Elie Wiesel and the Ethics of Fiction

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Elie Wiesel's post-Holocaust fiction offers a test case for ethical criticism, such as that explicated in Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Wiesel's writings are, among other things, about the grounds of possibility of both discourse and community after the Holocaust. Friendship, both as a theme and as the relation constructed between implied author and implied reader(s), is that which ultimately makes possible for Wiesel the risk of speech, the writing of narrative in particular, and the construction of the possibility for ethical community in confronting the Shoah.¹

The Holocaust represents, for Wiesel, the radical negation of all ethical and discursive orderings of the world. One of the hermeneutical antinomies facing him, as it does many other post-Holocaust writers, is the act of narrating an event that ruptures such order.² For how does one tell in narrative discourse about an event and its effects that have negated or undone the possibility of narrative coherence? By merely constructing a story with a beginning, middle, and end, has one not already teleologically sutured the very rupture that is to be told? Some writers, in response to this antinomy, eschew narrative discourse altogether and write explicitly antinarrativist texts (such as Edmond Jabès) or disrupted poetry (such as Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs).

In thinking through this problem of the testimonial dilemmas and possibilities of, especially, narrative discourse after the Holocaust, I turn here to Booth's ethical criticism.³ By reading these texts together, as it were "coductively," I intend to read Booth through Wiesel by treating Wiesel as a limit case, testing Booth's arguments about narratological
SUSAN E. SHAPIRO

friendship by attempting to apply (at least some of) them to this extreme circumstance of writing, in which narrative is itself questioned as to its ethical viability. By in turn reading Wiesel through Booth I hope to judge whether (and, if so, how) the Holocaust has challenged or further intensified the grounds of possibility of narratological friendship and ethical community.

The problem of fictional discourse “about” the Holocaust is a theme in Wiesel’s writings, and is structurally present in the very problem of narration. To project a future is to betray the past, to acknowledge a present (just as surviving itself evoked tremendous guilt for survivors of the Shoah). To write historically, in this case, is to place an event that seems to be isolated and outside of temporality, back into time—past time.

The risk of narration, of telling stories “about,” is that of distance and pleasure. Just as speaking at all (in a passionate gesture of communication and community) is a great risk, so also is it problematic to emplot and, thus, impose linear time on the event, giving it a past, present, and future. The event that seemed to eclipse all of history and God’s presence in history is surpassed, it seems, in a projection of a future (as possibly different, hence as future) in the risk of narrating a story about the event as past, with a beginning, middle, and end. The dimensions of the risk of speaking about the Holocaust begin to become clearer. At stake is an intrinsic betrayal, not related to the content of speech or writing but, rather, to the fact that to speak and write at all is necessarily to project a future and, thus, to distance oneself from an event by making it past.

The other side of this risk is the betrayal implicit in forever keeping silent about the event of the Holocaust, not telling, not witnessing, not testifying to its never-ebbing wake of effects. Not to speak about the past is to condemn it to be forgotten to history. It is to repeat too resonantly the awful silencing deaths, themselves become silent if not told.

Speaking and silence, then, this double betrayal, are the opposing and mutually implied poles present within Wiesel’s discourse, both as a theme or subject of discourse, and as a structuring principle of Wiesel’s narration and, thus, of the discourse itself. I have already treated the first of those manifestations elsewhere. I will here turn to the second and consider the rhetorical grounds of possibility of this narrative structuring.

