

**The Dark Wing of Gavriel.*¹ Apophysis in Wiesel's
*Les portes de la forêt***

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Keywords: Wiesel Elie, apophysis, discourse, angel, absence, witness

Abstract: This essay discusses Elie Wiesel's *Les portes de la forêt* and the author's exploration of apophatic discourse. It argues that Wiesel problematizes four aspects of *apophysis*: de-naming, alterity, secrecy, and joy. This signifies that the experience of absence (from language, from the world, from the self) is not merely a uniform and monochrome experience but a layered and textured darkness, interspersed with profane and sacred illuminations. Through the apophatic experience of Wiesel's character, we bear witness to the extreme richness of our shadow and to its relation with the question of the divine.

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In one of his lectures on the status and role of the post-Holocaust writer, Elie Wiesel affirmed that: "Now he has to remember the past, knowing all the while that what he has to say will never be told. What he hopes to transmit can never be transmitted. All he can possibly hope to achieve is to communicate the impossibility of communication."² These words mirror, almost to the letter, the fundamental assumption underlying contemporary apophatic phenomenology. They are the words of one who, having undergone the experience of the exceeding absence of God from the world, has identified himself with, and put his writing in the service of, the phenomenology of *constituted witnesses*.³ What differentiates Wiesel from the majority of twentieth-century writers whose works are permeated by the themes of nothingness, death, finitude, etc., is the conscientious engagement with the Hebrew (and not only) mystical traditions on the absence of God, as well

* This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, Project "Applied social, human and political sciences" co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

¹ In the Islamic tradition, i.e. the writings of Sohrawardi, the Archangel Gabriel is portrayed as having a dark wing (pertaining to the terrestrial realm) and a light wing (pertaining to the spiritual realm).

² Elie Wiesel, et al., *Dimensions of the Holocaust. Lectures at the Northwestern University*, ed. Elliot Lefkowitz (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 8.

³ The terminology of Jean-Luc Marion in *De surcroit. Etudes sur les phénomènes saturés* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2001).

as his attempt to translate this experience not only into a discourse *about* absence but into a discourse that incarnates this excessive absence:

To the careful reader, Wiesel struggles in all of his work to convey to his audience that the radical negativity of the *Shoah* irreparably ruptures language, rendering discursive thought woefully inexpedient. To convey a very real sense of this crisis of representation and interpretation, Wiesel in his essays often uses the direct means of stating in no uncertain terms that words fail in post-Holocaust discourse.¹

Much as his artistic effort is in response to the tragedy, colossal absurdity and absolute evil of the Holocaust, Wiesel's concern is fundamentally a theological one, at all times directed at deploying the several folds of the absence of God in and through language. For Wiesel, the experience of a world seemingly forgotten and abandoned by God does not necessarily condemn humanity, but rather opens the self to the experience of the other. This radically new experience of the other, of *living as another* is one of the key-motifs lying at the core of Wiesel's re-conceptualization of artistic discourse.

Published in 1964, Wiesel's *Les portes de la forêt* is one of the author's most elaborate attempts at incorporating the experience of abandonment in discourse. Not coincidentally, the whole work of the undoing of discourse towards and into its radical exteriority gravitates around an angelic figure, Gavriel, who is both the bearer of the message of the absence of God from the world, as well as the model and example to follow in this disenchantment of the world of representation. Beyond silence, maniacal laughter, lying and story-telling, there is always the mystery of the experience of oneself as another, the most consummate experience of excess:

Just like the spatial form of a human being's outward existence, the aesthetically valid *temporal* form of his inner life develops from the *excess* inherent in my temporal seeing of another soul – from an excess which contains in itself all the moments that enter into the transgredient consummation of the whole of another's inner life. What constitutes these transgredient moments, i.e., moments that exceed self-consciousness and consummate it, are the outer *boundaries* of inner life – the point where inner life is turned *outward* and ceases to be active out of itself.²

Precisely such an overwhelming of the boundaries of self-interiority into the interiority of the other is enacted through the angel's presence in Wiesel's novel. One of the angels' essential functions is that of acting as guides and doubles orienting man toward this utter exteriority, outside the limits of the senses as well as of "the boundaries of inner life".

¹ Jacqueline Bussie, "Laughter and the Limits of Holocaust Storytelling: Wiesel's *The Gates of the Forest*". *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling* pp. 123-156, (Ed. Rosemary Horowitz. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 131.

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, (Austin: U. of Texas P., 1990), 103.

