

## MEMORY, SALVATION, AND PERDITION

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“We remember Auschwitz and all that it symbolizes because we believe that, in spite of the past and its horrors, the world is worthy of salvation; and salvation, like redemption, can be found only in memory.”<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel spoke these words in German Reichstag in an address delivered on November 10, 1987, fifty years after the infamous Kristallnacht, in which mobs went through the streets of Nazi Germany destroying Jewish property and helping to set in motion the horrors of the Holocaust. The words sum up a theme that runs like a red thread through Wiesel’s work: the saving power of remembering wrongs that we have perpetrated or suffered. As he himself put it, faith in memory’s saving power, faith that it will heal individuals concerned and help rid the world of violence, is his central obsession.

Among our contemporaries, Wiesel may be the one most obsessed with memory of wrongs and sufferings. But belief in the redemptive power of such memory is widespread today. Psychologists and novelists, historians and philosophers, cultural critics and politicians are repeating the injunction “Remember!” like a reassuring drumbeat. For many, the injunction to remember has the same foundational status as the call “Believe!” has had for Protestant Christians since Martin Luther famously declared: “If you believe, you shall have all things.”<sup>2</sup> If you believe in Christ, you will be justified before God, insisted Luther; if you remember wrongs and sufferings they caused,

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory. Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 201.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Helmut Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), XXXI, 348-349.

you'll find salvation in history, urges Elie Wiesel and, along with him, many of our contemporaries. It is almost as if for many today "memory" has taken place once occupied by religion.

But is memory such an unambiguous good? How strong is the link between memory and salvation? Isn't the memory of wrongs suffused with pain and suffering? Hasn't it sometimes pushed those who remember to inflict pain and suffering upon others? Doesn't it then have a link to perdition and not just to salvation? And if memory is integral to salvation but can also lead to perdition, how should we remember for memory to be truly saving?

In unfolding the relations between memory, salvation, and perdition, I will mainly consider the memory of wrongs committed or suffered. In addition to remembering wrongs and sufferings, we remember many other things as well—stories from our childhood, adolescent dreams and disappointments, successes and failures in our work, history of our people, religious instruction. Though all such memories are central to who we are and how we live, I will not address them here. My theme is not memory in general, but memory of wrongs and sufferings. Moreover, I will examine here only the question whether such memory is in some significant way saving. There may be other reasons to remember wrongs irrespective of whether our remembering is "saving" or not—say out of sheer duty toward sufferers, because of unyielding demands of justice, or simply because to be a human being means to remember such things. I will leave here these reasons for remembering aside. Here my topic is memory and salvation.

There are two ways to understand the link between memory and salvation. We can consider memory as the *content* of salvation (as when we think that without memories of wrongs we have suffered we would have a gaping hole in our identity). And we can consider memory as a *means* to salvation (as when we think that the memory of violence committed protects people from becoming

victims in future). I will explore these two ways of linking memory and salvation in turn devoting two major sections of the lecture to each.

*The Pleasure and Pain of Memory*

Salvation lies in memory, argued Elie Wiesel. But it is not obvious that we should associate memory of wrongs with salvation or with anything positive for that matter. I dread, for instance, the memory of long hours of terrifying interrogations to which the officers of the Yugoslavian army have subjected me in the winter of 1984. The reason is simple: it is painful to relive those experiences in memory. As long as it is remembered, the past is not just past; it is taken up into the present and given a new lease on life.

If the experiences from the past are pleasant, their new life in memory will be welcomed, of course. Consider memories of Johannes, the fictitious author of Soren Kierkegaard's "Seducer's Diary." He is keeping the diary not just to record his past conquests but to recollect them and, in recollecting them, make them an occasion for "the second enjoyment."<sup>3</sup> We may object that his conquests are exploitive and his memory compulsive. But from his perspective, an aesthete whose main goal is to make life "interesting," the point of remembering is clear: memory multiplies pleasure because it re-presents the original experience. Often memory fails, of course, and the record of the past is erased. Distant events fade into background and disappear. Pleasure experienced in the past remains just that—pleasure past, swallowed up by the night of non-remembrance and lost forever. But the more vivid the memory, the more the past pleasure becomes a present delight.

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<sup>3</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), II, 305. Johannes strives to describe the events from the past "as if they were taking place right now and with such dramatic vividness that it sometimes seems as if everything were taking place before one's eyes" (304).

