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From Generation to Generation: Or, Elie Wiesel's Oral and Written Tradition

That the novelist can achieve a oneness with his diverse public by the spoken word, as well as the written, seems obvious. Ever since the mid-nineteenth century, at least, many leading novelists, convinced that popularity did not necessarily mean artistic inferiority, appeared regularly on the platform and stage to the delight of their ever increasing audiences and the pleasures of their own monetary rewards. "I was thinking the other day," Dickens, the most popular reader of his day, once wrote to John Forster, his intimate adviser and later official biographer, "that in these days of lecturings and readings, a great deal of money might possibly be made by one's having Readings of one's own books. It would be an *odd* thing. I think it would take immensely."

And the "take" was, indeed, immense. Dickens, for instance, found this enterprise so popular that, like Thackeray and Wilkie Collins, he decided to make public reading a secondary career. In fact, we know that from 1858 to his death in 1870, Dickens, whose performances exceeded all his contemporaries, gave some 423 readings in England and America which brought him added fame and much profit. He is reported to have earned the munificent sum of 45,000 pounds, "a great deal of money" then, as now, and, certainly, beyond his greatest expectations.

And the effect on his audience was electric. From the moment he began to read, we are told, Dickens "held his audience under a spell. The rapport between platform and floor was such that the novelist himself could not always master his own emotions. And from this sympathetic understanding he derived many of the sudden inspirations which kept his readings dynamic." So dynamic were these appearances that Dickens himself derived immense enjoyment from them, as he abundantly recorded in his letters. After one such reading, he wrote of his audience that they "lost nothing, misinterpreted nothing, followed everything closely, laughed and cried . . . and animated me to that extent that I felt as if they were all bodily going up into the clouds together."

By this immediate contact with his public, Dickens seems to have satisfied a craving which love and friendship alone could not fill, a craving which the uninitiated to stage presence first feel when their spoken word animates an audience

to laugh, cry, sob, howl, twist, turn and, finally, applaud vociferously. It is, simply, a craving for power. Early in his career, Dickens appreciated the significance of such power. Writing home to his wife Kate, he describes the effect one of his readings of *The Chimes,* had on William Macready, the distinguished Shakespearean actor: "If you had seen him last night undisguisedly sobbing and crying on the sofa as I read, you would have felt, as I did, what a thing it is to have power." And to the artist who normally creates his works in the utter loneliness of his study or studio, such power, when used effectively on an audience, is intoxicating. The power of the word, apparently, can, at times, be more dazzling on the public platform than on the written page.

Of even greater significance, however, is the fact that these readings stamped on the minds of thousands an impression of the writer's personality which, at least in Dickens's case, seemed warmhearted in indignation, sorrow, joviality and, always sincere. In fact, when Dickens was first trying to decide whether it would be proper for him to earn money as a reader in public, his sole concern, he told Forster, was what would be the effect of such action "on that particular relation (personally affectionate and like no other man's) which subsists between me and the public," a public, incidentally, that included, at Dickens's specific request, the poor as well as the rich. And by constantly developing that "particular relation," Dickens gave his audience a pleasurable sense of being on speaking terms with him. And each appearance increased that pleasure to a point where, at the height of his fame, he gave readings, "at least three days a week, and sometimes as often as six days, in over forty towns and in some more than once." Because he was able to preserve the "delicate balance" between writer and public, each reading became a triumph or, better, a piece of art.

II

Developing this art of reading, Dickens anticipated, among others in his own times, George Bernard Shaw. That Shaw was forever espousing causes, such as Fabianism, is well known to anyone acquainted with his polychromic life. Agitated by the ills besetting man, he would lash out at the gross stupidities of government and even grosser stupidities of the governed. And Trafalgar Square was the favorite ground for his verbal duels. He liked the open air not only because the ventilation was good but also, he argued, because "you cannot have an unwilling audience." And the audiences were, indeed, always willingly arriving in droves to enjoy his caustic wit.

