula's portrait of Eliezer, a further modulation of the window symbol. A close reading of the eighteen window scenes reveals their relationship to the structure of the trilogy as well as their symbolic function within it.

Wiesel focuses attention on the window as symbol at the very beginning of his trilogy. Father Wiesel returns at midnight from a council meeting, to which he had been summarily ordered, with news of the imminent deportation of all Jews from Sighet. At once a frenzy of activity begins inside the house; suddenly someone begins knocking at the boarded-up outside window. Eliezer says:

It was not until after the war that I learned who it was that had knocked. It was an inspector in the Hungarian police, a friend of my father. . . . If he could have spoken to us that evening, we

could perhaps have fled. . . . But by the time we had managed to open the window, it was too late. There was no one outside. (Night, pp. 23, 24)

Weller Embler says that "while the window may carry varied meanings for different artists, yet all meanings and interpretations must center upon the looking out on the world or the looking in upon the private life."¹⁵ In the context of the story, the window image is clearly in symbolic unity with what the action portrays: the darkness of the prison camp has already fallen on the Jews of Sighet although the anguish and despair of the symbolic night have not yet been realized. The window open to the darkness may be said, in one sense, to foreshadow that which is to come and, in another, to indicate that the future has, in fact, already begun. The second window episode occurs as the Jews of Sighet arrive at Auschwitz. From the crowded compartment of the train, Eliezer looks out the window at the flaming chimney of the crematorium. "We looked at the flames in the darkness. There was an abominable odor floating in the air," says Eliezer (Night, p. 38). This second window symbol is, like the first, a foreshadowing of future events and of the suffering and trials to come.

¹⁵ Embler, p. 52.

The window symbol appears again at the end of Eliezer's imprisonment on the eve of his departure for France. He gets out of the hospital bed to stare into the mirror on the wall. He says:

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

From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me. (Night, p. 127)

The mirror in this episode is a modulation of the window image, but by its very nature it cannot focus the eyes of the viewer on a larger or expanding vision of the world but serves only as a reflection of the past as seen in the present. "The sole function of a mirror," says Meyer Howard Abrams, "is to yield a flawless and accurate image."¹⁶ At times, however, a mirror also "images a state of mind."¹⁷ In this episode Eliezer sees himself as a living corpse, so wasted is his body. Only the eyes gazing out from the half-dead body confirm the presence of a living soul within. The mirror faithfully reflects Eliezer's present condition. It is, nevertheless, a limiting image,

¹⁶ The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 34.

¹⁷ Abrams, p. 50.

for Eliezer, after all, has survived, and a new life in France is now opening before him. The mirror, however, is a closed image and is unable to conduct Eliezer's eyes or his thoughts beyond the present moment.

The window image reappears soon after Eliezer's arrival in France where he is visited by Gad, a recruiter for a Jewish terrorist organization fighting for a homeland in Palestine. Eliezer, now calling himself Elisha, accepts Gad's invitation to join the movement. In so doing, Elisha believes he will help to bring in "the Messianic hope"; he will aid in creating a just society where "every human act will be free"; and he will find fulfillment and romance in the "calm and serene beauty" of evenings spent in the company of a beautiful woman (Dawn, pp. 29, 30). The episode concludes with the recruiter's staring out the window at the coming dawn. Elisha describes the scene:

[He] stopped talking and went to look out the window at the approaching dawn. The shadows melted away and a pale, prematurely weary light the color of stagnant water invaded my small room. (Dawn, p. 30)

That Gad sees the reality of life as a terrorist while Elisha fails to do so becomes symbolized in Gad's looking out the window while Elisha does not. Elisha is deceived; he is blind to the dangers inherent in life as a terrorist, concentrating only on the romantic aspects of life in the

Promised Land. A further discrepancy between hope and reality for Elisha lies in Gad's words as he stares at the gray Paris morning: "In our land it is very different. Here the dawn is gray; in Palestine it is red like fire" (Dawn, p. 31). It is a promise unfulfilled by the truth of Elisha's life in Palestine; the dawn is gray for Elisha even in Tel Aviv (Dawn, p. 127).