Just as memory of pleasure repeats past pleasure, so memory of pain repeat past pain. “The moment, here in a flash, gone in a flash . . . does, after all, return as a ghost once more and disturbs the peace of a later moment,” wrote Friedrich Nietzsche in one of his *Unfashionable Observations* entitled “Utility and Liability of History.”<sup>4</sup> Consider traumatic memories. We tend to repress them when the suffering undergone seems unbearable. Yet often what was repressed resurfaces in flashbacks beyond our control, and then we experience anew the horror of past pain. Even if we doubt of the reality of repression, as scholars increasingly do,<sup>5</sup> the point still stands: to remember suffering endured is to keep one’s wounds open. The larger the wound and the better the recollection, the more past and present merge and past suffering becomes present pain. If memory repeats and revives the original suffering, how could salvation lie in memory?

One could argue, however, that all memory of pain isn’t in itself painful. At the end of his masterpiece, *City of God*, Augustine distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge of evil, which he correlates with two kinds of memory. In one kind of knowledge, evil is “accessible to apprehension by the mind,” and in the other “it is a matter of direct experience.”<sup>6</sup> The first is like a medical doctor’s knowledge of a disease and the second like a patient’s knowledge of the same disease. The blessed in the world to come, Augustine argued, will remember their own past wrongdoing the way a medical doctor knows a disease she has never experienced.<sup>7</sup> They will have “no sensible recollection of past evils;” such recollection “will be completely erased from their feelings.”<sup>8</sup> Even

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Utility and Liability of History,” *The Complete Works*, ed. Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), II, 87.

<sup>5</sup> See Richard J. McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, transl. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), xxii, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, the saints in the world to come will have no memory of offenses *others* have perpetrated against them. Augustine writes of the freed will in the Heavenly City: “It will be freed from all evil and filled with all good, enjoying unfailingly the delight of eternal joys, forgetting all offences, forgetting all punishments” (*City of God*, XII, 30).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

though Augustine does not explain how such an erasure will happen in the world to come, the underlying conviction which leads him to speak of erasure of feelings of pain is plausible enough: if we are re-living pain in memory, we are not yet fully redeemed.

But can we remember past suffering without remembering the feeling that accompanied it? Depending on the mood, I can either remember my father's funeral simply as a fact or I can feel deeply saddened by the thought of the disappearance of this extraordinarily good man from my life. So one can remember an event without remembering the emotion which originally accompanied it. But a memory without such an emotion is a significantly altered memory. As Avishai Margalit argued in *Ethics of Memory*, "sensitivity," or the feelings that are tied to the events remembered, is an essential component of a memory of an event whenever the feelings are part of the original experience of the event. "The amazement and horror in watching the collapse of the twin towers in New York, let alone being there, is the kernel of the memory of the collapse and not ketchup added on top of it."<sup>9</sup> Memories of suffering undergone with no corresponding feeling of pain or of deep sympathy involve "forgetting" at their very core. I can remember my dad's funeral without sadness only if I let forgetting of the emotional dimension of the event alter my remembering.

This is in fact exactly how Augustine thought about the matter. The two ways of knowing evil—knowing by apprehension of mind and knowing by experience—have "two corresponding ways of forgetting evil," writes Augustine. "The learned scholar's way of forgetting is different from that of the one who has experienced suffering. The scholar forgets by neglecting his studies; the sufferer, by escaping from his misery." With this distinction of forgetting in mind—forgetting of facts and forgetting of misery—Augustine then claimed that past evils will be "completely erased

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<sup>9</sup> Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 62-63.

from their [the saints'] feelings."<sup>10</sup> In Augustine's account, the life of the blessed involves not just memory of past wrongs but also forgetting—forgetting of how suffering and evil *felt*.

With regard to salvation, the excision from memory of the pain endured is as significant as the memory of the event itself. If salvation lies in memory, must it then not be the kind of memory that at its heart includes forgetting of pain? For surely, as long as the pain is felt, salvation cannot be complete.

### *Memory and Identity*

But maybe we should not be so preoccupied with memory's pain, at least not before we have reached the state of the blessed, whose memories Augustine wanted to purge of any sensible recollection of evil. For memories do not merely cause pleasure or pain, but also decisively shape our identities.

