

## **The Sublime in Elie Wiesel's *Night***

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**Abstract:** This paper has some implications both in Literature and Translation. It establishes a parallel between the work of a novelist and that of a translator. It shows their complementary aspects. How translation turns into rewriting, that which enriches consequently literary imagination from the departure text. The reflection on different modalities of literary translation, using a post-structural prism, sheds light on the prime signified. The apprehension of this essential element is correlated to the sublime, as it grants authority and credibility to the final translation.

**Key words:** The sublime, “the transcendental signified”, existentialism, rewriting, madness, “Jewish genocide”.

**Résumé :** Ayant des implications à la fois en Littérature et en Traduction, cet article établit un parallèle entre le travail du romancier et celui du traducteur. Il dégage leurs aspects complémentaires, tout en montrant comment une traduction devient un acte de réécriture, enrichissant l'imagination littéraire du texte de départ. La réflexion portant sur les modalités d'une traduction littéraire, au moyen d'une analyse post-structurale, met en exergue le signifié premier. L'appréhension de cet élément essentiel dévoile le sublime, garantissant autorité et crédibilité au texte d'arrivée.

**Mots clés :** Le sublime, « le signifié transcendantal », l'existentialisme, la réécriture, la folie, « le génocide juif ».

## Introduction

This article analyzes the implications of translation on autobiographical writing. Elie Wiesel's *Night* contains both textual and paratextual elements. Originally, *Night* is written in Yiddish, translated for the first time into the French by François Mauriac. It was published by Les Éditions de Minuit in Paris in 1958, thirteen years right after the end of World War II. This publishing house led clandestine activities. Les Éditions de Minuit has played a significant role for the cause of Jews in the fight against Anti-Semitism, going therefore against censorship.

The second edition of *Night* came in 2006, within an interval of forty-eight years, enough time for maturation in the description and representation of ideas that which translation is all about. Published by Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux in New York, on the cover page is indicated a new translation in English by Marion Wiesel, the author's wife. It is worth mentioning that this affiliation gives way to an articulation that reveals the text.

French and English are considered as target languages. The option to translate *Night* from Yiddish into both languages tells the author's ambition to world widely share the experience of Jewish people in the concentration camps. The exercise of a renewed translation first from Yiddish into French, second from French into English clearly appears as a rewriting practice. Here, rewriting involves the author, the editor, and the translator's collaboration. The reflection undertaken in this article has some consideration on the genetics, as the study of the conditions of production of a text.

Within the rewriting process, we are particularly interested to apprehend creative imagination as it results from the act of translation in the book *Night*. We work on the latest edition (2006) that comprises *A Preface to the New Translation by Elie Wiesel, a Foreword by François Mauriac*, the text itself, and *The Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech Delivered by Elie Wiesel*, so as to see the possibilities of language rendered in the act of translation.

## I. Madness as a Shared Experience

The first motivation of the author is given in the preface of his book, where an existentialist philosophy prevails. It defines the function of Elie Wiesel's writing. Pointing out its utilitarian role, the act of writing or the literature of war in general is associated to a means of survival, says Wiesel who writes as a way "not to go mad." (*Night*, p. vii). The act of writing is then a cure to madness. It comes as an inscription that absorbs a wrong – an illness, since madness is contained in the mechanics of the author's writing. In other terms, it lies in the architecture of the novel *Night*.

However, madness is not literally narrated in the novel *Night* to appear as a core theme. It is not verbalized in the text, since the author's mind cannot record the images of suffering. Producing an autobiographical work, the writer strictly recounts, to a certain degree of objectivity, the experience of his childhood. Seeing that his mind cannot as well bear the pain that his people had endured during the Holocaust, madness is therefore transferred in the text. A transfer that denies any form of verbalization is consequently perceived in the form of the text instead of its content.<sup>1</sup> As subtly articulated in his historical account, madness hints at gaps in the author's writing.

Even readable in the structure of the text, madness still gives way to extremely shocking realities unlikely to be imagined as possible, and to be represented. It alludes to the language of the impossible, the unconceivable. And the distortion of language in *Night* is allowed by a certain subliminal mode of expression. The difficulty of *telling* the horrendous experience of the concentration camps and the recourse to *showing* as being eminently a sensorial whole justifies the work on memory operated by Elie Wiesel. He, who, has the project to make a reading museum, a book of a collective experience that would make any reader feel and share the horrors of the Holocaust. Establishing the sublime at the center of his writing as it triggers off imagination, the author's task turns into a literary archeology, since the recollection of some fragments of memory from his psyche leads to a negotiation with language. This process gives shape to mental representations.