How does Wiesel dare to take this risk of speech in the face of the double betrayal of speech and silence? Aside from making it an explicit
Elie Wiesel and the Ethics of Fiction

problem in his stories, and of the characters that tell these stories, Wiesel risks this emergence into speech rhetorically; that is, in constituting a peculiar rhetoric of friendship, Wiesel makes the implied reader (as well as his characters) a potential friend: “Gabriel [the protagonist of The Gates of the Forest] is my friend and he speaks for me. All my fictional characters exalt friendship; for some it is an obsession. Sometimes I tell myself that I have made them up only because I needed to believe in friendship, because I needed them as friends” (“Celebration” 79). Gabriel asks, “What is a friend? Someone who for the first time makes you aware of your loneliness and his, and helps you to escape so you in turn can help him. Thanks to him you may remain silent without shame and speak freely without risk” (“Celebration” 79). Indeed, it is only in friendship, through the risk of encounter between two “persons” (in this case, two characters and/or the implied author and implied reader), that Wiesel seems to locate the place for the possible reemergence of discourse about God, as well as of speech in general. What is true of the Hasid applies as well to the characters of Wiesel’s novels, although perhaps articulated with less optimism.

A Hasid is never alone nor allowed to be depressed. This is permitted the rabbi, but not the disciple. What, then, is a Hasid to do who is crushed by his memories, shattered by his inability to affirm life while he mourns his dead? How can a Hasid who has lived through the long night of the concentration camps still open himself to joy, to ecstasy? Alone, he would not have the strength. With friends, he can undertake anything, relearn anything; the duty of keeping the faith, of loving, of singing, of sharing with others the salt of his life, and his secret, too, through stories and melodies, through words and silences. The unhappy Hasid will have to choose happiness so as not to be a bad influence on his friends, so as to prevent them from following him into the abyss. (“Celebration” 84–85)

The rhetorical principle of friendship structuring Wiesel’s writing and making possible the risk of narration (making past present, projecting a possibly different future, and making past past) is itself a theme, then, of his novels. This rhetorical principle is shown in the way characters relate as they grow toward or away from each other as survivors, that is, as those people who are able to become friends because each has been permeated so thoroughly by silence and death that the usual or ordinary terms of friendship are no longer the determining ones.

The implied reader of Wiesel’s novels is constructed and positioned
in two ways, as one who either was or was not there, in the Holocaust itself. Nonsurvivor readers are encouraged to imagine that, had fate been otherwise, they could have been there, might even have died there; but this imaginative possibility also ironically heightens the awareness of their distance from the event in recognizing that in fact they were not there. This distance preserves silence even in the risk of speech. Indeed, it is through various strategies of distancing in and through language that silence is inscribed in discourse. For that distance between those who were there and those who were not is, according to Wiesel, unbridgeable. Wiesel writes in “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration”:

Ask any survivor and he will tell you, and his children will tell you. He or she who did live through the event will never reveal it. Not entirely. Not really. Between our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced. The past belongs to the dead and the survivor does not recognize himself in the words linking him to them. We speak in code, we survivors, and this code cannot be broken, cannot be deciphered, not by you no matter how much you try.

This distance creates a necessary silence in language. But this distance does not mean that there is not an overall will to, or strategy of, friendship in the narrative structuring of Wiesel’s works. Rather, one of the conditions of friendship with the implied author of Wiesel’s texts is the recognition of just this necessary silence and distance. The risk required of the implied reader is the risk of understanding the silence inscribed in the text’s language: its source, its pervasiveness, its impenetrability. Reading toward the limits of discourse through distance and silence is the implied strategy of Wiesel’s narration. This *via negativa* (i.e., knowing that you cannot know) is the ground of possibility of friendship and understanding. It is, in turn, only the desire for and will to friendship that makes possible the risk of speech.

The relation of friendship between the protagonists of Wiesel’s novels, especially in *The Gates of the Forest* and *The Town Beyond the Wall*, is of a peculiarly intense sort, friendship in which discourse about death, profound negativity, mad hope, and despair are central. The friends in Wiesel’s novels are most often survivors struggling to find themselves, each other, and God in a world that has become abysmal. These friends often are not polite. They hurl angry and, most often, wounded and wounding words at one another, messages sent in an attempt to orient the other to the distinctive, profound, and fundamentally dislocated site in which each struggles. Disconnected from one another,
alienated from themselves, apparently abandoned by God, each character whispers and shouts to the other as a way of sharing by recognizing their broken worlds. Struggling toward each other in silence and in fragmented, sometimes "mad," discourse, Wiesel's characters provide the basis for their emergence in the narrative through their risking of speech in the context of friendship.