In our private persons we *are* much of what we remember about ourselves. I am who I am because I remember having lived in Novi Sad in communist Yugoslavia, having done this or that mischief (like amassing a collection of stolen car "tags," a crime not dissimilar to Augustine's famous and gratuitous stealing of pears<sup>11</sup>) or having been laughed at in school by students and teachers alike because my father was a Pentecostal minister. Similarly, in our public persons we *are* what others remember about us. I am who I am on account of what my parents remember about my childhood, or how my colleagues have come to view me on the basis of their memory of my actions and reactions, or how my readers remember my books and articles. Memory, the argument goes, is central to identity. To the extent that we sever ourselves from memories of what we have done and

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XXII, 30.

<sup>11</sup> See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick. (New York: Oxford Press 1992), II, 4 (9).

what has happened to us, we will lose our proper identity. If suffering was part of our past, pain will be part of our identity. We need to embrace our memories along with their pain, otherwise we will not be true to ourselves. In that way, salvation lies in memory insofar as that memory protects us from distorting our very selves and living a lie.

But what exactly is the relationship between memory and identity? Let's accept for a moment that we are to a significant degree what we remember. Don't we remember many widely discordant things about ourselves—betrayals and fidelity, pain and delight, hatred and love, cowardice and heroism, as well as thousands of bland moments not worthy of description? The memory that makes us up is a quilt that we have stitched from the ever-growing mountain of multicolored shreds of discrete memories. What will be stitched into the quilt and what will be discarded, or what will feature prominently on that quilt and what will form a background will depend greatly on how we put our memories together and how others—from those who are closest to us all the way to the culture as a whole—put them together for us. We are not just shaped by memories; we ourselves shape the memories that shape us.

And since we do, the consequences are significant. For then our identities cannot consist simply in what we remember. Because we can react to our memories, we are larger than our memories. If our reactions to memories were simply determined by the memories themselves, then we would be slaves of the past. Unless we have been severely damaged and are in desperate need of healing, we will have a measure of freedom with regard to our memories. To the extent that we are psychologically healthy, our identity will consist in our ability to respond in freedom to our memories and in our free responses to memories, and not just in the memories themselves.

Moreover, aren't we also what we hope for in the *future*? It is true, the past can rob us of the future just like it can rob us of the present. But here again, our dreams cannot be just forward

projections of our memories, for then we would be nailed down to our past and our future would only be its boring and oppressive extension. A person with a healthy sense of identity will let the future draw her out of the past and the present, and will play with new possibilities and embark upon new paths. With regard to our past, present, and future we are a great deal more than our memories, and how memories shape our identity depends not just on memories themselves but on what we and others do with these memories.

To return to my own experience again, I can see myself primarily as the one who was terrorized by powerful people against whom I was helpless and whose intentions I could not discern. Or I can see myself primarily as a person who, after some suffering, has been delivered by God and given a new life, much like in their sacred writings, ancient Israelites saw themselves not primarily as those who suffered in Egypt but as those who were delivered by Yahweh. I can be angry about suffering. I can be thankful about deliverance. I can be both. I can also let that year of suffering recede somewhere into a distant background and stretch myself toward the future—I can try to make something of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture which I direct, I can work on a book about theology and ethics of fashion, or live for Nathanael and Aaron, my two sons.

Not all experiences of pain will be as compliant as I am suggesting mine are. Some will stubbornly insist in being at the heart of our identity; these memories define us without us having much say in the matter. But clearly these are an exception and not the rule, and the healthier the person is, the more of an exception they will be. If salvation lies in memory of wrongs committed, it must therefore lie more in what we *do* with memories than in memories themselves. And what we do with memories will depend on how we see ourselves in the present and how we project ourselves into the future.

So far I have taken Wiesel's claim that salvation lies in memory of wrongs to mean that such memory is a *component* of salvation, which is to say that salvation lies literally in memory. But the claim could also be taken to mean that memory is essential in order to *achieve* the salvation that lies outside of memory. This is how Wiesel primarily intended the claim (though he very much insists on the importance of the memory of wrongdoing for identity<sup>12</sup>). In this second sense, memory is more a means to salvation than a content of salvation. One can understand memory as a means to salvation in at least four distinct though closely related ways.

