Intergenerational Encounters in the Wake of Shoah and the Ethics behind a Child Survivor’s “Terrified Smile”\(^1\) in Elie Wiesel’s *A Mad Desire to Dance*\(^2\)

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Literary and memory studies scholar Nancy K. Miller has powerfully noted that “[t]he death of parents – dreaded or wished for – is a trauma that causes an invisible tear in our self-identity. In the aftermath of a parent’s death, which forces the acknowledgment of our shared mortality, loss and mourning take complex paths, since our earliest acts of identity are intimately bound up with our relation to the dead parent” (Miller X). In this paper, I aim to analyze the even more complex case of Holocaust-related implications on the identity of traumatized surviving families and children as rendered in Elie Wiesel’s 2006 novel, *A Mad Desire to Dance*, at whose

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\(^1\) In the original French version of Elie Wiesel’s novel entitled *Un désir fou de danser*, this image is called “un sourire d’enfant effrayé”, translated in the 2009 English version of the book as “the frightened smile of a child”. Yet, throughout this paper, I will use my own English version of the French original, “the terrified smile of a child” which I believe to better grasp the emotional load suggested in the original version.

\(^2\) The starting point for this essay is the same with that of another article I wrote, “The “Frightened Smile” of Elie Wiesel’s Narrative Imagination: Jewish Identity between Exile and Diaspora”, *Exile and Poetic/Narrative Imagination*. Ed. Agnieszka Gutthy. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. This refers to the trope of a child’s terrified smile, but the approach has been changed. In the earlier version, I used as tools of analysis the concepts of exile and diaspora in relation to memory as a grid to interpret Jewish identity. In the present essay, I propose an ethical approach to post-Holocaust Jewish identity which capitalizes on the importance of emotional memory and social conscience for the child survivor and postmemory generations.

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heart one finds the haunting image of a child’s terrified smile standing for intergenerational encounters and transmission.

Written by well-known Holocaust survivor and humanist Elie Wiesel, born in 1928 in Szeged (then part of Romania, now Hungary) and deported to Auschwitz together with his parents and peers at 15, this novel offers its author the chance to use imagination in order to explore complementary forms of Holocaust experience and their effects on contemporary Jewish identity. *A Mad Desire to Dance* follows the trajectory of Polish Jewish Doriel Waldman, who was born in 1935 and survived the Holocaust at the side of his parents, moving to France and then settling in the United States. Given this, the overarching question of the novel is: what does a child survivor’s terrified smile tell us about post-Holocaust Jewish identity? In order to answer it, I will trace the problematic features of the Holocaust child survivor’s dominant memories – namely “void” and “excess memories” – and then identify the alternative of emotional memories running on an intense ethical drive which the child survivor and the second generation come to embrace.

Wiesel’s novel opens with a child’s smile initially associated with madness seen as a mental condition or a deviant form of mind, while, later on, it seems to identify a physical condition, the excruciating pain caused by the loss of the protagonist’s parents near Marseilles, in 1947, as articulated in the two quotes below:

She has dark eyes and the smile of a [terrified] child. I searched for her all my life. Was it she who saved me from the silent death that characterizes resignation to solitude? (…) Madness is what I’ll talk to you about – madness burdened with memories and with eyes like everyone else’s, though in my story the eyes are like those of a smiling child trembling with fear.” (Wiesel, *A Mad Desire to Dance* 3)

Our first encounter was at your parents’ funeral in Marseilles. I remember, you were silent. And also, though it was imperceptible, I saw it and I remember it as though it was
yesterday. You were so unhappy that you were smiling. I saw your smile. It broke my heart. It was the smile of a [terrified] child. (Wiesel, *A Mad Desire to Dance* 274)

*What is a child survivor’s paradigmatic fear in his post-war life?*, this seems to be the inherent question subsumed in the above passages, one which Doriel tries to answer quite early in the novel, seeing it as a fear to grow up “in a world that, in spite of protesting grandiloquently, doesn’t like children, but uses them instead as targets for its disappointment, its lack of self-confidence, and for its revenge” (Wiesel, *A Mad Desire to Dance* 15). In other words, a child survivor’s terrified smile would translate the fear and refusal to embrace so-called normal life in a topsy-turvy post-Holocaust world obsessed with manipulation, vengeance and terror.