The relation of friendship between implied author and implied reader is analogously an arduous one. Friendship is the rhetorical ground of possibility for the narrative act of communication. The relations of friendship constituted in Wiesel's narrative discourse between implied reader and implied author may well be understood as analogous to the relations between the characters in his novels. As Booth suggests, there are various kinds of narrative friends.

The kinds of friendship—the quality of companionship during the process of reading—in Wiesel's novels, is, as noted, peculiar. It is constituted through distance and to that extent, ironically, it is shared. Like the disconnected and alienated characters of the novels, the relation between implied author and implied reader(s) is predicated upon distance, separation, and respect. Part of this distancing is, perhaps, maintaining the difference between, and thus memory of, those friends from whom the Holocaust has irretrievably separated the implied author and those who people Wiesel's novels, as well as his implied reader-friends.

I remember the friends of my childhood as I remember my childhood; I look at them as I look at myself, and a familiar sadness engulfs me. Where are they? Why were we separated? How could I have deserved to outlive them? For most of them are no longer of this world....

Ever since, I have been looking for them. I have never stopped looking for them. Other friends have come to enrich my life, but not one has resembled either of them. When they left they took with them not only a conception of Messianic hope, but also the ideal of friendship.

My new friends and I try to understand what has happened to our people, and sometimes even to act upon its destiny, but my mystical experiences of long ago remain enveloped in memory.

In other words: friendship has not disappeared from my life; it has only changed in nature. Even in a universe of ultimate horror friendship was a haven. ("Celebration" 77, 81-82)

The formidable distance between implied author and implied reader(s) is a rupture for understanding and in discourse that is caused by the Holocaust. It is the silence evoked by this event's uncommuni-
cable, unenunciably horrific dimensions. This rupture in both speech and understanding is itself told in Wiesel’s novels through their peculiar modes of negative transgressive discourse and in their impossible, but necessary, mediations of friendship.

Narrating by saying that one cannot fully say is a strategy for talking about the Holocaust without thereby immediately making it simply a subject of, and therefore subject to, discourse. Rather, the event of the Holocaust is understood as being always beyond discourse. It is narrated only to the extent that this unreachability and distance is itself articulated and grasped. As Wiesel remarks, “Only one of my books, Night, deals directly with the Holocaust; all the others reveal why one cannot speak about it” (Edelman 18). Thus, the inscription of the failure of discourse is a necessary condition of its testimonial effectiveness. Mediation of the ultimacy of the Holocaust’s radical negation of discourse (and of the social and religious coherences that make possible such speech and community) is itself made possible through the confession of this testimonial failure. This narrative confession of the failure of narrative ironically makes possible testimony to the Holocaust as ultimately, but not finally, rupturing discourse and community.

What both the problem of narrating at all about the event of the Holocaust and Wiesel’s peculiar use of the rhetoric of friendship that makes possible this narration demonstrate is the difficulty of constructing ultimate negation in discourse. The problem is that of narrating a radically disruptive event without either finalizing its negation, thus making impossible its (especially, but not only, narrative) telling, or domesticating its ruptured character and effects in the easy-analogizing and teleological ordering implicit in telling a story to another. Wiesel’s peculiar rhetoric of friendship between implied author and implied reader(s), however, makes possible a narrative discourse in which just such a distinction between ultimate and final negation can be made, even as this distinction, as it construes their “proper” narrative distance, makes possible their “proper” narrative friendship.