The central episode in Dawn is the execution of the British hostage. The night begins with Elisha "standing near the window" looking over Tel Aviv "at the transparent twilight whose descent made the city seem silent, motionless, unreal and very far away." The sound of a crying child fills the air (Dawn, p. ix). Night descends with Elisha still at the window:

I looked out the window where a shadowy face was taking shape out of the deep of night. A sharp pain caught my throat. I could not take my eyes off the face. It was my own. (Dawn, p. xiii)

Elisha's fear comes from something he had learned from a beggar in Sighet long ago. The beggar said:

I'm going to teach you the art of distinguishing night and day. Always look into a window, and failing that look into the eyes of a man. If you can see a face, any face, then you can be sure that night has succeeded day. (Dawn, p. xii)

For Elisha, seeing a face in the window signifies that he is still enveloped in night. Implicit in this episode as well is the inference that he is now the maker of his own night, for the imposed darkness of Night is behind him, and the only face he sees is his own. This window scene is also a limiting image, essentially a window-mirror, since what Elisha sees is his own reflection. The reflected fear explicit in this scene is in harmony with the action of the story, for Elisha is, indeed, in mortal fear of the moral consequences of the act of murder he is about to commit.

As the night wears on, Elisha reflects on his hunger to understand "the pure, unadulterated essence of human nature, the path to the understanding of man." He continues, "I had sought after the truth, and here I was about to become a killer, a participant in the work of death and God" (Dawn, p. 35). At this moment of reverie, he goes over to look in the mirror on the wall and sees his face. "I almost cried out," he says, "for everywhere I saw my own eyes" (Dawn, p. 35). The key word here is "everywhere." It is tied to Elisha's early childhood when his teacher had told him, "If you ever see a creature with eyes everywhere, you can be sure that it is death" (Dawn, p. 35). In this moment of looking inside himself, he sees that he is one of the "bearers of death" (Dawn, p. 41); the insight brings with it the most profound anguish. "I almost cried out," he says, for he has become death personified (Dawn, p. 35).

It is now far into the night, and Elisha comes once again to look out the window over the sleeping city of Tel Aviv. This episode occurs at a time when Elisha is torn between what he had meant to do and to become in life and what he is actually about to do and to become. Wiesel dramatizes Elisha's moral struggle by incorporating into the narrative the ghost episode in which all who have known Elisha and who have helped to form him fill the room, suffocating him with their presence and with the implication of adverse judgment on the course he is pursuing. Elisha describes the moment that he turns from the ghost-filled room to the window:

I walked over to the window and looked out. The city seemed far away and unreal. Deep in sleep it spawned anxious dreams, dreams which would proliferate other dreams on the morrow. And these dreams in their turn would engender new heroes, who would live through the night and prepare to die at dawn, to die and to give death. (Dawn, p. 85)

The chain of events and the texture of the words support the symbol as a foreshadowing. "Somewhere in the city a light shone in the window and went out" (Dawn, p. 85). Elisha comes to a decision, embraces his fate, and turns from the window with his mind made up, as he says to the ghost of his teacher:

If I were to refuse to obey orders I should betray my living friends. And the living have more rights over us than the dead. You told me that yourself. Therefore choose life it says in the Scriptures. I have espoused the cause of the living and that is no betrayal. (Dawn, p. 94)

Elisha has lived "through the night," and now he is prepared "to die at dawn, to die and to give death" (Dawn, p. 85). Even so, the light goes out within Elisha. The view of the darkness and the extinguished light foreshadow Elisha's experience following the execution. Having justified his course of action to his ghosts, Elisha says goodbye to life as he has known it, goes resolutely down the stairs, executes the hostage, and comes once again to gaze into the window at daybreak:

I went to the window. The city was still asleep. Somewhere a child woke up and began to cry. I wished that a dog would bark, but there was no dog anywhere nearby.

The night lited [sic], leaving behind it a grayish light the color of stagnant water. Soon there was only a tattered fragment of darkness, hanging in midair, the other side of the window. Fear caught in my throat. The tattered fragment of darkness had a face. Looking at it, I understood the reason for my fear. The face was my own. (Dawn, p. 127)

As he had once emerged from the concentration camp to see himself as a corpse-like body, he now emerges from his terrorist role to face himself once again, the night within mirrored in the "tattered fragment of darkness," to face the man who has chosen "to die and to give death" (Dawn, p. 85).