If popular and effective as a polemicist, Shaw was even more so as a reader of his own plays. Having finished a play, for instance, he would read it not to a vast public to be sure, but, rather, to a selected group of friends first and next to the company engaged to perform it. This closed circle of listeners, however, did not diminish the effectiveness of his readings; they

were always extraordinary vivid. As Hesketh Pearson recounts in his life of Shaw:

> He had an unerring dramatic sense; each character was carefully differentiated and he could maintain the voice peculiar to each right up to the end of the play without the least suggestion of strain; he was never monotonous; he used no gestures, getting his effects solely by the tempo and modulation of his voice; and he never seemed to strike a false note, his intonations exactly expressing the mood and meaning of the speaker. Such was the effect of his reading that it would have made a bad play appear good; but it disheartened the more modest actors, who knew they could never play their parts as well as he had read them.

If Dickens, as a reader, anticipated Shaw, he may have also set the style for his more immediate contemporary and one of America's most celebrated lecturers and readers: Mark Twain. Like Dickens, debts and sundry other financial considerations first motivated him to mount the stage to give his slow, drawling and humorous talks that were to make him famous. Though he arrived at his first lecture in a San Francisco theater, in the mid 1860's, miserable and scared, his terror ebbed away at the moment he came on stage. Because of a natural ability to use this "power" over an audience, the lineaments of Mark Twain as popular lecturer soon emerged. He was greeted everywhere—St. Paul, Butte, Winnipeg, Portland, Olympia, Tacoma, Seattle, Victoria, to name but a few of the stops in his cross-country tours—by full houses, packed to the roof, spinning yarns and winning the applause of laughter-choked audiences calling and recalling for more. In his interesting biography, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain,* Justin Kaplan best defines the essence of this "power" when he tells us that Twain was

> a daring manipulator of audience psychology and values, outrageous enough to hoax, surprise, and disorient, but careful not to offend; a humorist and entertainer with moral and educational zeal to assuage a puritan conscience; a printer of word pictures who makes fun of the effect he creates, thereby both gratifying his audience's hunger for 'literature' and reassuring them that he is a litterateur, that fancy talk and three-dollar words are just as alien to him as to any storekeeper or clerk. Publicly, he is not a bohemian. He is traveled and worldly, but he has an air of surprised innocence, and he manages to be a man and a boy at the same time. The vices he confesses to — laziness, petty dishonesty, lying when tempted, swearing when provoked — are, by the business-success values which most of his audience accepts, capital sins in a man. But he juggies these vices into seeming merely the bad habits of a boy playing hooky and fibbing to his mother. His audience likes him for this; in a boy such rejections of authority are taken for signs of independence and growing manliness.

Though the tradition of the writer turning, for whatever personal reasons, to the stage is now an accepted fact across the country, the "sign of independence" of former times is no longer prevalent. The writer in our time, because he must be readily available to the many forums seeking his presence, is now "controlled" by a multitude of agencies, including impressarios, and

managers, and theater owners, and community centers. Highly profitable as a commodity, he is being "merchandized" everywhere. Like so much else in our society, he has become institutionalized. This is not to say, of course, that his lectures and readings are, therefore, less interesting or exciting. On the contrary, because he is no longer plagued, like Dickens or Twain, with a myriad of incidental arrangements, he can more readily concentrate on his texts. But, as part of an institution or "regulating system," he no longer has, alas, some of that "air of surprised innocence."

Of all the institutions promoting the appearance of these artists, the most prestigious, certainly since the brief appointment of John Malcolm Brinnin to its directorship after World War II, is, of course, the "Poetry Center" at New York's "92nd Street Y." On its stage have trooped the most illustrious of contemporary writers. Among the poets, to name but a few, were: W. H. Auden, Padraic Colum, T. S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg, Carl Sandburg and Dylan Thomas; among the novelists: S. Y. Agnon, Saul Bellow, Truman Capote, Herbert Gold, Bernard Malamud, I. B. Singer and William Styron; among the playwrights: Edward Albee, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams; among the critics: David Daiches, Moses Hadas, Gilbert Highet, I. A. Richards, Lionel Trilling, and Edmund Wilson. By presenting their seasonal "recitals," these famous writers, as well as those not so famous, attempted, in some measure, to refine the sensibilities of American audiences.

To be sure, not all of these writers left the same lasting impression on these audiences. Some were, obviously, more exciting than others. On the whole, though, the poets among them read best, perhaps because their unique choice of words lends itself to better oral interpretation. In any event, it is generally agreed that, of the four hundred or so writers and artists who have appeared through the years at the "Poetry Center," the most impressive, by common consent, was the late Dylan Thomas. In fact, Mr. Brinnin first accepted the directorship of the Center, he tells us, "with one thought foremost in mind: at last I could myself invite Dylan Thomas to come to America." Invited, Thomas came in 1950 and, subsequently, twice more, until his tragic death in 1953.