This peculiar friendship does not in any way erase the rupture the Holocaust poses in discourse and history. It is rather one in which the recognition of the disorienting, silencing event of the Holocaust is itself intensified and shared. As constituting and occupying the place of friend, implied readers who are nonsurvivors understand only to the extent that they also recognize that they cannot fully understand either the event or what surviving fully means. But, as already suggested, implied nonsurvivor readers also know that had fate or historical circumstances been different, they could have been there. This recognition
makes the implied readers imaginative or, as it were, potential survivors and both maintains the grounds of distance (one is, as it were, potentially, though not actually, there) and of connectedness (one could have been there had fate and historical circumstance been otherwise). This is the peculiar friendship Wiesel offers nonsurvivor readers. Friendship is the ground of possibility of narrating what one cannot fully tell. It allows showing how words fail and silence intervenes. This rhetoric of friendship is crucial to the narrative strategies of Wiesel's novels generally.

Just as the recognition of distance, silence, and the negation of the possibility of communicating fully about the Holocaust form the grounds of possible narratological friendship, so is friendship the basis of the risk of speech about and to God. The rhetorical reaching out in communicating negation (of both the radically negative character of the event and of the impossibility of fully communicating this negativity) is present as well in the simultaneous affirmation and denial of Wiesel's peculiar God-language, as in his denial of God's existence in discourse addressed to God (the affirmation coming rhetorically rather than grammatically or logically). It is, likewise, manifest in the metaphorical extension of the term revelation as applied to the Holocaust (negative in the similar ultimacy of both Sinai and the Holocaust, and affirming the possibility of difference in the past and future by the metaphorical negation "as if" but not "that" the Holocaust is [i.e., "literally"] a revelation).

The risk of speech, as I have noted, is a testimony of ultimacy, but not of finality. In fact, for Wiesel, if the revelation of the Holocaust had been final, the term would not be metaphorical: indeed, it would not be employed at all. The only response for Wiesel to such finality would be silence.

The rupture within discourse for Wiesel, then, is double (of language in general and of God-language) and also is ultimate, but not final. This rupture, is, therefore, open to further negation, further difference and otherness, as produced in historical events. The site of rupture, then, is within both language and history. The shattering of language by the Holocaust reflects the ultimate and radically negative character of that event and yet, through language's disfiguring, we may both recognize and think about its character. The rupture in language does not take the form of a displacement from history and, as it were, into discourse; rather, it allows discourse to intensify our understanding of the events and eventful character of history, in this case, of the Holocaust.

Events end for the writing of conventional histories on a particular
date or a particular moment, effectively sealing them off from other events and times. However, an ultimate event that so radically disrupts our assumptions about humanness and about God, that tears apart even the very social fabric of speech and writing, is inscribed through its rupturing effects in discourse. Discourse thereby becomes testimony to the event in its shattered and ruptured character, in its aporias, its silences, its ellipses, its gaps. And to the extent that the language we “inherit” and learn is so inscribed, our speaking and acting will be affected by this event, whether we are aware of these effects or not. The Holocaust does not, then, simply end, but continues—through its inscription into our language and functioning—to affect us in a wake that we cannot, as linguistic beings, hope to escape.

Our horizons of both understanding and belief have been thus radically altered. Hermeneutical matters are therefore significant in considering this event, for its effects persist in our language, communities, and history/ies. Indeed, as I have suggested, the very temporal ordering of both discourse and history has been radically put into question.

Wiesel notes, “The trouble is that we [survivors] have lived beyond time and therefore find it difficult to distinguish between past and present” (“Why Should People Care?” 17). How can one narrate both the experience of an end of time and the abysmal character of history within the temporal ordering of narration? As stated, the antinomous character of the double betrayal of either writing or remaining silent about the Holocaust is present in the very risk of the temporal ordering of narrative.