The eminence of mental images in language shows writing as an act of memory from the fragility of human conscience.<sup>2</sup> It yields a series of flashes in the mind. Structurally, the words that bear the memory of the Holocaust are a materialized form of the repressed images of the past. Images both evoke and invoke the memory of the past from the human psyche.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *L'Inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 40-41.

This mechanism describes the sublime regarding the intensity of the speech.<sup>3</sup> They function as negatives, from which a vision can be produced, and lead to a recognition and knowledge of the Jewish history. Elie Wiesel's text possesses some sorts of photosensitive sensors that reveal in the form of a shared experience the Holocaust. In so doing, his text brings the humanly unconceivable to perception. But this ingredient as a narrative substance has made unsatisfactory, then unacceptable the different translations proposed prior to Marion Wiesel's.

As a space of memory, the uploaded information in the text alters writing into an act of purgation. It liberates both the author, and particularly the translator the object of our reflection (in the present case the author's spouse) from the phantoms and other horrors of the past. Not to be only curative, but also photosensitive, translation becomes from a literary standpoint the Other writing, a literary reinvention. It is a rewriting that puts at stakes sensors. This practice engages imagination as well. It gives as a result to the translated text more creative possibilities.

A translated text, as what we attempt to demonstrate in this paper, may recapture a lost meaning or a transcendental signified.<sup>4</sup> This is likely what motivates the author Elie Wiesel to have his text translated again by his wife. The forms of silence raised in the French and English versions designate at first sight the untranslatable. Appearing as the unwritten, it constitutes the essential of the author's experience.<sup>5</sup> Since essentially missing in the text, the first translation offered as compared to the original Yiddish text was deemed approximate. It explains, beyond commercial motivations, the reason of an ongoing research or activities on translation of the novel *Night* this time in English.

Silences are due to the difference of languages. A transposition from one language to another is intricate. Linguistically, a cultural barrier stands between Yiddish whose enunciation system is specific and far distinct from both French and English. These languages do not share the same modes and codes of perception and representation. These being unbridged by François Mauriac, the benefit of the French translation is to have been an attempt. In that sense, translation is but a repetitive practice whose aim is to lead toward perfectibility. The objective of Marion's last translation is to recapture, owing to photosensitive sensors, the effect of the real rendered in the original text written in Yiddish.

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Molinié, *Dictionnaire de rhétorique*, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1992, p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 411-412.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

The solution of a better translation remains, as it is visibly the case of Elie Wiesel's text, in the shift of the targeted language.

Translation is an attempt at representing, describing, transcribing, or giving shape to the madness of humanity. Authorship is shared both by the novelist Elie Wiesel and the translator Marion Wiesel. Translation is a means of contemplation of horrors. The act of rewriting undertaken by the translator reveals the memory of the past, using more evocative words. We attempt at understanding the mechanism within translation which allows the perception of the transcendental signified. The object targeted in the translation of the Holocaust is the perception of the unconscious, only caught in a state of madness. It explains why Elie Wiesel contends that he wrote *Night* "to go mad in order to understand the nature of madness, the immense, terrifying madness" (*Night*, p. VII). The role of the translator can be assimilated to a go-between giving voice to the ineffable. Our next interest lies in the translation of *Night* to know if the English version of this text contains the elements of this madness.

## **II. The Transcendental Signified**

The author has written *Night* to raise the reader's awareness on the tragedy of the Holocaust and "to prevent history from repeating itself." (*Night*, p. VII). Wiesel strongly believes in the "legacy of words." (*Night*, p. VII). This term describes an effect and a level of consciousness reached in a cathartic writing. The transcendental signified derives from the reception of the author's writing. It is a mental construct that reconnects the reader with the text. It reveals the content of the book not from a Saussurian perspective, which basically defines and establishes a linguistic sign from the correlation between signifier and signified.

