

***Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel* by Simon P. Sibelman. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.**

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This study identifies silence as the central theme of Wiesel's literary oeuvre. Indeed, Professor Sibelman asserts that silence constitutes the "basic matrix from which all other thematic material develops" (6), and argues that in the course of Wiesel's novels silence undergoes a gradual transformation from a symptom and expression of despair and loss into "a more positive, mystical and regenerative pole of reference" (7).

In his first chapter, Sibelman presents a broad overview of the phenomenon of silence in philosophy and literature, invoking writers such as Martin Buber, Brice Parain, Roland Barthes, Emmanuel Lévinas and Stéphane Mallarmé to support his contention that, despite often the result of language's fundamental inadequacy for expressing experience, silence nonetheless evinces "an underlying positive ontology" (17). Signifying the ineffable *au-delà*, creativity, potentiality and the divine, silence is, according to Sibelman, not an absence of speech or language, but their adjunct, and functions within narrative as a conscious communicative strategy. Sibelman thus attaches importance here and throughout his study to the use of visual silence in the form of blank spaces on the page; what he terms *le grand silence typographique-respiratoire*.

According to Sibelman, the radical transformation of the ontological significance of silence was brought about by the Holocaust, with the inability of survivors to give expression to their death-camp experiences resulting in a negative silence symptomatic of exile, destruction and a loss of identity and faith. Speech must therefore be wrested from silence, life from a near-death stasis. In Sibelman's view, and in this he concurs with widespread thinking on post-Holocaust literature, Wiesel's ethical and literary dilemma is thus the reconciliation of language with silence, of the survivor's duty to bear witness with his desire to remain silent, either of which in isolation would amount to a betrayal of the victims of the Holocaust. He therefore suggests that "Wiesel is proposing silence's being used in tandem with the word in order to present some image of the *anus mundi* and to represent the fragmented soul of the survivor" (24), and thereby to effect some sort of healing. Thus far, we are on familiar ground, already explored in myriad other studies on Wiesel. The chapter concludes with an outline of what Sibelman terms the rhetoric of silence in Wiesel's novels—morphological, syntactic and semantic silences.

Subsequent chapters undertake a chronological analysis of the theme of silence in Wiesel's novels. Beginning with the negative, solitary silences which punctuate the account of the narrator of *La Nuit*, whose faith in humanity, language and God has been demolished by his experiences in Auschwitz, Sibelman traces the evolution in the later novels of this initial despairing silence into positive, creative and regenerative spaces in which questions are posed and from which "a cosmos of dialogue" (171) eventually emerges. As a result, life is reaffirmed, interaction with others promoted, and responsibilities assumed. The individual is reconciled with his past, his identity and his God and undergoes a spiritual resurrection. Sibelman asserts that "these texts inexorably draw the active reader into the emerging dialogue, sanctioning life, and establishing an irrevocable sense of moral responsibility" (173). In this somewhat schematic conception of Wiesel's novels as a coherent, organic whole in which can be seen a clear progression from despair to hope and from silence to language and dialogue (or a modified silence indicative of divine mysticism), Sibelman adheres very much to previous moral, theological and humanist readings of Wiesel's novels, aligning himself with the interpretive stances of Robert McAfee Brown (surprisingly, not referred to in the bibliography), Edward Grossman and Michael Berenbaum, all of whom find in Wiesel's literary output a similar process of regeneration and the warning voice of a humanitarian crusader. Sibelman's concentration here on an insightful analysis of the relationships pertaining between charac-

ters, particularly fathers and sons, and their attitudes towards post-Holocaust existence, underscores the moral, spiritual and psychological aspects of Wiesel's fiction, perhaps at the expense of a more theoretical analysis of its incessant, anxious questioning of its own status as fiction and its very intelligibility; issues at whose core is to be found the temptation or threat of silence. Indeed, in his discussion of the role of lying in *Le Jour*, he fails to account for Wiesel's decision to abandon the *témoignage* of *La Nuit* with its claims to veracity in favour of storytelling and its ambiguous situation between truth and falsehood. He does however come tantalisingly close to addressing the issue, arguing that "in order to conceal the unspeakable, lying becomes an active adoption of euphemisms, or words possessing multiple meanings, or silence itself. Veracity emerges as another victim of the *shoah*" (53). Do not this loss of veracity and adoption of lying have important implications for Wiesel's whole literary enterprise and for the unequivocal moral messages sought there by Sibelman and others? This disparity between the ambiguities and which pervade Wiesel's fiction and the clear moral messages commonly drawn from it has been dealt with at some length by Colin Davis who argues that "Wiesel's texts are often neither as clear nor as uplifting, nor as intelligible as the dominant reading of his fiction would suggest. His stories often entail confusion, disbelief, and misunderstanding, rather than the linear progression from despair to hope attributed by the critics to Wiesel himself" (21). We must, as Colin Davis urges, be wary of making our interpretations of Wiesel's work an act of faith; it is however on such an act of faith that Sibelman's study seems to be predicated, as he suggests in his comforting closing remarks: "As the events are wrenched from the abyss and truth voiced to warn humanity, one can view in Wiesel's oeuvre and the accompanying theme of silence on which it is constructed as an act of faith: Faith in humanity's perfectibility despite Auschwitz; faith in God despite his silence" (175). One might also add the critic's unerring faith in language and its ability to communicate unambiguous messages, despite the frequent propensity of Wiesel's narratives to imply the opposite.

The study's most enriching aspect seems to me to be Sibelman's competent use of Jewish traditions and theology in order to illuminate Wiesel's novels in a rewarding way. Consistently, the theme of silence is seen within a Jewish context and related to the Bible, talmudic literature, Hassidic stories and midrash. Sibelman conducts convincing analyses of Wiesel's allusions to biblical stories (Abraham and Isaac, Jacob's struggle at Peniel in *Les Portes de la forêt*, the story of Jonah in *La Ville de la Chance*), the Kabbala and Jewish mysticism. Similarly well executed are

his observations of the structuring of narrative after Jewish feast and prayer days such as Yom Kippur, and his explorations of the literary and religious connotations of characters' names. Sibelman's regenerative, theological reading of Wiesel's fiction is therefore complemented by the theological dimension of his study which traces a parallel loss or shaking of faith and its subsequent reaffirmation.

Professor Sibelman's thesis thus subscribes to the tenets of the dominant school of Wiesel criticism with its focus on spiritual regeneration and moral and theological aspects of the latter's writing. As such it is an interesting study and represents another valuable contribution to the growing corpus of critical writing on Wiesel's fiction. Nonetheless, Sibelman's study perhaps fails to deliver all that its title promises, and it is a pity that his study should have been published so soon after Colin Davis' excellent *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts* which deals with related issues and to which he was unfortunately unable to refer.

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### Works Cited

Davis, Colin. *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994.