To narrate is to construct, in narrative discourse (statement), a temporal account and ordering that is about the story and its temporality. To order temporally is (1) to make the event in some way coherent and, thus, sensible; (2) to construe it as an occurrence in “pseudo” time, that is, to fictionalize it; (3) to structure a temporal mediation of this event that was experienced as out-of-time and end-of-history and, thus, in some way to risk phenomenologically betraying its victims; and (4) to recognize that each of the preceding acts risks domesticating, reducing and, in particular, betraying the radically disruptive and negating force of the event itself. This problem of domestication in discourse applies to, and is exemplified by, the problem of creating a linear narrative of an event that shatters and radically transforms our notions of time and history, as well as our very notions and use of language. How does one avoid domesticating the Holocaust, as a subject of discourse, to speech or writing about the event? About the inadequacy of language to and after the Holocaust, Wiesel writes, “all words seemed inadequate, worn,
Elie Wiesel and the Ethics of Fiction

foolish, lifeless, whereas I wanted them to be searing. Where was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language?” (“Why I Write” 201).

Beginning from rupture and silence, how does one emerge into order and speech? According to Wiesel, as a survivor he "enters literature through . . . silence" (“Why I Write” 201). As already noted, Wiesel enters literature through the risk of friendship in the narrative relation of implied author and implied reader(s) through the confession of the testimonial failure of discourse to adequately represent or tell about the Holocaust, a confession, however, given in narrative. This risk of friendship rhetorically makes possible the risk of narrative temporal ordering as well.

The narration of time, constructing the relations between narrative statement time and story time, becomes possible in the context of Wiesel’s construal of narrative friendship. Just as Wiesel makes the recognition of distance from the event the basis of friendship, so too does he heighten the distance from historical discourse by writing fiction, increasing the distance between narrative statement time and story time. If readers know that they are not reading history but rather “true fiction” (a true story), then the first-order reference is suspended.16 The temporality of the story is suspended in favor of the “pseudotemporality” of the narrative statement. The reference of the temporality of the narrative statement is likewise suspended (i.e., “pseudo”), but for the sake of telling a true story. Truth in this context entails distance from historical narration through a narrative discourse and temporality that is at once “pseudo” and “most true.” The “pseudo” characteristic is the necessary condition for narrating a true story that recognizes that writing about the event of the Holocaust is impossible. As Wiesel says,

I wrote a book called The Town Beyond the Wall, which is a novel. . . . And it is written in the third person, which is rare in my books, but if you ask 99 percent of the people who read the book they will tell you it is written in the first person. And for me it was a discovery; it pleased me very much because I was so much there although it was pure fiction. And the same goes for the Holocaust. I never really write about the Holocaust. Yet ask people who read (and there are a few) and they will tell you that I write nothing but about the Holocaust. (“What Is a Jew?” 151–52)

Wiesel has come to consider historical documents of, and personal testimonies to, the Shoah as most veracious and trustworthy.17 While
the split between historical and fictional accounts of the Holocaust is implicit in his hermeneutic practice generally (effacing their shared narrative sources and character), Wiesel’s increased concern with the documentary force of historical testimony may be understood not only as a fearful anticipation of the general inattentiveness to the subject and claims of the Holocaust on the part of the public, especially immediately after the war, but as in response to the actual denial that the Holocaust occurred at all. Wiesel’s earlier trust in the transformative reception of the truth of his fictional narratives seems somewhat, and perhaps intensely, broken by such denials: “[T]he leader of the SS today in Germany . . . recently told a convention that the Holocaust was a lie, a hoax of the century . . . I do not know how you react to all this. I can only tell you what one survivor feels. More than sadness, he feels dismay, and more than dismay he feels despair, and even more than despair, he feels disgust” (“The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration” 19). In “Why I Write,” Wiesel notes: “And yet the survivor may experience remorse. He has tried to bear witness; it was all in vain . . . [But] they [the survivors] will continue, for they cannot do otherwise” (205). The essay “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration” was delivered at Northwestern University, in part in response to the denial, by a professor at that institution, that the Holocaust had in fact occurred. As Irving Abraham notes, “this essay examines the impossibility for fiction to treat the event. Wiesel stresses that a new literary form has grown out of the Holocaust—the literature of testimony—and he offers numerous telling quotations that illustrate this new genre and authenticate the event.”