### *Memory, Healing, and Acknowledgment*

One way to think about memory as a means to salvation is to relate it to *personal healing*. Psychological wounds caused by suffering can be healed only if a person passes through the narrow door of painful memories. In other words, she must endure pain of memory to reach a cure—one of Sigmund Freud's basic insights. An unexpressed traumatic experience is like a foreign body "which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work."<sup>13</sup> Healing is possible only if someone recollects the event along with the emotional state that accompanied it. By bringing it into the light of knowledge both the event and the co-occurrent emotion, therapy provides an opportunity "for the normal discharge of the process of excitation."<sup>14</sup> Since the feeling accompanying the event is no longer, as Freud puts it, "strangled" but set free, healing can take place.

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<sup>12</sup> See Elie Wiesel, "Ethics and Memory," *Ernst Reuter Vorlesungs im Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 14f.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, vol. 2 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, vol. 11 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 19.

We can interpret Freud as meaning that the mere fact of remembering what was repressed—events and emotional reactions to them—will result in healing at least to some degree. Shine the light of knowledge into the dungeon where memories of suffering and wrongdoing are locked up, and you will be freed from their clandestine and subversive work! But this cannot be right. If the mere fact of remembering a traumatic experience had healing power, you would not have repressed the memory of it in the first place! Memory does no more than repeat the original trauma in an altered form, and repetition *as such* is a problem, not a solution.

As the trauma literature consistently notes, for wounded psyches to be healed, we must not only remember traumatic experiences; in one way or another, we must also *integrate* the retrieved memories into a broader pattern of our life stories, either by making sense of the traumatic experiences or by tagging them as surd elements in our lives. Salvation understood as personal healing is accomplished not so much by remembering the traumatic event and emotions which have accompanied it as by *interpreting* memories and *inscribing* them into a larger pattern of meaning.

As I relive in memory the humiliation and pain of my military police interrogations, I can tell myself, for instance, that the suffering has made me a better person (say, in the way it has drawn me closer to God or made me more empathetic to the suffering of others). Or I can come to believe that it has contributed in some small way to exposing the injustice of a regime that controlled its citizens, curtailed their freedoms, and sacrificed their well-being out of a commitment to an unworkable ideology. In either case, healing will come about not by remembering but by seeing memories and the experiences they hold in a new light. Put more generally, the memory of suffering is a precondition for healing, not the means of healing itself. The means of healing is the *interpretative work* a person does *with* memory.

A second way to understand memory as a means of salvation concerns *acknowledgement*. The interrogations to which I was subjected would not have been possible without cooperation of my fellow soldiers. They sought to lure me into conversations about politically sensitive topics (such as pacifism) and provided me with literature potentially subversive to the communist regime to elicit my responses, which the police then secretly taped. To those not familiar with what was going on, these soldiers would have looked as perfectly decent human beings, and yet they were willingly participating in the attempt potentially to ruin a life of an innocent person. If no one remembers a misdeed or names it publicly, it remains invisible. On one level, the victim is not a victim and the perpetrator is not a perpetrator; both are misperceived because the one's violence and the other's suffering go unrecognized. A double injustice occurs, the first when the original deed is done and the second when it is made to disappear.

The injustice of concealing wrongs fuels the strong urge many victims have to speak about their suffering. Because the act of public remembering is an act of acknowledgement, it is therefore also an act of justice. This holds true at both personal and broader political levels. Commenting on the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Andre de Toit writes:

The victims of political killings cannot be brought back to life, nor can the harm and trauma of torture and abuse somehow be negated. What can be done, though, is publicly to restore the civic and human dignity of those victims precisely by acknowledging the truth of what was done to them. This was the function and purpose of the victims' hearings where people were enabled to tell their own stories, and to have them publicly acknowledged in non-adversarial procedures.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Andre du Toit, "Moral Foundations of the South African TRC. Truth as Acknowledgement and Justice as Recognition," in *Truth vs. Justice. The Morality of Truth Commissions*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 134. In our court system, adversarial procedures are meant to get at the truth of the

Acknowledgement is essential to personal and social healing. Notice, however, what acknowledgment here means. According to de Toit, Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not supposed to acknowledge victims' unqualified remembrances, but "the *truth* of what was done to them." No doubt, our first duty is simply to attend to victims' experiences and memories as they present them to us. But ultimately we cannot put aside the question of truth. Scholars who study memory are unanimous: Memories are notoriously unreliable.<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to think that victims' memories are an exception. Though victims often do remember correctly, the pain of their undeniable suffering and understandable rage can easily distort their memories.