These eventful visits, described in intimate detail by Mr. Brinnin in his hauntingly moving *Dylan Thomas in America,* set a standard of reading excellence that few, if any, others could attain. So successful were his initial readings that Thomas, like Dickens, found himself swamped with invitations to appear everywhere. And during his three visits, he actually appeared in over a hundred readings at colleges, universities and institutes across the entire United States and Canada. Of his immediate success, Brinnin writes:

> Some of his listeners were moved by the almost sacred sense of his approach to language; some by the bravado of a modern poet whose themes dealt directly and unapolo-

> getically with birth and death and the presence of God; some were entertained merely by the plangent virtuosity of an actor with a great voice. In every case, the response was one of delight. Ovations greeting him as he came on and as he went off were tremendous . . .

Clearly, then, the institution of artists and critics appearing on stage before eager and sympathetic audiences has become, far more than even Dickens's time, a salient aspect of our cultural scene. Unfortunately, however, because so many community centers, temples, men's clubs, and sisterhoods now sponsor "adult institutes" at which at least one "famous author" must always appear lest the "season of activities" be termed a failure, such readings have become, though highly remunerative, terribly routine. So smutted have some of them, indeed, become that one institution actually offered last season a "ten week course" in the "Technique of Public Reading for Poets" which included, among other things, "work in voice production, the nuances of delivery, and the shaping of public recital." However shapeless some of these public recitals are, it is, nevertheless, true that, whenever a truly significant artist like, say, Dylan Thomas, appears, either at the "Y" or on some other stage, the audience is moved by his "almost sacred" approach to the language of his soul.

III

Another such artist is Elie Wiesel. Because he, too, reveals his "almost sacred" approach to the language of his soul, his appearances at the "Poetry Center" have attracted huge audiences. And even in "these days of lecturings and readings," he easily manages to fill halls across the entire country with people seeking, especially after each of his newest publications, evenings of animated pleasure.

So popular, in fact, are his appearances that, for the past four years, the B'nai B'rith Education Department has sponsored him in an individual series of four lectures each Fall season at the Kaufman auditorium of the "Y." This series has become New York's latest "happening." It is, at least in season, the talk of the town. And each session, well publicized in the mass media, in extensive mailings and, above all, by word of mouth, draws a cross-section of New York's Jewry.

And what a strange audience! It is an admixture of people of whom, one notices immediately, youth predominates over age, the worldly over the pious, the female over the male, and, without the "perhaps," the receptive over the unreceptive. One sees there, for example, the middle-aged ladies who troop religiously from lecture hall to lecture hall "to adore" the famous and near-famous; young Yeshiva students of "liberal" persuasion and a sprinkling of some from Brooklyn's "rightist camps" who, unbeknown to their masters, skip their fixed Thursday evening study sessions to come clandestinely to the "Y"; rabbis, preachers and teachers seeking material for their next pulpit discourse; satisfied businessmen in striped shirts and wide

ties; young girls in mod coats and others in jeans, sweaters, sandals, jackets and wide earrings; a founder of the James Joyce Society; and, a few rows of family, friends, collaborators, and well-wishers.

As this audience files excitedly into the auditorium, each one casually eyeing "the house" for familiar faces and with an intent not only to see but to be seen, the standees wait nervously to learn who among the subscribers will not show up so that they might, during the speaker's prearranged pause, slide into some unoccupied seat. Amid the animated discussion of the lucky seatholders, one senses the anticipation that usually precedes the appearance of any star.