I think, however, that it would be important to consider Wiesel’s own writing, his “true fiction,” as a part of this genre of testimony, thereby extending (and making more complicated) our notions of narrative truth beyond the radical split between historical and fictive narrative. Despite this hermeneutical fence built around historical narrative in an attempt to protect the veracity of the Shoah from assault, Wiesel’s practice opens up the possibility of imagining and thinking about truth in ways not constrained by, or confined to, notions of literal representation. For the peculiar strategies of discourse required for the testimony of ultimacy but not finality, and for telling by saying that one cannot say, are constituted in Wiesel’s novels as a kind of “true fiction.” The truth of fiction is made possible by heightening the epistemic distance from the event, thus preserving the silence, the character, of the event as beyond discourse, the fictional necessary conditions of the telling of a true
story. Writing fiction, then, ironically becomes the literary condition of telling the truth, part of which is the telling of precisely that epistemic distance. Only by first widening this temporal gap in fiction—indeed, by making it unbridgeable—is "true" narrative possible.

The first condition of narration, then, is negative; the inaccessibility of the Holocaust is intensified by the fictional status of the narrative. This negation is again ultimate, but not final. The rhetoric of friendship between implied author and implied reader(s) makes such discourse "about" the Holocaust possible through, among other things, the portrayal of its effects. But this friendship must continue to be distanced. It must not fully bridge the abyss between those who were there and those who were not. The limits of discourse, though rendered not final through the rhetoric of narrative friendship in Wiesel's works, are not eradicated. If recalcitrant "no" is rhetorically transformed into "yes," it still preserves its negativity in the grammar and logic of the text. Grammar and logic are rhetoricized but not sublated in Wiesel's writings in a testifying to the event for the sake of the dead, for those who can no longer tell and on behalf of whose memory Wiesel attempts, however problematically, to speak.

This is the concentration camp language. It negated all other language and took its place. Rather than link, it became wall. Could it be surmounted? Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer to be negative, and yet I also knew that "no" had to become "yes." It was the wish, the last will of the dead. One had to break the shell enclosing the dark truth, and give it a name. One had to force man to look. ("Why I Write" 201).

As the rhetorical definalization of the narrative friendship in Wiesel's novels mediates and reorients their negative grammars and logics, and as the relation of friendship is constituted in and by the "quality of the companionship during the time of reading," so is the odd logic of temporality of Wiesel's "true fiction" that occurs between kinds of temporal ordering governed by the time of reading. The relationship of friendship—through which the temporal aspects of the narrative discourse are construed—is constituted in the terms of the quality of the companionship during the time of reading. Just as story time and the narrative statement time are derived in and from their metonymic displacement in and of reading time, so the relative quality of friendship is derived from and constituted in the quality of the companionship be-
tween implied author and implied reader(s) during the time of reading. This displacement into the possibility of saying “yes” to friendship is constitutive, therefore, of the temporal ordering of the narrative as it allows the (ambivalent) projection of a future horizon. This horizon is different from the past, and yet allows its retrieval, as well as a retrieval of those values more fundamental of humanity.

Friendship allows for the emergence of thought of the future as shared destiny rather than as fateful end. The relationship of friendship between implied author and implied reader is thus the ground of possibility for the risk of narrating, however indirectly, the event of the Holocaust. Narrative friendship also reorients the reader(s) (and the implied author) by allowing for a future that recovers the possibility of community. In this way, it makes possible a recovery of just those fundamental relations and assumptions about humanness and the divine that the Holocaust ruptured. As Wiesel retrospectively writes,

> Of course, the technicians of death tried to deprive us of it [the haven of friendship]. Forget your parents, your brothers, your past, or else you will perish. That is what they kept telling us day and night. But what happened was the opposite. Those who lived only for themselves, only to feed themselves, ended up succumbing to the laws of death, while the others, those who knew whom to live for—a parent, a brother, a friend—managed to obey the laws of life. (“Celebration” 83)

Friendship is, thus, a kind of resistance to the relentless attempts by the Nazis to dehumanize, and thus to destroy, the Jews. It is also an affirmation founded in the very risk of friendship.