The reconnection aforementioned is rather Derridian. In that sense, it compels to rereading – a deconstruction through which the relationship between signifier and signified is determined by a substantive existence of the *logos*<sup>6</sup>. It connotes the whole of Elie Wiesel's thought. The rational content of his thought to be found in the author's intentions is the ultimate reality that he inscribed in his novel *Night* originally written in Yiddish. But François Mauriac in the first translation somehow failed to transcribe the transcendental signified in the French version of the book. This part missing, but essential as what the author ambitions to see in every translation of his text, led to the English version.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

The concept of the transcendental signified explores the very motives that are unvoiced in the text. They actually stand at the creation of the author's art. The transcendental signified procures both credibility and authority to any translated text. In another way, translation as an academic or literary exercise can be understood as a quest of the transcendental signified. Its perception in the translated text ensure acceptability and stability to the translation offered. The state of catharsis that sustains a subliminal reaction, grasping both the writer and the translator, is made possible in the apprehension of this prime signified at work in the text.

No wonder why the English version of the novel *Night* which has received Elie Wiesel's satisfaction has been performed by the author's wife. The link between these two persons reveals the intimacy of a life-lived experience. Otherwise, this experience would not be written or translated by anyone else, but those who have directly lived the Holocaust. No wonder why as an acknowledgment, agreement, and approval of the latest version, they have both dedicated the English version of the book *Night* to the victims of the Holocaust. "In memory of my parents and of my little sister, Tzipora" signed E.W and "This translation in memory of my grandparents, Abba, Sarah and Nachman, who also vanished in that night" signed by M.W. The recollection of the Holocaust is a shared experience which then remains intimate, as its translation requires the apprehension of the transcendental signified. And to mean this point, authorship is shared, since translating the transcendental signified is literally reinventing, re-writing – in a few words, fictionalizing writing.

One of the greatest challenges of translating non-fiction lies in the rehabilitation of memory. Language may stand as an obstacle. It needs in such circumstances to be re-contextualized. The limitation of words at the disposal of the translator leads to search for a context. The built-up context gives an echo to the silences of history. Here is raised the fictional dimension of historical writing. For, the context should be apprehended as a space of writing that generates a new language. It is the unnamable. This "it" mentioned in the text to refer to a new context — the space of the catharsis — is by nature "something elusive, darkly shrouded for fear of being usurped, profaned" (*Night, IX?*). It is the "it" or the space of the catharsis that permits to unveil and deal with "the darkest zone of man" (*Night, p. IX*). It is disclosed in purgation.

The state of catharsis is a reaction toward different scenes of representation. It is observed in the abruptness and rupture of the ordinary, perceptible within words. In other terms, words are limited to the description of the logic. Their use condemns them to their intrinsic meaning, as they can hardly get rid of it. Structurally speaking, their signification is combined, melted in a form that contains them. Saussure's representation of a linguistic sign perfectly accounts for this mode of representation, evoking the arbitrariness and convention of a sign. Determined by and in the society, words are bound to describe ordinary experiences. They oppose the ambition of the writer or the translator whose objective is to write about and translate a peculiar experience. The conventional nature of linguistic signs justifies the silence of words, their unfaithfulness as being "betrayed and perverted" (*Night*, p. IX).

Arbitrariness points out instability. Words as vectors of meaning are by essence conflictual. With meaning being granted, there is no systematic link between a word and its referred signification. The fragility of words makes the writer and/or translator resort to verbal constructs as to way to get to a targeted degree of expressivity. But the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs gives way to a fragmentary writing. Elie Wiesel's book *Night* deals in fact with non-granted significations which are not determined by any social contract. These insignifications as they definitely result leave gaps in the textuality of the novel, which destabilize the reader.

The energy contained in Elie Wiesel's words is made of antithetical forces. And pausing at every sentence comes a moment of relief. It is the eruption of a pressure the writer originally felt in writing the book, and the translator shares while translating the author's words in another language. *Night* is on and about catharsis, as a collective experience. The writing of this text has a twofold function, consisting on the one hand in curing the author from the trauma of the past, on the other hand of being the truest possible. Elie Wiesel considers writing as an act of testimony that brings those who did not experience Auschwitz to know what it actually was.

Elie Wiesel's words are a space of conflicts. All the stakes of his writing lie in the use and manipulation of words. The work of translation that conveys this tension inscribed in the structure of words has heavily contributed to refine the story. From one version to another, words are cut. From one version to another, words are silenced in a writing made unspeakable. From one version to another, words transcend silence – writing then becomes

speakable. The work on words, *i.e.* translation avoids superfluousness, as to extract mainly the substance that reveals the text and leads to the awareness of what really was the experience of Auschwitz. The sublime is the substance that dwells in the interplay and tension between both the speakable and the unspeakable.