Wiesel is thoroughly submitting the main character of *Les portes de la forêt* to all the stages involved in the metamorphosis of the self through the *lived experience* of the other. The “other” is the angel, that most radical stranger whom Michel de Certeau defined as the “shadow which comes from afar, the advent of an unnamable origin in a fleeting sign”.¹ The angel’s advent in language, within the limits of representation, is the indication of that absolute mystery and secrecy lying beyond all discourses, be they affirmative or negative (or both). Through this double instantiation of otherness (the other of the self and the other of everything that has a name), the figure of Gavriel enacts in Wiesel’s novel that connection between language and destiny. The great difference is that this reunion is first given as a fracture and it is reinstated in the end only to find another sense, a sense akin to the liturgy of attending at the celebration of the invisible God that envisages me only *within a community*. In the following pages, I will look at this double particularity of the presence of the angelic figure in Wiesel’s novel in order to define the traits of the *via negativa* such as it is incorporated in a discourse which always points its move to the peripheral regions of language. My reading will highlight the four main strategies of exceeding the limits of representation deployed in the novel – de-naming, alterity, secrecy and joy – in parallel with the angelic semiosis, in order to define Wiesel’s highly particular and semantically rich reinterpretation of the absence of God from language and from the world. My intention is to highlight the trajectories towards the *tertium datur* of representation that are shaped in the aftermath of the angel’s disruption and disenchantment of the world of representation.

The whole narrative gravitates around Gavriel, whose presence both triggers the beginning of Gregor’s story as well as makes possible its ending. For a writer so conscientiously engaged with mystical matters as Wiesel, the name of Gavriel is surely not coincidental and it already suggests an angelic reference. It is also worthwhile noting that in most of Wiesel’s novels there is almost always such an angelic figure who acts as a guide, alter-ego etc., to the main character. Although he constantly intersperses allusions to the angelic nature of his character, Wiesel prefers to retain the ambivalence of his status, to blur the line between the human and the angelic (this deliberate confusion is also in line with the Old Testament accounts of angels where angels were called ‘men’:

- *C’est le nom d’un ange, dit Gregor en murmurant. Il s’appelle Gavriel.*

L’inconnu émit un petit rire triste:

- *Sais-tu ce qu’il signifie? L’homme de Dieu. Drôle de nom, tu ne trouves pas? Ainsi nous apprenons que ce que nous appelons des anges ne sont que des hommes.*²

¹ Michel De Certeau, “Le parler angélique. Figures pour une poétique de la langue,” in *La linguistique fantastique*, ed. Sylvain Auroux (Paris: J. Clims Denoël, 1985), 117.

² Elie Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), 2.

“- It is the name of an angel, said Gregor whispering. He is called Gavriel.

The stranger gave a little sad laugh:

- Do you know what it signifies? The man of God. Funny name, don’t you find? Thus we learn that those whom we call angels are nothing else but men.” Ibid., 20.

In Wiesel's text, the configuration of the angel is in clear relation with these particular Old Testament descriptions of angels as men; the subtext of this description is the revealing function of angels as a hypostasis of the Face of God. Here it will be the revelation of the majestic aspect of God, of God's absence as His substance. At the moment of his encounter with Gregor, Gavriel is just as disconsolate and dejected as his companion; his bitterness and lack of confidence in humanity and in God are expressed in a maniacal laughter that horrifies Gregor:

*Il ne faut pas oublier le rire non plus. Sais-tu ce qu'est le rire? Je vais te le dire. C'est l'erreur de Dieu. En créant l'homme afin de le soumettre à ses desseins, il lui octroya par mégarde la faculté de rire. Il ignorait que plus tard, ce ver de terre s'en servirait comme moyen de vengeance. Lorsqu'il s'en rendit compte, il était déjà trop tard, Dieu n'y pouvait rien. Trop tard pour ôter à l'homme ce pouvoir. Pourtant, il s'y est appliqué. Il le chassa du paradis, inventa à son intention une variété infinie de péchés et de châtements, lui donna conscience de son propre néant et cela uniquement dans le but de l'empêcher de rire. Trop tard te dis-je. L'erreur de Dieu précéda celle de l'homme: elles ont ceci en commun qu'elles sont irréparables.
Et comme pour illustrer ses paroles, il rit avec une telle passion que Gregor, pour ne pas se mettre à hurler, dut se boucher les oreilles.¹*

This blasphemous, despising angel does not so much accuse God for his absence from the world, but is there in order to point to an original sin that had produced an *irreparable* fracture between man and God. For the character in Wiesel's novel, laughter is that surplus left by mistake in the scheme of representation, the one attribute that man has in order to escape the intricate web in which human destiny and the demonic have become imbricated. In this respect, Gavriel has many affinities with Sohrawardi's *Crimson Angel* (the Islamic Gibreel) who was also beginning his recital by pointing to the shadowy nature of earthly appearance. Like the *Crimson Angel*, Gavriel is also coming from "the land of nowhere":

*D'où viens-tu? demanda Gregor.
De là-bas.
Où exactement se situe 'là-bas'?
Là-bas, te dis-je. Partout. De l'autre côté.²*

¹ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 29. "We should not forget laughter either. Do you know what laughter is? I will tell you. It is the error of God. By creating man in order to submit him to his designs, God gave him by mistake the faculty of laughter. He didn't know that later this earth worm would use it as a means of vengeance. When he realized it, it was too late, there was nothing to be done. Too late to take this power away from man. But he tried to, nevertheless. He chased him out of paradise, invented for him an infinite variety of sins and punishments, gave him the awareness of his own nothingness and all that in order to prevent him from laughing. Too late, I'm telling you. The mistake of God preceded that of man: what they have in common is that they are both irreparable.