The move is made in Wiesel's narratives from attempting to bring the Messiah for the sake of the world to the act of one individual character on behalf of another. The saving of one human life is for Wiesel, the saving of a world. And this act is the ground of possibility for redemption more generally, although it is not explicitly performed for the sake of that more general aim. This risk on behalf of another person is the basis for possibly recovering viable God-language. The implied author exhorts his characters (and readers) not to wait for the arrival of the Messiah, not to judge, finally, the effectiveness of God-language in terms of divine intercession. This is not, however, a counsel of indifference.

> “The Messiah may come by accident,” said a Hasidic Master, one hundred and fifty years ago. Today he would say: the end of the world may
come by accident. How can it be saved? That's not for the novelist to say. There is a “Savior” for that particular purpose. But the Savior, according to the tradition of my people, is not one person: he is all of us. Which means: we can—we must—help him help us. Which means: we must appeal to our collective memory: only the tale of what was done to my people can save humankind from a similar fate. Which means: we must care—lest we fall victim to our own indifference.

Could this be the answer? No. But—it is the question. (“Why Should People Care?” 18)

But God is not let off easily in Wiesel’s works, either. This possibility of saving action despite God is achieved through the risk and demand to save another human being, to make a difference in the world through one’s own acts. This is very much a retrieval of the praxis character of Halachah, but it is not a praxis grounded in a simple, reassuring, covenantal relation between God and the Jewish people or between God and humankind. Historical events appear, rather, to be countercovenantal. This belief in the ultimate value of saving action on behalf of another—and as an act that saves a world—is, in some ways, a postcovenantal religious praxis. It does not necessarily deny the possible truth or validity of the now undisclosed—indeed, seemingly negated—covenantal relation. This postcovenantal religious praxis is grounded, one might say, in the risk of friendship. Saving a world by saving a life is a reaffirmation of the ultimate value of life: this in the face of an event in which the idea of humanness was itself negated, and in which there was an explicit attempt to dehumanize the Jews completely before annihilating them.

Such an affirmation does not proceed through the prior affirmation of God and the guaranteed creation of an ultimately valuable universe. Rather, this affirmation is a risk, and it is a risk of friendship between two “persons” (two characters or the implied author and implied reader) who encounter and struggle with each other as they do with themselves and God.

The affirming of the ultimate value of human life—in a saving act of friendship—mitigates the finality of the Holocaust. This mitigation does not reduce its ultimate negativity. This affirming, this “yes,” is the risk of friendship that grounds itself in this very risk. It is not a denial of the ultimate negativity of the event. It is, however, the allowing of a possibly different future: drawing upon what is a fundamental human characteristic and also a ground of possibility for reorientation toward, and retrieval of, a religious tradition for which such humanity is nec-
necessary. If the risk of friendship were impossible, then both secular and religious humanistic traditions would be finally irretrievable. This projecting of a potentially different future through the risk of friendship makes possible, but does not guarantee, a retrieval of those traditions. It also grounds the possibility of an ethical criticism, such as Booth's, that draws on and places itself in relation to them.

Reading Wiesel through Booth helps us read Booth through Wiesel. Wiesel's writings "invite" Booth's concern with narratological friendship.\(^2\) If the stakes of an ethical criticism such as Booth's require a limit case for demonstration, surely Wiesel provides such an occasion. For while their works are so very different in style and subject, they share profoundly similar concerns for the continued viability of language and ethical community. Keeping company with Booth and Wiesel thus vividly demonstrates both the breakdown and limits of ethical community and discourse as well as their continued viability and claim upon us.