My own memory of interrogations by Captain Goranovic and his superiors is a case in point. As I've remembered and occasionally retold the story, the interrogators' brutality has tended to grow, even as basic facts remained the same. I would conveniently leave out the fact that my fellow soldiers did not act out of malice but out of desire to please superiors in exchange for small benefits like longer hours off base. I found myself portraying perpetrators as greater villains than who, in my better moments, I knew they in fact were. I was unjust toward them, and "injustice" is the proper term here, even if we do feel reluctant to suggest that a victim may be guilty of it. If a victim's truthful stories are a form of justice, then their deceitful memories must be a form of injustice. And an unjust memory of wrongdoing is not a means of salvation. *Truthful* and therefore *just* memory is. Untruthful memories add to the evil they are intended to subtract from.

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matter. But it is not clear that this is in fact their effect. Money can buy a perpetrator a good deal of "reasonable doubt," and the consequence is that truth gets to be trampled under foot.

<sup>16</sup> See Brian L. Cutler and Steven D. Penrod, *Mistaken Identification: The Eyewitness, Psychology, and the Law* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *Witness for the Defense: The Accused, the Eyewitness and the Expert Who Puts Memory on Trial* (St. Martin's Press, 1992).

### *Memory, Solidarity, and Protection*

A third way memory can serve as means to salvation is by generating *solidarity* with victims. Remembering suffering awakens us from slumber of indifference and goads us to fight against the suffering and oppression around us—or so the argument goes. To struggle against evil, we must empathize with its victims. And to empathize with victims, we must know either from experience or from witnesses' stories what it means to hunger, thirst, shiver, bleed, grieve or tremble in fear. The memory of past horror will make us loathe to accept it in the present.

Yet it isn't clear that we must recall past wrongs in order to struggle against present ones, or that such recollection invariably leads us to fight wrongdoing. Take, for example, someone who has not undergone a major wrongdoing himself but who relies instead on witnesses' to past wrongdoings. Can that memory motivate him more than vivid portrayals of present suffering can? It seems that, when it comes to motivating persons to struggle against wrongdoing, we can safely let go of the memory of distant suffering because reports of fresh suffering are plentiful. Though memory of past suffering may stimulate empathy with today's victims, such memory may not be necessary or even be the best means toward that end. Thus, remembering suffering does not seem indispensable to generating solidarity.

Or take someone who herself has been wronged in deeply painful ways. Her indifference to another's suffering, precisely on account of her own, is also a possible, even reasonable, response. Why should she of all people add the burden of caring for others to the burden of nursing her own wounds and mending her own shattered life? There are good answers to this question. But they don't lie in memory itself, but in the broader set of convictions about the nature of reality and our responsibilities within it. Though memory of our own suffering can be a motivating force to alleviate

others' suffering, it can also turn our eyes away from sufferers. By itself, memory of wrongs seems insufficient to generate solidarity.

Finally, trauma literature consistently warns that those who have suffered violence are prone to repeat the act of victimization either as victims or as perpetrators. Someone who was physically abused as a child may repeat the act as an adult, caught in the cycle of victim and perpetrator. Memories of wrongs committed against a person may create new victims rather than generate solidarity with existing ones. To be a means of salvation, memories themselves must be “saved.”

When it comes to generating solidarity with victims, memories of wrongs may be expendable, are certainly insufficient, and are potentially dangerous. They *can* engender empathy and mitigate against oppression. But they can also lead to indifference and even trigger renewed violence—hardly a means of salvation.

The fourth and final way in which memory can serve as a means of salvation is by serving to *protect* victims from further violence. As Elie Wiesel put it in his Nobel lecture, from his youth on, as a survivor of the Holocaust he believed “that memory of evil will serve as a shield against evil, that the memory of death will serve as a shield against death.”<sup>17</sup> Though Wiesel describes this belief as existential and not based on controlled observation, at least in one of its aspects the belief seems immediately plausible. A notable feature of evil is that it seeks to cloak itself with a mantle of goodness in order to hide its true nature; whenever he can, Satan will appear as the angel of light precisely because it enhances his Satanic work. Evil thrives when it is concealed and languishes when exposed. When the light of memory is directed on an evildoer, she and others like her are likely to retreat out of fear of exposure; when the light of memory is switched off, more wrongdoing is likely to follow.

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<sup>17</sup> Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 239.