The hour of eight strikes. Suddenly, the lights dim and a spotlight reveals a barren stage, an ornate table and chair, and a microphone. Silence. Mr. Wiesel enters, to a loud burst of applause. He approaches the table with a slightly nervous gait and runs his fingers through his soft, thinning strands of hair, pushing them ever so slightly over his forehead. He pauses for a second to look at the packed house as a feint smile curls the corner of his lips. That smile would seem to reveal the feeling which might possibly overcome every writer turned lecturer — the feeling, in Dickens's words, of "what it is to have power." And what pleasure that power must bring to a master story-teller who, seated facing the microphone, will reveal to a hushed and eager audience his Word about this year's series: Cain and Abel, Rebbi Akiba, Three Hassidic Masters, and "The Summing Up" or, *One Generation After.** Gently, Mr. Wiesel opens his notebook and, in dulcet tones of English with traces of Yiddish, French and Hungarian accents, begins to unravel his encounter with the past. As in all his writings, the sentences are short and clipped. Though glancing frequently at his text, he seems to know it well; so well, in fact, that the listener is tempted to conclude that, like Dickens, he must "work every day for two or three hours on [his] readings." In any event, the result is dynamic and, after each lecture, he is greeted with a tremendous ovation. The audience is more than pleased; it is ecstatic. The Word is, indeed, powerful.

To record all the words spoken in the four lectures would, obviously, be impossible. Impressions alone remain. And what is, among other things, impressive are not the well known Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic and Hassidic texts quoted, but rather the freshness and ingenuity with which he approaches all this material. In the delicate hands of the artist, the texts are woven into a pattern of meaning at once new and radical. And yet, any meaningful discussion, however cursory, of what he said, especially in the last session, is hardly possible without first recognizing the "crisis situation" out of which all that Mr. Wiesel writes and speaks stems.

It all begins with his first work,

* *One Generation After,* by Elie Wiesel. (New York: Random House, 1970.) 198 pp.

the autobiographical *Night.* In it, Mr. Wiesel tells the story of how he was deported with his family from his Hungarian-Jewish village when he was a child of twelve, how his mother and sister were metamorphosed into the smoke above the crematoria, how he and his father suffered through Auschwitz, and forced winter marches until finally, just before liberation, his father died.

And suddenly, witnessing the "great injustice" in the world, he finds that God, for him, is suddenly "dead." "Never," he writes, "shall I forget those flames which consumed my Faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never." Or, like the rabbi from a little town in Poland whom he met in the camps, the youngster concluded that "it's the end. God is no longer with us." Or, watching the hanging of a child with the sad face of an angel, he answered someone behind him who cried: "Where is God? — "Where? Here He is — He has been hanged here, on these gallows."

If God "expired" on the gallows, if at the core of faith there remains an abiding "crisis of faith," a searing dissatisfaction with a God of Mercy who mercilessly allows evil to rage rampantly everywhere, then much of what he said in this series can be readily understood. In his first discourse, Mr. Wiesel presents the case of Cain, in his dialogue with God, as not only the accused but also as the accuser. Why, argues Cain, did God permit murder in His world? If he is to be his brother's keeper, so is God. Cain alone may not be responsible for this senseless killing; God shares some of this responsibility. If murder will out, then more than just the killer must be brought to justice.

And if justice is to be served, then the same anxious conclusion must be reached concerning Rebbi Akiba's death. That this martyr, father of Rabbinic Judaism, who, at the giving of the Law at Sinai captured, according to the Midrash, the attention and admiration of both God and Moses for his acuity as teacher and leader, should, for the beliefs he espoused, suffer an unspeakable death leaves more unanswered questions in its wake than even the believer is willing to admit. For, however admittedly unshakable R. Akiba's faith actually was, Mr. Wiesel still wonders aloud whether, at his gruesome end, this saint might not have suffered, in his silence, the pangs of doubt. Quoting most of the known Aggadic texts about R. Akiba, the artist in Mr. Wiesel fashions a portrait that is far from bland or one dimensional. Instead, he presents a hero who is racked by "violent contraries," the worst being faith and doubt. And in the end, as his flesh falls, something within may have revolted against his heinous death. "Is this the law? And this, its reward?" Or, "where is the divine Mercy? Where is God?" These and other

thoughts, our novelist claims, might have crossed his mind. But, we shall never know.

Doubts, if of a decidedly different nature, also consumed the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Hassidic Masters — Rebbe Simcha Bunim of Parshischa, The "Holy Jew," and Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk as they began to question the life-style of their own Master, the "Seer of Lublin." Venerated for his learning, piety and wisdom, the "Seer" gradually assumed, at least in the adoring eyes of the uncontrolled masses of Polish Jewry who streamed endlessly into his "court," a "divine" posture. And what disturbed his three discerning disciples were not the "wonders" their Master performed but that he was allowing, often unwittingly, ignorance to be synonymous with virtue. To them, this was intolerable. There are, they believed, good men among the learned — men whose hearts are uncorrupted by their brains. To boast of ignorance as if it guaranteed illumination would never again be tolerated by these three disciples. Noisy praying, ablutions, white Sabbath robes were only external signs of a unique life style but must never be allowed to be anything more than externals, lest they become — and, in many instances actually were — symbols of rigidity and death. The three of them seriously questioned the relation of these symbols to the *desideratum* of Hassidism—"inwardness."