The beggar was right: it is night in his soul, the result, not of force, but of his own free choice. Once again the window-mirror is limited to looking within; the view is the past as seen in the present.

Wiesel continues to use the window as the key image in The Accident. The first in this final sequence occurs when Kathleen comes back. Eliezer (he has assumed his first name again) first sees Kathleen "framed by the window" (The Accident, p. 82). Moved by her beauty, Eliezer comes to her and together they look out on the beautiful scene before them. Eliezer describes the moment:

I walked toward the open window. It looked on Central Park, the no man's land which at night, in this enormous city, shelters with equal kindness criminals and lovers. The trees were turning orange. It was humid and hot: the last heat wave before winter. Far below, thousands of cars drove into the foliage and disappeared. The sun grafted its golden rays onto the skyscrapers' windows. (The Accident, pp. 82, 83)

The park "shelters with equal kindness criminals and lovers," and thus it encompasses Eliezer the murderer and Eliezer the lover. The image makes explicit that love and beauty are present and that the past is now hidden, just as the cars drive into the foliage and disappear in the embrace of the park. The symbol foreshadows the beauty and joy that lie in a relationship with Kathleen.

Eliezer, however, rejects Kathleen in his heart, precipitates the accident, and in the next window episode lies

gravely injured in a hospital with a cast from neck to toe. When the nurse, who has shaved his face and made him presentable, wants him to see himself in the mirror, he refuses vehemently in the following exchange:

"There you are," the nurse said beaming. "Now you're nice."
 "I know," I said. "Now I'm like a newborn baby!"
 "Wait and I'll bring you a mirror!"
 "I don't want it," I said.
 "I'll bring it, you'll see."
 "Listen," I said threateningly, "If you hand me a mirror, I'll break it." (The Accident, p. 59)

The clue to Eliezer's refusal to look at himself lies in his belief that all that was good--the saints--perished in the Holocaust. And "the others, those who live out their destiny, no longer dare look at themselves in the mirror, afraid they may see their inner image: a monster" (The Accident, p. 53). Eliezer finds himself in the kind of situation described by Lawrence L. Langer: "To be in touch with the intolerable, and to remain psychologically whole, is the vexing challenge that confronts us."¹⁸ It is a challenge Eliezer is unable to deal with. The death of Eliezer's family has so traumatized Eliezer that he is dehumanized, unable to function as a normal human being. He says of himself, "My real self . . . stayed there . . .

¹⁸ The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. xiii.

my present self . . . [has] nothing in common with the other one, the real one. I . . . [am] like the skin shed by a snake" (The Accident, p. 52). To be "like the skin shed by a snake" is to be a "corpse," which, in turn, is to be a "monster" (The Accident, p. 59), according to Eliezer; the terms are analogous. The episode marks the nadir of Eliezer's experience. Neither a corpse nor the skin shed by a snake has life, and a monster has only deformed life. On the one hand, Eliezer cannot bear to see his deformity reflected in the mirror; on the other, he cannot help himself. His physical and psychic wounds have rendered him powerless.

At this point the window imagery changes, and the story turns. The agents of change who mediate healing to Eliezer are his doctor, Paul Russel; his lover, Kathleen; and his friend, Gyula. As the pace of the story quickens, the window image takes on added importance and becomes more complex.

From his hospital bed Eliezer looks out the window. "I was facing the window," he says, "and could see the East River from my bed. A small boat was going by: a grayish spot on a blue background. A mirage" (The Accident, p. 59). Eliezer compares himself to the river: "The river is like me: it hardly moves" (The Accident, p. 60). The doctor comments, "You have a beautiful view," (The Accident, p. 60).