And yet, does this resigning retreat and disavowal of the surrounding world encompass all there is to the Terrified smile in Wiesel’s novel, or is there a further meaning? Starting from this haunting query of mine, my essay explores the meaning of post-Holocaust Jewish identity in Wiesel’s novel as a matter of transmitting ethical responsibility for the new generations. The primary questions I address are: to what extent has the Holocaust experience been formative for contemporary Jewish identity and what of this experience can be passed on to the new post-Holocaust generations? In response to these, my ultimate aim is to articulate a contemporary Jewish identity at the heart of which one finds the resorts of emotional memory and social conscience.

*A Mad Desire to Dance* follows narrator-protagonist Doriel Waldman’s confessions to psychoanalyst Thérèse Goldschmidt in view of overcoming a mad-like state which has taken hold of his life since Doriel thinks he is possessed by a dybbuk and traces the ghosts of his memory in the psychoanalyst’s office starting around 1996 and going on until around 2002 (the year which marks the novel’s present). This is definitely not the right novel to read for those who
expect to find a meaning of contemporary Jewish American identity resulting from a self’s confrontation with specific details from the outside present-day social reality of American life, as there are actually no specific references in the novel as to coordinates of present-day mainstream American life. Instead, this is a novel that obliquely comments on contemporary reality and offers insight into post-Holocaust Jewish American identity as a result of various face-to-face encounters between individuals with a burdened past, and whose experience of the Shoah represents the central traumatic event which frames and commands their present existence.

The face-to-face encounter is defined by Levinas as the primordial inter-human relationship which renders possible the condition of the human, a transcendental condition of the unique existent born out of the fundamental question, “In being has not one oppressed somebody?” (Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?* 97). Henceforth arises for the French Jewish philosopher the ethical approach and the notion of the human which he describes as “an uncertain awakening, an uneasiness of having taken the place of another”, a “putting into question of my place – of my site – in being. (...) A reversal of a being content with its own good conscience of existence, a subversion which I call ‘otherwise than being’” (Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?* 98). Levinas locates this notion of a primary measureless responsibility that defines the human beyond being in the face-to-face encounter between a defenseless self and a defenseless other, where the other’s face represents the ambiguity of power and weakness, power residing in its commanding tone “Thou shalt not kill” while weakness would derive from its upright exposure of “the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all” (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 89). As Levinas explains, exposure seals the success of a face-to-face encounter and it means a “turning inside out” in which “one discloses oneself by neglecting one’s defenses, leaving a shelter, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults and wounding” (Levinas, *Otherwise than*
Being 49); such an opening of the self is a risk of loss and wounding, indeed, but it is also the only opportunity to learn about and help both oneself and the other. Close to Levinas’s insights above, Doriel’s encounters throughout Wiesel’s novel follow the trajectory from partially successful encounters with the other via a traumatic past to ultimate exposure of the self in traumatic love, the only possibility to find a meaning for one’s life.

Thus, what is at stake in Wiesel’s novel is memory, how much it contributes to a person’s identity in its personal and collective forms, and how much it depends upon the presence of the other. In Doriel’s case, the collective dimension of memory is immediately associated with Shoah, the event that shattered the lives of the Jewish community to an unprecedented degree and which ties Doriel to other characters’ equally painful experiences about which he learns in later encounters, namely Samek’s camp trials at Auschwitz or Laurent’s difficult moments in the Jewish Resistance in France.