### III. On an Existential Discourse

A tension results from the interplay between the speakable and the unspeakable in Elie Wiesel's text. The narrative structure of the novel *Night* is based on contradictory and antithetical constructs. They produce, from a structural point of view, a discourse on existentialism - a doctrine that praises and advocates both action and optimism in situations of great despair.<sup>7</sup> Though the function of the author's writing remains historical, the nature of his text is not essentially descriptive as an autobiographical work.

The dynamism of Elie Wiesel's writing fabricates its own trope. The novel is stamped with metaphors that enhance the imaginative dimension of this autobiographical work. It gives to the novel the taste of a pamphlet. The narrative treatment on the figure of God for example, central in the text, announces the author's philosophy. The reason why the novel *Night* stands as a major work internationally acclaimed is that it exposes Elie Wiesel's vision — his struggle for the rehabilitation of the Jewish memory. It is not incidental that in 1986 the author received the Nobel Peace Prize.

With regard to the sartrian definition of existentialism and its articulation in the novel, the term "action" does not essentially denote the actualization of characters in the text. This category is rather perceived as the elaboration of a perception through an oriented discourse. It is an initiative that participates to a commitment<sup>8</sup>. As characters act in the novel, the novelist through the words of his text holds a speech that contributes to the formation and consolidation of a community. Grounded in an existential philosophy, the author's project in *Night* is on the liberation of the Jewish community from the trauma of the past. In this perspective, Elie Wiesel's writing becomes essentially therapeutic — a cure for the survival of the Jewish people who have gone through the Holocaust, as it is testified in his treatment and representation of the figure of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> M.A.R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 650.



Initially, the God depicted as a totality at the beginning of the story in the book *Night* is a representation of Judaism. A monolithic entity, a supreme being, the Almighty, he is considered as the Creator, and he is merciful. Considering the context of war and genocide, the Jewish people expect his intervention, a miracle to come and get them away from their daily plight, suffering, and agony - a situation of misery that only God can change to save people's lives. This God is qualified and perceived in the book as being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. And as such, he determines the social aspirations and the spiritual elevation of all the members of the community.

Belief comes from this connection, which is indeed a superficial link of a created God that works as a governing principle. The image of God is consolidated and cemented in the tradition, culture, and religion of Jewish people. It stands for the Signified that only has a mental existence. Unrepresented, the image of God is then detached from the set of signifiers that makes up the text. For, a signifier only signifies in association with other signifiers. The chain of signifiers generates meaning, which is not the case of this representation of God as the prime signified or a totality thoroughly dissociated from the chain of significance in the narrative.

The interaction between these two narrative instances makes writing build up a discourse on God, although characters tend to assimilate it. Reversely, God is disclosed not as a character with human attributes. A dialog set on between the invisible (God) and the visible (characters) shifts into a monolog in the book. The quest of spirituality becomes a reflection on individual, in so much as the image of God remains and plays merely the role of an actant in the economy of the text.

In other words, as an actant, God is invisible in *Night*. Only characters - here the case of Moishe, are concerned about their fate. Writing does not let out any form of visibility which induces a belief in God. But an act of refusal granting visibility to God is authorized and assumed by the text. The enactment of monolog in the novel creates a distance – God is then absent. Disbelief is rendered in the formula that follows: “every question possessed a power that was lost in the answer...” (*Night*, p. 6). Technically, God becomes unreliable having deserted its people.

The discourse on God in the book *Night* is a sublimation of language. The inexistence of this entity marked by a disbelief of characters leads to the perception of a world falling

apart. The image of God is a representation of absence, which is a way to justify the horrors of the past. For instance, the discourse on the character Moishe the Beadle tells the prophecy of the apocalypse where human constants are destroyed. Amongst the most important is the belief in God that Moishe has lost, having witnessed the pogrom of his community. It reads in the text:

They were forced to dig huge trenches. When they had finished their work, the men from the Gestapo began theirs. Without passion or haste, they shot their prisoners, who were forced to approach the trench one by one and offer their necks. Infants were tossed into the air and used as targets for the machine guns (*Night*, p. 6).

Captives are treated as cattle, and they are dehumanized. Writing in this passage comprises a succession of actions which raises the determination of soldiers to exterminate all the deportees as in a programmed agenda. Gestapo soldiers strictly execute orders and tasks – “without passion or haste” is used to describe the establishment of a machine gun. A move from animalization to objectification of individuals underpins the systematic slaughter, where no emotions are allowed. No mercy for the kids used as targets.