He agrees that Eliezer is like the river: "It is calm only on the surface. Go beneath the surface, you'll see how restless it is. . . . Just like you, as a matter of fact" (The Accident, p. 60). Although they agree that Eliezer is like the river, they do not see the river in the same way. For the doctor, the river is beautiful. For Eliezer, the beauty of the river is a mirage. His true feeling is expressed in these words: "Rivers flow toward the sea, which is never full. Men are swallowed up by death which is never satiated" (The Accident, p. 61). Paul Russel does not deny the truth in Eliezer's statement. In fact, he agrees with Eliezer when he says, "We have the same enemy and it has only one name: Death" (The Accident, p. 72). The doctor's emphasis, however, is on life, as he tells Eliezer:

What fascinates me in man is his capacity for living. . . . If you had ever held a man's life in the palm of your hand, you too would come to prefer the immediate to the future, the concrete to the ideal, and life to the problems it brings with it. (The Accident, p. 72)

The differing views of the river reflect precisely the differing views of life in general, and of Eliezer's life in particular, that the two men hold. It is clear at this point that Wiesel presents the river as analogous to Eliezer; looking out the window on the beauty of the river opens up an expanded vision of the possibilities for beauty

in Eliezer's life. But it is beauty that is to be apprehended only in the present moment, for it is always passing by. Thus, when Paul Russel looks out and sees the beauty of the river, his vision is consonant with his view of life in general and with the possibilities life holds for Eliezer. When Eliezer looks at the river and sees it as only an illusion, with its underlying theme as a movement toward death, his vision is also consonant both with his view of life in general and with that of his own life in particular. Eliezer sums up the doctor's attitude:

Each prey torn away from death made him as happy as if he had won a universal victory.

His victory tasted like wine. He couldn't stand still. To split up his happiness he would have liked to be simultaneously himself and someone else: witness and hero. He wanted to sing, and to hear himself singing, to dance and to see himself dancing, to climb to the highest mountain and to shout, to scream with all his strength, "I won! I conquered Death!" (The Accident, p. 70)

Such a concept of life is entirely new to Eliezer. "The joy of saving a human life, I thought. I have never experienced it. I didn't even know it existed" (The Accident, p. 71). These glimpses of the doctor's raison d'etre provide new insights into life for Eliezer.

For his part, Paul Russel is aware that his patient is a troubled man and probes for ways to effect a healing of his psychic wounds. "What are you afraid of?" he asks

Eliezer, and turns to look out the window on the river.

"You have a beautiful view," he says (The Accident, p. 60).

In his next visit, he stands for a moment at the window before turning to Eliezer and forcing the problem into the open:

Why don't you care about living? . . . Don't deny it. I know. . . . Nobody told me. But I know it anyway. I guessed. During the operation. You never helped me. Not once. You abandoned me. I had to wage the fight alone, all alone. Worse. You were on the other side, against me, on the side of the enemy. . . . Why don't you want to live? Why? (The Accident, p. 73)

The question stuns Eliezer: "For a moment everything shook," he says. "Even the light flickered and changed color. It was white, red, black. The blood was beating in my temples. My head was no longer my own" (The Accident, p. 73). The powerful emotional reaction triggered by the doctor's questions forces Eliezer to face himself--even without a mirror. The confrontation between the two men represents their opposing viewpoints of life. Eliezer comments:

We . . . [are] so different, so far from each other. His fingers . . . [touch] life. Mine death . . . without partitions. Life, death, each as bare, as true as the other. The problem . . . [goes] beyond us. It . . . [is] an invisible sphere, on a faraway screen, between two powers for whom we . . . [are] only ambassadors. (The Accident, p. 77)

The passage confirms that Eliezer continues to see himself as an ambassador of death, even as he recognizes that the doctor is an ambassador of life.

In each of the two confrontations with Eliezer, Dr. Russel appeals to the window as though inviting Eliezer to turn his thoughts to the window and to embrace his point of view "to prefer the immediate to the future" (The Accident, p. 72). When Kathleen comes to visit, she too focuses attention on the window: "What a beautiful view! Look, the river!" (The Accident, p. 63). Her remarks are a further invitation to Eliezer to focus on the beauty of the river, and, in effect, to accept life in the present moment.