And as if in illustration of his words, he laughed with such a passion, that Gregor had to cover his ears so that he wouldn't start yelling."

² Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 16. "Where are you coming from? asked Gregor. From over there. Where exactly is this 'over there'? There, I'm telling you. Everywhere. On the other side."

Like Gibreel, he is also a creature made of lights and shadows appearing both, as we have already seen, in an all too human instantiation, and bearing the attributes of the angelic realm: “*Sa voix à l’accent irréel provient d’un autre monde*”¹; “*La mort n’a pas de prise sur moi*”², he declares to Gregor shortly before surrendering himself to the hands of the Hungarian police. The first time Gregor becomes aware of his presence, he does so through hearing, not sight:

*Les pas approchaient. Le crissement se faisait plus net*³; [...]

*Alors, pour la première fois, il entendit le rire. Un frisson le parcourut. Ses jambes se dérobèrent sous lui. Derrière chaque arbre et dans chaque lambeau de nuage il y avait quelqu’un qui riait. Ce n’était pas le rire d’un seul homme, mais de cent, de sept fois sept cents.*⁴

This association between laughter and excessive absence propagating itself *ad infinitum*, in tricking replicas which do not allow for the recognition of an origin (the loss of the symbolic relation between words and ideas) is also the mark of the beginnings of the “dark night of the soul”:

The theme of the voice is connected to that of the night. [...] The secrets Gavriel possesses are disclosed only in the dark, which stimulates him and which he peoples with images and memories. [...] Listening in amazement to the poisoned words of the messenger, Gregor is unable to grasp their significance. All he knows is that a cruel and foreign universe exists outside of the cave “in which things and events must have a secret meaning, a secret bond, impossible to understand, a warped meaning, a warped bond.”⁵

With Gavriel’s laughter, we are already in the sphere of the inexpressible and the irrepresentable. Whenever Gavriel laughs – at the tragedy of the Holocaust, at the loss of the promised Messiah, in the faces of the Hungarian guards – it is as if to superimpose on all these chronological events, a supra-determining order that can only be expressed through laughter in this world. Laughter is the echo and response to that secret of secrets wherein lies hidden the undoing of all names and non-names. Submitted to the experience of the sole unnamable trace of the tremendous mystery, Gregor cannot do anything else but *tremble*. It is this trembling that translates the confrontation with excessive absence, with the revelation of the world as excessive absence. In *The Gift of Death*, elaborating on

¹ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 18. “his voice with an unreal accent came from another world.”

² Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 44. “death has no power over me”

³ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 12. “The steps were approaching. The rustling became clearer.”

⁴ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 14. “Then, for the first time, he heard the laughter. A shudder went all over him. He felt the earth slipping under his feet. Behind every tree and every strip of clouds there was somebody who was laughing. It wasn’t the laughter of a single man, but of a hundred, of seven times seven hundred.”

⁵ Ellen S. Fine, *Legacy of Night. The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 86–87.

Kierkegaard's analyses in *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida envisaged the act of trembling precisely as the experience of this secret: "A secret always *makes* you tremble. Not simply quiver or shiver, which also happens sometimes, but tremble."¹ The emphasis on the verbal character of this act – *makes* – suggests the deployment of the specific phenomenology of saturated phenomena in which the subject drastically alters his subjectivity, transforming himself, from an independent, unbound agency into a *subjectified*² entity, a "constituted witness", to use Marion's terminology. In Wiesel's universe, the idea of witnessing is a fundamental one; for him, it is an actual genre, with its own specific traits which modify the whole deployment of perspective in the novel as well as the polarity between fiction and truth (as in the case of saturated phenomena, the condition of witnessing precedes any capacity of valuation, it resembles more that "instantaneous synthesis" that Marion was defining as the actual perceptual process taking place in the sphere of revelation). Trembling, as can be noted in the various accounts on apophasis as the kenotic unveiling of the world of representation, is also the sign of the revelation of the absence inherent in what had previously been perceived as the exceeding presence of the world. In Wiesel's novel, this parallel between the revelation of the excessive absence lying at the heart of "presence" and the encounter with the angel is made evident through the metaphor of the forest which has all the phantasmagorical attributes of earthly life:

*Enfant, il avait peur de la forêt, même en plein jour. On lui avait dit qu'elle abritait des loups sauvages qui vous prennent la vie, des êtres sanguinaires qui vous dérobent la fierté et de créatures maléfiques envoyées sur terre afin de détourner l'homme de sa voie: elles emprisonnent votre regard, plient votre élan. [...] Rien ne sert de fuir cette forêt, elle est partout; elle est ce qui sépare l'homme de l'image qu'il se forge de son destin, de la mort de ce destin. Qui donc t'a ouvert les yeux, Gregor? Lui. Cela faisait mal? Oui et non.*³

Nous sommes prisonniers de cette forêt qui, tel un être vivant, retient son souffle et, curieuse, avance et s'incline en tendant l'oreille pour ne pas perdre le moindre froissement, le moindre chuchotement: rien ne doit lui

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 53.