Notes

1. The terms Holocaust and Shoah (as is every other such term, e.g., Churban) are in different ways problematic. Holocaust implies that the event was a (completely consumed) sacrifice to God, and Shoah is a term used primarily to refer to natural catastrophes. I use both terms to call attention to the problems and limits of each.

2. See, for example, my "Failing Speech: Post-Holocaust Writing and the Discourse of Postmodernism."

3. Booth, Company, especially chapters 5, 6, and 7.

4. The present chapter draws on a chapter on Wiesel (ch. 3) from a larger work of mine, "Recovering the Sacred: Hermeneutics and Theology after the Holocaust" (forthcoming).

5. In this essay, I do not closely read any of Wiesel's novels. Such readings of his The Gates of the Forest (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966) and The Town Beyond the Wall (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), two of his novels most concerned with friendship, may be found in "Recovering the Sacred," ch. 3.


8. In "Celebration," Wiesel notes that these two works in particular are concerned with friendship.
9. See Booth, "The Way I Loved George Eliot" 4-27. These themes are once again developed in The Company We Keep, especially chs. 6 and 7, 168-224.


11. See my "Failing Speech" 66, 87n. 2.

12. In this chapter, I am treating only the implied nonsurvivor reader. It is this reader, I believe, that forms the primary audience for these novels. The implied survivor-reader represents the degree zero of reading/writing. Like the implied author, the implied survivor-reader(s) is constructed as knowing, but not telling all, both because of the limits of discourse adequately to narrate and, relatedly, because if the survivors did tell, their discourses would be considered excessive and unrealistic and, thus, as unbelievable fabrications of or upon the event. This romantic, absolute horizon of shared knowledge and understanding, however, functions in some ways problematically to efface the constructed and partial character of all knowledge and memory. In construing the nonsurvivor reader(s) as his primary audience, however, Wiesel opens up yet other ways of reading this detour into fiction in order to "truly narrate," as I later demonstrate.

13. Because of its connotation of futuricity, using the term potential in this context is somewhat awkward. However, the implied reader's recognition that she or he could have been there is a recognition of fateful potential, the limitations of which are, I believe, that none of us is finally excluded from such fateful negative possibility.

14. See Genette, Narrative Discourse, for the narrative terms and their use in this discussion. Although Genette's terms do not necessarily directly correspond to Booth's (see Booth, Company i25n), there are some shared insights about the working of stories and narrative discourse that my treatment of Genette highlights.

15. In "Failing Speech" and "Recovering the Sacred," I have shown the risks of this displacement of event by discourse in the grammatical, rhetorical, and logical assumptions and strategies of Edmond Jabès, among others.

16. See Genette 33-35 for a related discussion of this manipulation of narrative distance. The ideas in this paragraph are drawn in part from these pages.

17. See "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" 7-8; see also Wiesel, "Myth and History" 20-30.


19. For an insightful criticism of hermeneutically naive understandings of documenting the event, see James E. Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988).

20. See Booth, "George Eliot" 7.

22. See Genette, 25–32.

23. In some ways, this risk of friendship might appear to resemble the logic of resistance as explicated by Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1982). We must, however, recall that Wiesel's resistance is founded both rhetorically and socially in friendship, not in a quasi-categorical (logical, isolatively founded) imperative as for Fackenheim.

24. *Halachah* means "the way" or "the path" and refers both to the decision-making processes and the determinations of Jewish law, specifically in the Talmud.

25. See Booth’s *The Company We Keep*, ch. 4, 90–92, for a discussion of the terms *invite*, *tolerate*, and *violate*, or *resist* as applied to the relation between texts and particular acts of criticism. See also Wayne Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* 191–92, for his treatment of Wiesel's *Gates of the Forest*. I have found the resources of his *The Company We Keep* more helpful, however, in reading this (and other) Wiesel works in "Boothian terms" such as those explicated above.

**Bibliography**


———. "Recovering the Sacred: Hermeneutics and Theology after the Holocaust" (forthcoming).