The final window images occur in the portrait scene on Eliezer's last day in the hospital. His friend Gyula has been working on Eliezer's portrait throughout his ten-week hospital stay. On this last day he comes in, stands "like a victorious general at the foot of my bed, between the river and me" as Eliezer says, announces that the portrait is finished, and tells Eliezer, "Now you can die" (The Accident, p. 123). Abrams says that a picture is "the nearest thing to a mirror-image of the external world."¹⁹ Gyula's painting reflects Eliezer as he is at the moment and incorporates elements of his past as well. When Eliezer

¹⁹ Abrams, p. 50.

looks at the portrait, he truly confronts himself. He describes his reaction to the painting in these words:

My heart was beating violently. I was there, facing me. My whole past was there, facing me. It was a painting in which black, interspersed with a few red spots, dominated. The sky was a thick black. The sun, a dark gray. My eyes were a beating red, like Soutine's. They belonged to a man who had seen God commit the most unforgivable crime: to kill without reason. (The Accident, p. 123)

While Eliezer contemplates the portrait, Gyula goes to the window and watches "the playful waves of the East River moving elegantly toward their date with infinity" (The Accident, p. 123). The portrait, a further modulation of the window image, depicts Eliezer's past, giving him an opportunity to see it pictured before him. Eliezer now knows that his friend has intuited the truth about the accident and drawn it into the portrait. He could have avoided it had he wished. The dead past is present, too. Eliezer looks into the face and eyes of a man--his own: night is still with him. All that the past holds is contained in the portrait that is at this moment juxtaposed with the open window with "the playful waves of the East River moving elegantly toward their date with infinity." Eliezer sees, in effect, at one and the same time, a window on the past and a window on the future and recognizes that he must choose between them. "I would choose," he says,

"the living or the dead": Kathleen or grandmother with her black shawl (The Accident, p. 124).

Gyula encourages a choice for the living. "Kathleen is alive. I am alive. You must think of us" (The Accident, p. 125). As Eliezer continues to stare at the portrait, Gyula continues: "She loves you. . . . You can lean on Kathleen. She'll be happy if you lean on her. Receiving is a superior form of generosity. Make her happy. A little happiness justifies the effort of a whole life" (The Accident, p. 127).

Eliezer makes his choice to live and to give life as he had once chosen to die and to give death. "Kathleen will be happy," he affirms (The Accident, p. 126). He will lean on her and accept her help just as he had earlier shared his strength with her. However, even in the moment of decision Eliezer continues to stare at the portrait, and Gyula, interpreting this as ambiguity on Eliezer's part, seizes the portrait and sets fire to it, turning it slowly in his hands so that it is entirely consumed. The moment is a private holocaust for Eliezer. In one sense, he is symbolically reunited with his family, sharing their experience so that his sense of guilt at his own survival is purged. In another sense, the liberation of Eliezer through the burning of the portrait is analogous to what Frye calls "the removal of enchantment, the demonic principle" that

enforces "a mechanical pattern of behaviour," a common device in "ascent themes." It is "the casting off of whatever conceals or frustrates" the freedom of the hero.²⁰ In still another sense, the burning portrait becomes the symbol of a sacrificed scapegoat for the real Eliezer, taking with it his past and setting him free from those aspects of his personal history that he considers shameful. It is a liberating moment--only the ashes of his past remain. "I couldn't hold back my tears," he says. "I cried a long time after Gyula closed the door behind him" (The Accident, p. 127). Even so, "tears, as it is written, open all doors" (The Accident, p. 40). The night has passed; the symbol of night--looking into the face and eyes of a man as he looks in the window--has been destroyed. At last, nothing and no one block Eliezer's view out the window. As he says, "Paradise is when nothing comes between the eye and the tree" (The Accident, p. 60).

From beginning to end, the window symbol accurately depicts Eliezer's story whether he is looking out the window himself and gains a truthful view of reality, whether the window merely reflects what is and what is past, limiting or distorting his vision, or whether it is someone other than Eliezer who sees the expanded vision. All are

²⁰ Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 140.

faithfully depicted in the window symbols. Wiesel has enhanced the complexity of his work by incorporating at each threshold of Eliezer's mythic passage an appropriate window image.

In addition to the recurrent metaphors and symbols that he uses throughout the trilogy, Wiesel makes use of episodic images that relate to the hierarchic structure of the recurrent elements. The most significant cluster of episodic images occurs in Night. In presenting these images, Wiesel employs the device of reversal, which Embler says is "a method of philosophical inquiry into the measure of difference between the normal and the abnormal, the human and inhuman, reason and unreason."²¹ In his handling of the technique of reversal, Wiesel dramatizes the great gulf between "human and inhuman, reason and unreason" as it existed for prisoners in the concentration camps. Wiesel himself has noted certain ironic parallels between aspects of Eliezer's experiences in Night and that of the Hebrew nation in the Exodus from Egypt as recorded in the Old Testament.²² A close reading of the text reveals key episodes from the Exodus recreated in Night as episodes of ironic reversal, three of which are considered here: God's

²¹ Embler, p. 97.