² I would like to note the drastic shift of the subject-object polarity. Here, it is not a question of "being objectified" (like in postmodernist, post-Marxist discourse) but rather of being "subjectified", that is, becoming even more truly and authentically a subject through the experience of excessive absence.

³ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 12. "As a child, he was afraid of the forest, even in broad daylight. He had been told that it sheltered wild wolves that will take your life, sanguinary beings which will steal your pride and evil creatures sent on earth in order to deter man from his route: they enslave your regard and dampen your enthusiasm. [...] There's no point trying to escape from this forest, it is everywhere; it is what separates man from the image that he creates of his destiny, of the death of this destiny. Who was it that opened your eyes, Gregor? He. Did it hurt? Yes and no."

*échapper, rien ne peut se produire en dehors son étreinte. Nous sommes prisonniers de cette folie.*¹

The forest contains the first dimension of apophasis enacted in Wiesel's novel. It is, as the above quotations unambiguously suggest, the realization of the representational character of reality, as well as of the *demonic* significance of this *mise en représentation*. At the moment of the encounter with Gavriel, Gregor is temporarily located in an in-between place, in that cave which is almost a breach in the thick texture of the demoniac forest. Caves are also traditional places of recollection and ascesis for monks. It is their configuration, their *concavity* that turns upside down the process of perception and makes possible the return and awakening of the interior self. It is in this privileged place of return, deserted and unencumbered by almost any sign of life, that the encounter with the angel as the radical other of the self can take place:

- *Cela ne fait rien, dit Gavriel. N'aie pas peur.*

- *Peur?*

- *Chez nous on disait que lorsque l'ombre vous quitte, vous mourrez dans les trente jours. Elle est lâche, l'ombre, elle se refuse à suivre le corps dans le néant. Ceci t'explique pour quoi, dans notre monde, il y a plus d'ombres que d'êtres vivants.*

- *Donc, je mourrai dans les trente jours qui viennent?*

- *Je n'ai pas dit cela, j'ai dit: n'aie pas peur.*

Gavriel se pencha légèrement vers son compagnon et ajouta:

- *Je serai ton ombre, je te protégerai*".²

With yet another allusion to Gavriel's angelic nature – the injunction 'have no fear' – Wiesel is here preparing the grounds for the *dénouement* of Gregor and Gavriel's encounter, as well as articulating the perimeters of the bond between the two characters: the whole scene is played out on the metaphor of the shadow, with all the implications of excessive visibility and invisibility it carries within. As long as Gavriel is present, Gregor's shadow becomes invisible. By sacrificing his life in order to save Gregor, Gavriel restores him his imperilled shadow/soul. From this perspective, Wiesel constructs a highly complex angelic figure, inextricably linked

¹ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 129. "We are prisoners of this forest which, like a living being, holds its breath and, curious, advances and reclines listening carefully so as not to lose the slightest rustle, the slightest whisper: nothing must escape it, nothing can take place outside its embrace. We are prisoners of this madness."

² Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 33. "That's nothing, said Gavriel. Have no fear.

- Fear?

- In my hometown, they said that when your shadow leaves you, you will die in the following thirty days. It is coward, the shadow, it refuses to follow the body in the abyss. This explains why, in our world, there are more shadows than living beings.

- So, I will die in the next thirty days?

- I did not say that. I said: have no fear.

Gavriel leaned slightly towards his companion and added:

- I will be your shadow, I will protect you."

to the human destiny and at the same time seemingly obeying another spatial and temporal law, irreducible to this very destiny for which it is *made* to fall. Even if there are constant hints to this saintly, divine dimension of Gavriel throughout the novel, Wiesel prefers to infinitely veil this aspect, highlighting only the sombre, human aspect of this being. The “light wing” of Gavriel will become visible only gradually, incarnated in Gregor’s slow and painful *kenosis*. As in the case of Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander” this transfiguration of the self is possible not only through the bond of destiny (i.e. giving one’s life for another) but also through a connection in the nominal dimension of being. The angel is at the middle point of this reunion between name and destiny. While in this case too the name will have to be guarded, kept secret, hidden by the angel at first, the emphasis is laid on the loss of this relation:

- *Quel est ton nom?*

- *Je n’en ai point.*

Gregor ne dissimula guère son étonnement:

- *Tout le monde en a un, dit-il.*

- *Soit. Mais moi, je l’ai perdu”¹*

- *Ecoute, j’ai une idée. Mon nom, je ne m’en sers plus. Je te l’offre, il est tien. Prends-le, Gavriel. [...]*

- *Tu aimes donner, pas vrai?*

- *Oui, admit Gregor. C’est plus facile.*

- *Pas du tout. Rien n’est plus difficile.*

Il ajouta comme à lui-même:

- *Pour les Orientaux, donner est un privilège qu’il faut mériter.”²*

This double gift of name and destiny opens the narrative in the excessive chiasmus that the gift of infinite love determines. The one receiving such an incommensurable gift, Gregor, attempts to palliate its effects by forebodingly giving his name in return for his life. But even this giving of the name could never measure itself to the gift of infinite goodness whose only mould is the exceeding void opened by death. It is from this surplus of gift that the inevitable economy of guilt arises, which is inherent even in the most responsible of characters:

¹ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 17.