And they paid a price for their "apostasy." The three of them were, at least at the beginning of their careers as leaders of their own separate dynasties, hounded, harassed, and hassled. But they stood their ground. For, as Mr. Wiesel intimated, had they not doubted but accepted blindly what to them were the worsening conditions of their "movement," advanced, however unconsciously, by the "Seer," Hassidism might have become totally devoid of content and meaning and, eventually, its relevance.

In point of fact, Mr. Wiesel's correct reasoning may have been anticipated, if in a slightly different context, by Zangwill who, in his essay "The Master of the Name" in *Dreamers of the Ghetto*, proceeds to delineate the basic differences between the original founder of Hassidism and some of his disciples. When the *Zaddik* everywhere monopolizes the service and the worship which should be given to God, such service, he argues, must ultimately decline and sink into desuetude. Hence, he concludes: "Alas! that such a movement which began with such pure aspiration, which was . . . to so many . . . students as the shadow of a rock in a weary land, that a doctrine which opened out to young Israel such spiritual vistas and transcendent splendors of the Godhead, should end in such delusions and distortions." Our three latter day Masters, the subject of the third lecture, would, therefore, neither delude nor distort but, rather, confirm and constrict. And it all began in doubting.

If to doubt is a virtue and, consequently, valid fare for three "encounters," then it must perforce serve equally well for the fourth. And it did. But with one difference.

Instead of focusing his attention on the past with which he feels closely related, Mr. Wiesel chose a subject with which he is even more closely related and, obviously, knows best: himself. After some readings from the three "dialogues" that form part of *One Generation After*, he began to discuss, among other things, his own role as novelist, essayist, critic and polemicist. And, true to his subject, began to doubt himself. After all, he is now at the peak of his artistic powers. He has already published nine works, to vast international acclaim, including, *Night, Dawn, The Accident, The Town Beyond the Wall, The Gates of the Forest, Legends of Our Time, A Beggar in Jerusalem*, and the current *One Generation After*. But all, with the exception of *The Jews of Silence*, deal with one theme: the holocaust. Might not, therefore, the effect of such writing, were it to continue, decline sharply and, despite the "passionate few," who, as Arnold Bennett once remarked, initiate and sustain literary reputations," fail to withstand the ravages of time? Isn't such constancy limiting the range of his artistic scope? And may not this one theme, however significant, become, if pursued again, artistically insufficient to others as to himself.

In fact, one cannot help but recall, for example, that no less a renowned novelist than Conrad was equally troubled by a somewhat similar situation. Speaking of the artist who, however sincere, becomes the victim of what he calls his own "exaggeration," he tells us in *A Personal Record*:

> In order to move others deeply we must deliberately allow ourselves to be carried away beyond the bounds of normal sensibility . . . like an actor who raises his voice on the stage . . . And surely this is no great sin. But the danger lies in the writer becoming the victim of his own exaggeration, losing the exact notion of sincerity . . . From laughter and tears the descent is easy to sniveling and giggles.

Though little to fear of "sniveling" and "giggles" because his theme is still the greatest imponderable in all history, Mr. Wiesel is, nevertheless, troubled whether in his novels, lectures, and readings he is not being carried away by his own "exaggeration." To overcome his valid doubts, he announced there at his last lecture that *One Generation After* would be his last work on the theme of the holocaust. Having encountered death, he must now begin actively to seek consolation.

To be sure, the memory of his youth will never leave him. He feels duty bound to continue to speak, if not write, about it so that the young generation, seated everywhere before him but unborn when the furnaces raged, would learn of the worst catastrophe in history. And, if adequately integrated in their thinking, they would eventually teach this lesson of man's inhumanity to man to another generation, still to be born. His story of the unimaginable tragedy, that forever placed the mark of Cain on mankind, must be handed down from generation to generation so that, to the end of days, man will stand condemned for his bestiality, for his duplicity, for his silence, for his utter failure to be his brother's