²² Harry James Cargas, ed., Harry James Cargas in Conversation With Elie Wiesel (Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 56.

protective presence in the pillar of fire by night, the arrival at the Red Sea, and the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai.

In the historic Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, the symbol of God's presence was an overshadowing cloud by day and a protective pillar of fire by night. The narrator records the event in these words:

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them in the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light, to go by day and night. He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.²³

Eliezer encounters the ironic reversal of this symbol on the night he arrives at Auschwitz. He describes the scene:

Suddenly we heard terrible screams:

"Jews, look! Look through the window! Flames! Look!"

And as the train stopped, we saw . . . that the flames were gushing out of a tall chimney into the black sky. . . .

We looked at the flames in the darkness. There was an abominable odor floating in the air. Suddenly, our doors opened. . . .

We jumped out. . . . In front of us flames. In the air the smell of burning flesh. It must have been about midnight. (Night, p. 38)

²³ Exodus 13:21, 22, Holy Bible, King James Version (New York: American Bible Society, n.d.), p. 60.

In Night the pillar of fire of the Exodus has become a chimney belching forth flames. The symbolic significance is reversed. Instead of indicating God's comforting presence, the symbol becomes objectified as evidence of the abandonment by both God and man of the Jews to their fate as the flames devour the bodies of fellow Jews.

The second episode is a reversal of the Red Sea experience recorded in Exodus 14 where God miraculously delivered the Jewish people from the Pharaoh and the Egyptian army, who were themselves destroyed in the sea. In Wiesel's recreation, the Red Sea is reduced to a flaming ditch. Eliezer describes the scene:

Not far from us, flames were leaping up from a ditch, gigantic flames. They were burning something. A lorry drew up at the pit and delivered its load--little children. Babies! Yes, I saw it--saw it with my own eyes . . . those children in the flames. . . . A little farther on was another and larger ditch for adults. (Night, p. 42)

The reversal in this episode lies in the fact that it is not the enemies of the Jewish people who are destroyed in the Red Sea; it is the children of the Jewish people themselves who are destroyed in a red ditch.

The third episode follows immediately. It concerns the rules for survival in the forced labor camp at Auschwitz. A speech is given by an SS officer to the surviving members of the newly arrived convoy. The episode

itself stands in ironic contrast to the commandments given by Moses to the Jewish people after their departure from Egypt, On that occasion Moses stood before the people with his face shining with the glory of God (Exodus 34:30); on this occasion the SS officer stands before the prisoners with "the odor of the Angel of Death" with "crime inscribed upon his brow" (Night, pp. 48, 49). Here are his remarks:

Remember this. . . . Remember it forever.
 Engrave it into your minds. You are at
 Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is not a convalescent
 home. It is a concentration camp. Here, you
 have got to work. If not, you will go straight
 to the furnace. To the crematory--the choice
 is in your hands. (Night, p. 49)

But the speech is noteworthy, however, not only for its symbolic reversal of the commandments episode and for its content, but also for its structure. The structure of the SS officer's speech becomes clearer when it is recast:

Remember this,	1
Remember it forever,	2
Engrave it in your minds.	3
You are at Auschwitz	4
And Auschwitz is not a convalescent home.	5
It's a concentration camp.	6
Here, you have got to work.	7
If not, you will go straight to the furnace.	8
To the crematory.	9
Work or the crematory--the choice	10
is in your hands.	11

An analysis of the structure reveals that the speech is an ironic reversal of Hebrew poetry, specifically, the Hebrew lament. The Hebrew lament incorporates, among others, the following elements: (1) the invocation (or request for attention); (2) the lamentation (or statement of the painful situation); (3) the petition (or the response the speaker desires); and (4) the statement of confidence that his petition will be granted.²⁴ The chief organizing principle of Hebrew poetry is parallel structure. Alton C. Capps says that Hebrew verse "was not made primarily by rhythm . . . but by the symmetry or balance of clauses in a verse or stanza. This resemblance or correspondence [is] commonly called parallelism."²⁵

A close reading discloses the various kinds of parallel structure incorporated into the utterance. Line one introduces the utterance, "Remember this." Line two is a "climactic parallelism"; it repeats line one and adds to it:²⁶ "Remember it forever." Line three is a "synonymous parallelism"; it repeats the thought in different

²⁴ Leland Ryken, The Literature of the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 139.