“-What is your name?

- I don’t have one.

Gregor could not hide his astonishment:

- Everybody has one, he said.

- Perhaps. But I have lost mine.”

² Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 17–23.

“- Listen, I have an idea. I have no use for my name anymore. I am offering it to you, it is yours. Take it, Gavriel. [...]

- You like to give, don’t you?

- Yes, admitted Gregor. It’s easier.

- Not at all. Nothing is more difficult.

He added, as though for himself:

- For the Orientals, giving is a privilege that one has to deserve.”

Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to *become finite*, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other. This gift of infinite love comes from someone and is addressed to someone; responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity. Yet only death or rather the apprehension of death can give this irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of the self, of myself, etc [...]. But the mortal thus deduced is someone whose very responsibility requires that he concern himself not only with an objective God but with a gift of infinite love, a goodness that is forgetful of itself. There is thus a structural disproportion and dissymmetry between the finite and responsible mortal on the one hand and the goodness of the infinite gift on the other hand. One can conceive of this disproportion without assigning to it a revealed cause or without tracing it back to the event of original sin, but it inevitably transforms the experience of responsibility into one of guilt: I have never been and will never be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift, the frameless that must in general define (*in-define*) a gift as such. This guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible.¹

Although the experience of the infinite gift of death is entirely necessary, it remains bound up in this contamination of responsibility and guilt. By founding his whole narrative on the premise of the angel's gift of death, Wiesel sets his discourse in the mode of denial: on the one hand, he is constructing a responsible character, a "subjectified" subject, a constituted witness who can become so only through the experience of the absolute absence of God; on the other hand, he implicitly denies any possibility of achieving such a redemption due to the reminder of guilt which Gavriel's self-abnegation necessarily bestows upon Gregor's destiny. Indeed, this guilt will never leave the character and the novel's resolution is not a suspension of guilt or a coming to terms with God's absence but a way to *make do* with both of them. Through his self-sacrifice, Gavriel is also presenting Gregor with the most consummate example of kenosis, the completely selfless gift that can never be repaid. Although the gift cannot be returned or repaid, it comes with an obligation of honour for Gregor to follow the trajectories of this silencing of the self: "He emptied himself of his divinity'. To empty oneself of the world. To refigure the nature of a slave. To reduce oneself to the point that one occupies in space and time. To nothing. To undress oneself of the imaginary kingdom of the world. Absolute solitude. It is then that one has the truth of the world."²

The fact that this particular configuration of the *via negativa* goes hand in hand with, this time, the *divesting* of name is indicative of Wiesel's attempt at hinting at that third way of the apophatic path that Marion defined based on his reading of Dionysius the Areopagite:

¹ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 51.

² Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1961), 14.

De-naming does not become a ‘metaphysics of presence’ which would not avow its name, but a *theological pragmatics of absence* – where the name gives itself as without name, as not giving the essence and having, precisely, nothing but this absence to make manifest, where listening is accomplished, as Paul notices, “not only in my presence, but much more so in my absence” (*Philippians*, 2, 12). [...] Through a ‘theological pragmatics of absence’ we will understand from now on not the non-presence of God, but the fact that the name gives itself God, which gives God, which gives itself as God (all of them going together, without confusing one with the other) has the function to *protect* him – because weakness designates God at least as well as power – *from the presence* and to give him just like in the way it excepts him [from giving].¹

Through Marion’s explanation, we can guess better the relation between the necessity of angels as hypostasized names of God and the preservation of His hidden, unrevealable aspect. This is the background on which Wiesel’s Gavriel is created. In the economy of apophasis, the divesting of the name has the function of a *de-naming*: it does not, apostatically, deny the existence of God, but protects His coming into presence. Through this connection between the giving of name and destiny, Wiesel seems to be suggesting that the only way to respond to this *de-naming* of God is through a parallel emptying of one’s destiny and name. But this act is possible only through the presence of the other as oneself. The angel as the *absented* other guides the character towards self-knowledge even to a larger extent than he does through his presence (which is too overwhelming for Gregor, he cannot comprehend Gavriel: in the moment of their encounter, he takes him for a madman). As the narrative unfolds, Gregor will begin to identify himself more and more with Gavriel: he will become silent like his companion; in the moment of the partisans’ interrogatory, he will understand and assimilate Gavriel’s mad laughter, all of these in parallel with the obsession of finding him again. This identification is also hinted at from the very beginning: “*Il devint triste. Il pensa: un jour je serai comme lui, je serai entouré par la tristesse, un jour je serai un autre*”². By the time he reaches the Romanian village, Gregor’s assimilation of Gavriel is almost complete: “*Tu vois, Maria, ce n’est pas moi qui ai frappé à ta porte. C’est lui, l’étranger qui m’habite, c’est lui qui a frappé, c’est lui qui t’a fait descendre du lit. Il est puissant, tu dois le reconnaître, non?*”³

In Wiesel’s text, the Talmudic and Kabbalistic traditions offer the *sense* of the absence and hiddenness of the angel as the other of the self. It is in the third season of his apophatic itinerary that Gavriel will learn this sense through Yehuda’s teachings:

¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît. Etude sur les phénomènes saturés*, 187–188.

² Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 190. “He became sad. He thought: one day I will be like him, I will be surrounded by sadness, one day I will be another.”

³ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 68. “You see, Maria, it is not I who knocked at your door. It is he, the stranger who inhabits me, he is the one who knocked on your door, he is the one who made you come down from your bed. He is powerful, you recognize him, don’t you?”

C'est inhumain de vouloir s'enfermer dans la douleur, dans le souvenir, comme dans une prison sans porte, sans air. La souffrance doit nous ouvrir à autrui et non faire de lui un étranger. Le Talmud dit que Dieu souffre avec l'homme: pour quoi? Pour renforcer les liens entre la création et le créateur; c'est pour mieux comprendre l'homme et se faire mieux comprendre de lui que Dieu choisit la souffrance. Or toi, tu cherches à souffrir seul. Cette souffrance te rétrécit, te diminue, elle est proche de la cruauté.¹

It would seem that the sense of suffering (from God's excessive absence from the world, from the loss of the sense bestowed by the connection between destiny and name, etc.) is this ascetic and ascending movement towards the other through which the character more closely approaches God. As compared to the angels' manifesting the presence of God in the world, which was defined by a movement of descent from the divine to material reality, the way of apophasis, the emptying of the world of representation are characterized by a movement of ascent from creature to Creator. This emptying of the world of representation is an *imitatio angelica*, that evacuation of all images and representations in order to reach the limit separating the visible from the invisible. This is a space where excessive presence and absence meet. Envisaging the angel Gavriel as Gregor's *alter-ego* means going very deep in the realm of the *imaginal*, where the images have a face but no flesh, where *parousia* can come about only once one has learnt to perceive the other's interior meaning through the displacement of the confines of the self in the direction of the other:

Lived experiences, when experienced outside myself in the other, possesses an inner exterior, an inner countenance adverted toward me, and this inner exterior or countenance can be and should be lovingly contemplated, it can be and should be remembered the way we remember a person's face (and not the way we remember some past experiences of our own) [...]. It is this exterior of another's soul (an inner flesh of the subtlest kind, as it were) that constitutes an intuitively palpable artistic individuality [...], that is, a particular realization of meaning in being, an *individual* realization and embodiment of meaning, a clothing of meaning with inner flesh ...²

The similarity between Bakhtin's description of envisaging the palpable interiority of the other and the definitions of angels' bodies as "spiritual flesh", etc., is striking. There is a deep affinity between the apophatic way as the emptying of

¹ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 190. "It is inhuman to wish to shut yourself up in pain, in the memory, as in a gateless prison, without air. Suffering should open us to the other and not turn him into a stranger. The Talmud says that God is suffering with man. Why? In order to reinforce the connections between creature and creator; it is in order to better understand man and to make himself better understood by man that God chooses suffering. But you, you are trying to suffer all alone. This suffering limits and demeans you, it is close to cruelty."

² Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, 102.

the self in the other, a particular way of perceiving reality, and the ascending movement of the soul towards God. All these acts are concentrated in the kernel of the metamorphosis of meaning which is made possible by envisaging the *countenance* of the other. Bakhtin's use of this word here is probably not accidental; in *Iconostasis*, Pavel Florensky elaborated on the notion of countenance (*lik*) as opposed to the ideas of mask and face (*lichina* and *litzo*) in order to refine the distinctions between them (in spite of their similar linguistic root) as well as to define this “face of the interior self” that Bakhtin was referring to:

we are beholding a countenance, then, whenever we have before us a face that has fully realized within itself its likeness to God: and we then rightly say, Here is the image of God, meaning: Here is depicted the prototype of Him. [...] In Greek, we remember, *countenance* is called εἶδος or ἰδέα (i.e., idea), for ἰδέα is precisely the meaning of countenance: the idea of revealed spiritual being, eternal meaning contemplatively apprehended, the supreme heavenly beauty of a precise reality, the highest prototype, the ray from the source of all images: such are the meanings of idea in Plato.¹

In Wiesel's novel, alterity has the role to accomplish this transfiguration of the inner self into a countenance, a meaningful interiority which is accompanied by a movement of return to the idea. The emergence of the countenance is conditioned, in *Les portes de la forêt*, by the disappearance of the name and “shadow”. It is through this paradoxical abnegation of the tokens of the self that the new subject can emerge. Moreover, Gregor will be able to regain his true name *only* in the radical loss of the self, in his abandonment of all questions and rationalistic guises. The significant absence of Gavriel will open, little by little, the dimension of what Bakhtin called “sympathetic understanding”:

This self-activity of mine in relation to another's inner world (from outside this world) is usually called ‘sympathetic understanding’. What should be emphasized is the absolutely incremental, excessive, productive, and enriching character of sympathetic understanding. [...] The other's co-experienced suffering is a completely new *ontic* formation that I alone actualize *inwardly* from my unique place *outside* the other. Sympathetic understanding is not a mirroring, but a fundamentally and essentially new valuation, a utilization of my own architectonic position in being outside another's inner life. Sympathetic understanding recreates the whole inner person in aesthetically loving categories for a new existence in a new dimension of the world.²

First of all, we should note the excessive nature of this way of envisioning alterity: undoubtedly, it signifies that “growing of the desert” which is the *sense* of

¹ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, Trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 52.

² Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, 103.

the communitarian dimension of bereavement and suffering. The other oscillates between the invisibility of the *face* (in Bakhtinian terms) and the visibility of the *countenance*. For Gregor, the disappearance of the embodied Gavriel will lead to the gradual growth of his countenance, both as Gavriel and himself. The access to this moment of transfer and transfiguration is possible only through the *via-dolorosa* of suffering together: with the people of the Romanian village for their muted secrets, with the partisans for their massacred people, with Clara for the loss of the man they both admire the most. However, in all of these instances, Gregor is never really co-participating in the suffering of the others: he is only playing a part when he becomes the confessor of the Romanian villagers, his being accused of treason takes away from him the possibility of sharing with the partisans the same moment of mourning for the loss of Lieb, and Clara's holding on to the image of her first lover oppresses and accuses him. Until the very end of the novel, Gregor is not quite ready for that "new valuation" that sympathetic understanding affords. Eager to relinquish his name, he is not nearly as ready to strip himself of his divinity, of himself *as* Gavriel: "*Si je survis, pensa-t-il, je dévourai ma vie à clarifier cette question. Ce sera le but de mon existence. Je deviendrai lui afin de le saisir mieux, peut-être le comprendre et l'aimer ; l'aimer sans le comprendre*"¹. But in the space of excessive absence opened up by the gift of death, there is no longer room for angels: any such identification is an apostasy, an attempt to dress nothingness with images. The surplus of secrecy enacted by Gavriel's self-sacrifice and reinforced by his persistent absence is what turns the whole experience into a secret, exceeding language and even the possibility of witnessing:

The ideas of secrecy and exclusivity [*non-partage*] are essential here, as is Abraham's silence. He doesn't speak, he doesn't tell his secret to his loved ones. He is, like the knight of faith, a witness and not a teacher [...] and it is true that this witness enters into an absolute relation with the absolute, but he doesn't witness to it in the sense that to witness means to show, teach, illustrate, manifest to others the truth that one can precisely attest to. Abraham is a witness of the absolute faith that cannot and must not witness before men. He must keep his secret. But his silence is not just any silence. Can one witness in silence? By silence?²

Indeed, Gregor's witnessing is fraught with guilt and it always leads to the propagation and intensification of the lie: it is because he decides to share with Leib the story of Gavriel that the partisans' leader eventually loses his life; even at the end, when he meets the character he takes for Gavriel and retells him the whole narrative of his history of loss, his words seem to pass through his audience, they seem to serve the sole purpose of helping the narrator empty himself of inescapable images. His story, having started under the sign of the gift of death, is utterly

¹ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 49. "If I stay alive, he thought, I will devote my life to clarifying this question. This will be the purpose of my existence. I will become him in order to grasp him better, maybe understand and love him; love him without understanding him."

² Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 73.

incomprehensible and impossible to express in language. In Gregor's subsequent narratives on Gavriel, he will, most of the times, only very vaguely hint to his supra-natural dimension. Gavriel will remain, until the very end, the impenetrable gate-keeper of a world of secrecy: "*Gregor n'osait l'interroger, n'osait s'introduire dans ce monde clos où choses et évènements devaient avoir un sens secret, un lien secret, échappant à l'entendement, un sens malade, un lien malade*"¹. The inexpressible referent of apophatic discourse is, for Derrida, that which lies at the intersection of "a secret and non-secret". In Wiesel's novel, it takes the shape of that double movement of excess that characterizes the majority of apophaticism: on the one hand, it is the secret of the world of representation and on the other hand, it is the secret of revelation, the taboo and impossibility of expressing and sharing the mystery of the encounter with the angel. In the novel, the forest encapsulates both:

Le miracle de la forêt: rien de ce qui s'y dit ne se perd. Le saint et le solitaire – peut-être c'est le même – y viennent non seulement pour se purifier le corps et la passion, surtout la passion, mais surtout pour écouter en tremblant, pour trembler en écoutant cette voix mugissante qui, avant la création première, avant la libération du verbe, contenait déjà la forme et la matière – la joie e sa défaite – et ce qui les sépare et ce qui les concilie – à partir desquels furent pétris l'univers, le temps et leur vie secrete.²