Moishe has come out of this experience completely ravaged and fragmented. His madness evokes the insignificance and invisibility of his being, which are not to be explained by his social status as an outcast. The feeling of not existing or rather being “insignificant, invisible” (*Night*, p. 3) derives from the dispossession of his humanity. The discourse on God is elaborated on this absence. He becomes simple with the loss of his humanity which is incarnated in the figure of God. Elie Wiesel’s writing describes as a matter of fact the death of God.

Besides the Nietzschean perspective, the novel *Night* emphasizes above all the peril of human souls. The sublimation of language stems from a double articulation. On the one hand, it is made into the quest of a God — absent, lost, and dead. All these deepening on the other hand, human suffering, as God turns into an object of consolation, as it is meant in the following passage: “he sang, or rather he chanted, and the few snatches [...] spoke of divine suffering, of the Shekhinah in Exile, where, according to Kabbalah, it awaits its redemption linked to that of man” (*Night*, p. 3). The discourse on God advocates as a result the return to man, not as a way to apprehend his nature, but as a way to signify the survival of Jews.

The juxtaposition of the three sentences on page 5 of the novel *Night* allows a better assessment of characters acting in the text. All the passages mentioned below allude to being and body as two essential constituents that make up every character.

- a. “every question possessed a power that was lost in the answer...”
- b. “The real answers [...], you will find only within yourself.”
- c. “question and answer would become ONE.”

Behind the idea of question and answer, writing displays not only a representation, but also the function of the signifier and the signified. The question is associated to the chain of signifiers, as it designates an actualization. It results into another instance - the answer which is assimilated to the body. The relationship that comes out of these couples generates narrative information, in so much as the function of the first coupling of question and signifier is to get to the production of meaning which is rendered in the concept of being. While the function of the set made of answer and signified only refers to a material form, which evokes the concept of body.

In the context of the Jewish genocide, the sublimation of language appears as a narrative strategy that either reveals the fragmentation, or the absence of correlation between body and being in the book *Night*. This explains the lack of effect manifested as a disbelief in God. In fact, the concept of being is related to the belief and faith in God. It describes a meaning, it generates a state or a moment when existence acquires its signification.

However, through the dismantlement of coupling sets body and being, question and answer, and signifier and signified, the book *Night* tackles the sense of inexistence, the death of the human soul in a few words. Or more precisely, the nonsense of an existence through the quest of an absent God represents the context of the book. The treatment of the body differs from the concept of being, as it functionally illustrates the womb. The body is a structure in which being is embedded, as it reads: “question and answer would become ONE.” The being is perceived as the essence of human being. But being contained, it represents a world with no hope. Through the detachment of these instances body and being, Elie Wiesel’s writing definitely sheds light on the inhuman during the Holocaust.

## **Conclusion**

One of the great qualities of this novel *Night* is its ability to show the shock and the horror of the Jewish genocide. The text lays on the treatment of traditional figures of authority. By extension, the figure of God can be substituted to the image of the father. The text abounds with characters of high social ranks, either educated or highly esteemed and admired by the whole community.

Their position, consideration, and responsibilities generate authority manifested in a distance with their counterparts, as seen in the narrator's description of his father being "a cultured man, rather unsentimental." (*Night*, p. 4). Wisdom comes with age, religion, and education. Being "unsentimental" — not displaying feelings, is associated with having self-control, an attitude to contain oneself, to dominate one's emotions. Or as the novel draws a context of war, to be prepared enough for the worst. Indifference expressed in the adjective "unsentimental" evokes indeed matured minds/spirits, which inspires admiration, instead of disconcert.

In the economy of the text, this description of characters predisposes the reader to understand the tragedy that happens in the story later on. It is built on the dissociation and questioning of the image of God and that of the father as sacred figures. The sublime is then revealed in a deconstruction, as the figure of the God/father ceases to be the prime signified. This referential entity whose function is to generate meaning, providing security and stability, is demystified up to the point to dramatize the destiny of captives.

The narrative strategy that leads to this perception proceeds with a dismantlement of the symbolic. Dramatization as a narrative mode gives way to an unconventional writing in which defamiliarization shocks the reader or the translator in his/her reception of the story. The Jewish genocide or the experience of the inhuman, in terms of description, leads to new forms of representation where there is no prominence of any prime signified determining the production of meaning.

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