²⁵ The Bible as Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 157.

²⁶ Ryken, p. 122.

words:²⁷ "Engrave it in your minds." The first stanza, a triplet, is a direct reversal of the invocation; instead of requesting attention, it demands attention. Line four states the painful situation, "You are at Auschwitz," followed in line five by an "antithetical parallelism";²⁸ it expresses a negative aspect of the previous line: "And Auschwitz is not a convalescent home." Line six is also an antithetical parallelism since it introduces a contrast to line five: "It's a concentration camp." This triplet stands as a reversal of the complaint of the painful situation in the traditional Hebrew lament.

Line seven begins the triplet of reversal of the petition or supplication in the lament. Instead of a petition the officer orders the prisoners to work: "Here, you have got to work." Thus, stanza three declares the required response, with line nine expressing the thought of line eight in different terms, another use of synonymous parallelism:

If not, you will go straight to the furnace.
To the crematory.

The concluding couplet provides an example of "synthetic parallelism"; the thought of the first line of the couplet

²⁷ Ryken, p. 122.

²⁸ Ryken, p. 122.

is continued and completed on the second line:²⁹

Work or the crematory--the choice
is in your hands.

The concluding couplet is a reversal of the statement of confidence in the Hebrew lament.

This intricate poem lies hidden in the SS officer's address. The punctuation and capitalization, the parallel form of the utterance, and the stanzaic structure confirm its poetic form and essence. The speech stands as an irony of ironies; at one and the same time it is both dramatic irony and situational irony. In addition, it is a brilliant example of Wiesel's mastery of the technique of reversal. Embler says that "through the use of reversal a dramatic tension is created . . . with the accent on the unexpected as revelation of new truth."³⁰ Through his use of reversal, Wiesel is able to dramatize the horror of concentration camp life as its "new truth" is juxtaposed against some of the most revered episodes in Jewish history.

An analysis of metaphors and symbols reveals the rich texture of Wiesel's art that make possible a second level of interpretation of the trilogy, each level enriching and reinforcing the other. The chapter has focused on the

²⁹ Ryken, p. 122.

³⁰ Embler, p. 96.

major imagery that Wiesel uses to develop his major themes. His skillful modulation of the prison image invites the reader to share his vision of Jewish suffering, while his hospital imagery underscores his belief in the healing process that makes hope possible. Wiesel's window symbolism demonstrates his mastery of the literary techniques he employs to illuminate his vision of the contemporary Jewish experience. Finally, his episodic symbols dramatize his skill in the techniques of the absurd. The perfect fusion of content and technique distinguishes the trilogy as a major artistic achievement.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to explore Elie Wiesel's early novels--Night, Dawn, and The Accident--in order to discover the means the author employs to give enduring literary significance to his art. The study has established the archetypal and metaphoric qualities of Wiesel's trilogy. In his work he expresses his insights into the Jewish experience of the mid-twentieth century through the character of his hero, Eliezer. The story of Eliezer belongs to a great tradition from which it draws its method and mode of development and to which it contributes enriched meaning. "To work within a given tradition and adopt its devices is perfectly compatible with emotional power and artistic value," according to René Wellek and Austin Warren.¹ Wiesel has taken the archetypal mythic passage from adolescence to maturity and has placed upon it his "signature," which Leslie Fiedler defines as

¹ Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956), p. 259.

"the sum total of the individuating factors" of a given work.² Thus, Wiesel has created in Eliezer a character who brings to the body of Western literature his unique story of the contemporary Jewish experience.