The secret is experienced as a sickness, as this trembling which is the sign of the exposure to the exceeding absence. The forest integrates a double movement of excess because, on the one hand, it is a metaphor of the world of representation – the demoniac stratum of representation – which becomes shattered after the encounter with the angel and the experience of the gift of death. But even beyond this purging of false images and representations there still lies hidden the absolute secret of the coming into being of creation. Gregor's apophatic itinerary will be successful therefore only in the re-encounter of these *traces*. The key-word here is *joy* and Wiesel embeds it at the beginning of the novel as a subtle foretelling of the final stage of Gregor's apophatic itinerary. After the failure of words and acts, of witnessing even, there is but one domain that the experience of apophasis as alterity can find its most accomplished expression:

What is possible, of course, is that I come to partake passively in the justified givenness of being, in the *joyful* givenness of being. Joy knows no

¹ Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 26. "Gregor did not dare interrogate him, he did not dare introduce himself in this closed world in which things and events must have had a secret meaning, a secret connection, exceeding understanding, a sick sense, a sick bond."

² Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 129. "The miracle of the forest: nothing of what is said there is lost. The saint and the solitary – maybe they are one and the same – go there not only to purify their body and passion, especially their passion, but mostly in order to listen and tremble, to tremble while listening to this roaring voice which, before the primordial creation, before the liberation of the verb, already contained form and matter – joy and its defeat – and what separates and reconciles them – from which the universe, time and their secret life were petrified."

active relationship to being; I must become naïve in order to rejoice. From within myself, in my own self-activity, I cannot become naïve and, hence, I cannot rejoice. Only being, and not my self-activity, can be joyful; my self-activity is inescapably and irresolvably serious. Joy is the most passive, the most defenselessly pitiful condition of being. Joy is possible for me only in God or in the world, that is, where I partake in being in a justified manner *through* the other and *for* the other, where I am passive and receive a bestowed gift. It is my otherness that rejoices in me, not I for myself.¹

This is the lesson that Gregor will learn at the Jewish celebration of the *hassidim*. The climax of that moment is not, as has been suggested, Gregor's so-called re-encounter with Gavriel, but his final self-abandonment after this encounter, when he joins the joyous dancing of his people. It is only after the undoing of the sense he had given to the story of Gavriel's absence, that he reaches that emptiness and selflessness in which he can experience the "joyful givenness of being":

*Les hassidim dansent sur place, verticalement, imposant leur rythme à la terre. Que les murs s'écroulent, tant pis, cela prouvera qu'aucune enceinte n'est assez large pour contenir leur ferveur. Ils chantent et c'est le chant qui les fait vivre, qui les emplît de sève, qui les unit; [...] oui, il fut un temps où Dieu et l'homme ne faisaient qu'un, puis ils se séparèrent et depuis ils se cherchent, se poursuivent, se proclament invincibles, et tant que durera la fête, ils seront.*²

This joy which is experienced in dancing is, for Bakhtin, the most consummate manner of "losing oneself in another": "In dancing, everything inward in me strives to come to the outside, strives to coincide with my exterior".³ This final image in which the hero has restored his name at the same time as experiencing the joyous dimension of being through co-extensive participation with the other is what defines the final stage of the *kenosis* begun with the encounter between Gregor and Gavriel (or their split).

In this highly particular deployment of apophatic itinerary, which involves the fundamental stages of *de-naming*, alterity, secrecy, and joy, Wiesel has opened up a space which does not attempt to fill in the void left by the fully experienced absence of God from the world. Rather, with the emphasis on these aspects of the apophatic experience, he has highlighted the traces by which language (only) *dialogically* becomes the site of a marked and excessive absence of sense. In this

¹ Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, 136.

² Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt*, 201. "The hassidim are dancing in place, vertically, imposing their rhythm to the ground. Too bad if the walls should fall, that will prove that no room is large enough to contain their fervor. They are singing and it is their song that makes them live, that fills them with energy and unites them [...], yes, there was a time when God and man were one, then they grew apart and ever since they have been looking for each other, they are following each other, proclaim themselves invincible and, as long as the celebration lasts, they will be so."

³ Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, 137.

context, the angel's presence/absence educates to the unlearning of images of the self in the experience of the other. The angel Gavriel historicizes this revelation of the hidden aspect of God as well as continuously veils it through the repeated movements of de-naming or un-naming which are enacted in his presence at all times. The pathos of this peripatetic wandering outside the limits of the self towards the re-discovery of traces of an absolutely exceeding sense is the mode of being of the coming to life of history, from the *punctum caecum* of the encounter with the angel. Gavriel's narrative function in Wiesel's novel is very similar to that of the angel announcing the Resurrection of Christ. The narrative, as well as the transfiguration, began with his announcement of exceeding absence. The *sense* of the narrative will always be the presence of the empty tomb, or rather all the narratives and histories will henceforth have to pass through this experience of excessive emptiness. However, the space between the announcing of excessive absence and the final accomplishment of *kenosis* is a vast one and its figures and traces constantly relate the two moments of death. Seamlessly, the angel weaves the two axes together.