It would seem that memory's power to serve as a protective shield for victims is undeniable. And yet even here, things are more complicated than they first appear. Though in many cases memory may rein in evildoers, in others cases it may goad them on. Persuaded of the rightness of their abominable cause, some evildoers commit atrocities *in order to be remembered*. This is in part the motivation of terrorists—or at least, their search for publicity appears so motivated from the perspective of those who radically disagree with them.<sup>18</sup> The memory of their deeds is their glory, which is why in many ancient cultures, including Israel, blotting out the memory of perpetrators was not a crime against victims, as we are inclined to think today, but a punishment of tormentors.

A more significant problem with the protective function of memory than its occasional opposite effect is that protection itself can be a deeply problematic endeavor. As victims seek to protect themselves, they are not immune to becoming perpetrators. Indeed, as the deft and gloomy aphorist Emil M. Cioran has observed, the great persecutors are often “recruited among the martyrs not quite beheaded.”<sup>19</sup> Memory of their own persecution makes them see dangers lurking even where there are none; it leads them to exaggerate dangers that do exist and overreact with excessive violence or inappropriate preventive measures so as to ensure their own safety. Victims will often become perpetrators precisely on account of their memories. It is *because they remember* past victimization that they feel justified committing violence today. Or rather, it is because they remember their past victimization that what to most observers looks like violence born out of intolerance or even hatred is deemed by the perpetrators as rightful self-protection. The shield of memory so easily transmutes into a sword. Memories of past suffering are ambiguous: they can protect, but they can also generate violence.

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<sup>18</sup> Terrorists are a case in point. During the trial of Timothy McVeigh, for instance, some people argued that he ought not to be killed, which would satisfy his wish for dying for a cause and elevate his stature among followers. He should be left, it was suggested, to rot somewhere in prison with no publicity, thereby erasing his memory.

<sup>19</sup> Emil M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Quartet Books, 1990), 4.

How then can salvation lie in remembering wrongdoing and suffering? Instead of simply protecting someone, it may wound another. Instead of generating solidarity with victims, it may breed indifference and reinforce cycles of violence. Instead of acknowledging wrongdoing, it may prop up victims' false self-perceptions and unjust demands. Instead of healing wounds, it may simply repeat injury. Remembering wrongs will forge an identity, but it may be the identity of a person imprisoned in his own past and condemned to repeat it. Notice the word "may" in previous sentences—memory of wrongs *may* wound, *may* breed indifference, *may* reinforce false self-perceptions. I am not arguing that remembering wrongs *must* do all that or even that, as a rule, it will. In no way do I want to one-sidedly associate remembering wrongs with perdition. Rather, my point is that such memory is dangerously *ambiguous*.

### *Disambiguating Memories*

Wiesel is well aware that the memory of wrongs committed or suffered—even memory of the Holocaust—is ambiguous and can therefore be deeply problematic. Of all people, he knows of memory's pain and therefore of victims' deep need to, as he puts it in *Forgotten*, wipe out traces of days that are blacker than nights.<sup>20</sup> And he clearly knows of memory's misuses—of their ability to create a false sense of identity, generate hatred, or breed indifference instead of creating solidarity with victims, and to lead to violence rather than justice.<sup>21</sup> Wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s have led him, a prophet of memory, to see clearly that memory itself can be made into "an abomination." In Bosnia, "that tormented land," he writes, "it is memory that is a problem. It's because they remember what happened to their parents or their sister or their grandparents that they

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<sup>20</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Forgotten*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 297.

<sup>21</sup> See Elie Wiesel, "Ethics and Memory," *Ernst Reuter Vorlesungs im Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 11-28.

hate each other.”<sup>22</sup> He even concedes in an interview that the negative use of memory has loomed larger throughout history than the positive one has. At the edges of his work, Wiesel points to the need to redeem memories if they themselves are to be redeeming. Yet perhaps understandably, he leaves this problem basically unexplored and instead cries out in as many creative ways as he can the one dominant injunction: “Remember!”

If memory is important, even saving, and at the same time dangerous, then it is essential to explore ways of *disambiguating* memory. What does it take to remember well, to remember in redeeming rather than destructive ways? How can we help memory become a bridge between enemies instead of a deep and dark ravine that separates them? How can former enemies remember together so as to be able to reconcile, and how can they reconcile so as to be able to remember together? These questions express what I consider to be the most important challenge facing the theory and practice of memory in our conflict-ridden world.

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<sup>22</sup> Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, ed. Thomas J. Vincigoerra (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 144-145.