The story of Eliezer is the story of the one emerging from the many. Weller Embler calls the story of "the one" the principal metaphor of Western literature: "The guiding, prevailing, metaphor of the western tradition centers upon the one, the one who is like the many, but different."³ In Night, Eliezer is an anonymous number, one of six million hapless prisoners. In Dawn, he is one of a hundred or so terrorists. In The Accident, all of the action focuses on him as he discovers his individual identity and emerges as a fully realized human being with friends who care for him as a person. "And that is the purpose of art," says Embler, "to tell how it is with separate human beings."⁴ From the story of the one emerges the universality of the struggle for maturity in the contemporary world. Cleanth Brooks comments that "the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and

² "Archetype and Signature: The Relationship of Poet and Poem," The Sewanee Review (Spring 1952), n. pag.; rpt. Literature in Critical Perspectives: An Anthology, ed. Walter K. Gordon (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968) p. 519.

³ Metaphor and Meaning (DeLand, Fla.: Everett-Edwards, Inc., 1966), p. 143.

⁴ Embler, p. 40.

the particular."⁵ Thus, in the concrete experiences of Eliezer, Wiesel dramatizes the universal struggle of men for maturity. In Night he portrays the plight of the victim-hero; in Dawn he shows us the despair of the activist-hero; and in The Accident he dramatizes the hero's successful struggle for transcendence over despair and irrationality.

The present study confirms the unity of Wiesel's trilogy. Wiesel addresses the problem of unity, in the first instance, by creating a unified structure. He presents his hero moving from innocence to experience in the pattern of the archetypal monomyth. The trilogy is further unified by Wiesel's use of metaphors and symbols common to each work: the prison, the hospital, and the window. In addition, Wiesel achieves unity by a prevailing somberness of tone throughout. The somber tone reflects the tragic nature of the subject matter and the suffering of the hero. The unity of the trilogy is further reinforced by a uniform point of view. Eliezer tells his own story throughout. It is through Eliezer's consciousness that the reader experiences the action.

⁵ "The Formalist Critics," The Kenyon Review, XIII (Winter 1951), 72-81; rpt. Literature in Critical Perspectives, p. 167.

The purpose of Wiesel's art is threefold. He dramatizes in his trilogy the experience of Auschwitz so that the world will not forget what happened there. Curt Leviant comments that "Elie Wiesel has realized the terror of the holocaust and its equally painful aftereffects by poeticizing autobiography via symbol, legend, and philosophical speculation."⁶ It is a measure of Wiesel's genius that he has transmuted painful personal history into literature, using the trilogy as the means to portray the universal significance of his own experience. In doing so, he has wedded experience to myth. Further, Wiesel seeks in his art to give direction to the future, a future that must be built on interdependence and the mutual respect of human beings for one another. Wiesel at one time believed that a person had to be totally alone to find himself, a point of view which he no longer holds. He now believes that "the other one is essential, indispensable."⁷ Wiesel dramatizes this aspect of his philosophy by portraying the mutual dependence of Kathleen and Eliezer on one another at the close of the trilogy. By reintegrating his hero with society, Wiesel moves away from pain toward joy and

⁶ "Elie Wiesel: A Soul on Fire," rev. of A Beggar in Jerusalem, by Elie Wiesel, Saturday Review, 31 January 1970, p. 25.

⁷ Harry James Cargas, ed., Harry James Cargas in Conversation With Elie Wiesel (Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 102.

away from tragedy toward romance. Thus, Wiesel concludes the trilogy on a positive note. Cargas sums up Wiesel's view of the future in these words: "Man must look into himself to find the faith and the hope which will not only sustain him but which will require him to sanctify rather than destroy the world in which he lives."⁸

Northrop Frye says that "the moment we go from the individual work of art to the sense of the total form of the art, the art becomes no longer an object of aesthetic contemplation but an ethical instrument, participating in the work of civilization."⁹ As "an ethical instrument, participating in the work of civilization," the story of Eliezer becomes a part of our literary heritage, that "whole system of works which is, with the accretion of new ones, constantly changing its relationships."¹⁰ Wiesel's work, forged in the Holocaust, is a literature of life-choosing," says John K. Roth.¹¹ The trilogy develops meaning that is, finally, more than the sum of the literary

⁸ Conversation, p. 117.

⁹ Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 349.

¹⁰ Wellek and Warren, p. 255.

¹¹ A Consuming Fire: Encounters With Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), p. 57.

devices Wiesel employs; thus he achieves an artistic creation akin to all that came before it, while at the same time it is unique unto itself.

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