Nevertheless, at the side of this collective burden, one counts Doriel’s equally disturbing personal memory. This is once again related to the death of his siblings during the Holocaust, and the problematic survival of the rest of the family, but also to the death of Doriel’s parents in a car accident after the end of World War 2, and records the son’s impossibility to understand the banality of their end after managing to survive the greater tragedy. As a result of this, he identifies “the aftermath” as the tragedy of human life. As the survivor of his parents then, Doriel needs to confront collective and personal memory as permanent coordinates of his life and shows how, for people who took part in the Holocaust, this experience has become the hallmark of their future existence materialized, at least partly, in the feeling of guilt, fear and shame related to their survival by contrast to others’ perishing (in Doriel’s case the death of his siblings) but it has also become a system of reference against which one measures any
subsequent tragic event in a person’s life, such as the death of Doriel’s parents which becomes even more difficult to bear because of its comparative triviality.

The complex stakes of memory spring out even more clearly in Doriel’s following exchange with Rina, a woman he supposedly meets while wandering around Central Park, and to whose question “who are you?”, Doriel’s intriguing response reads, “I am someone who is looking for a child” (15). To my mind, Doriel’s self-definition here denotes the Holocaust child survivor’s paradoxical position vis-à-vis memory as a simultaneous flight away from and towards memory, a simultaneous quest for a “void memory” and of an “excess memory”. It is a flight away from memory and its burdens in the imagination’s attempt to reach back to childhood and, possibly, to the moment before the Holocaust and his parents’ death, so an act of forgetting as erasure. But it is equally a flight towards recovering his memory as, physically speaking, the quest for childhood can only be translated as the need to remember and face one’s past in order to come to terms with it.

The Holocaust Orphaned Child-Survivor Caught between Void and Excess Memories

In the three encounters with Maya, another woman that Doriel meets in his wanderings, what prevents the encounter from actually fulfilling itself is Doriel’s attempt to run away from his memories of the past, following his fear to expose himself and to reach out to Maya. Thus, on their first encounter in the 1950s Marseilles, Doriel finds a kindred spirit in Maya who “wasn’t alone, and yet no one was accompanying her” (30), meaning, as she would later avow, that, like Doriel, she also possessed a burdened memory because of losing her parents during the Holocaust. Doriel decides to trust this stranger as a guide to his parents’ graves, strangely suggesting as possible reason for his decision “her melodious Yiddish” (31). As we peruse further, the mystery of this non-fulfilled encounter bound to a linguistic affinity gets elucidated
once Maya is associated not with Doriel’s smile of a terrified child, but, sic!, with “the smile of an innocent, peaceful child” (32). In other words, for Doriel, Maya seems to represent a projection of his desire to fly away from his traumatic past memories by association with his innocent childhood years prior to the Shoah, hence his fixed fascination on the woman’s Yiddish, the language of his early peaceful years, before it became dangerous to use Yiddish and betray one’s Jewishness to Nazis. On their third encounter, in 1974 New York, Doriel seems to openly admit the above case. He confesses, “Yes, I loved her in my way, not in hers. I loved her because her voice took me back to my childhood and those miraculous moments. And because she had dark blue eyes and dark rings around them. And an open face. And she forgot nothing. She requested – she demanded – that I take up the bet of candidly narrating a novel to her about the future we could have had” (38). As can be further derived from here, Maya is simultaneously the epitome of a selective pleasurable past and a hypothetical future that could have happened if only later suffering had not interfered in Doriel’s life, an image that he already suggested on their second encounter, in Tel Aviv, when he saw Maya at an officer’s arm, so much absorbed by her lover that she did not see Doriel who “left the place, tiptoeing away through a hidden door. Like a thief” (35). Maya therefore stands for Doriel’s initial belief that he can pursue love only by forgetting the traumatic past, by erasing it from memory, an endeavor that he fails to achieve given the haunting recollection of the death of his parents after the war, and of his siblings during the Shoah. As Doriel acknowledges, “that’s man’s tragedy; there is always an afterward” (49).

Meanwhile, Doriel finds the only meaningful continuation of life in helping others, working at shelters and health-care centers for the disinherited, taking care of war-victims’ orphans and offering private classes of medieval Jewish history, all this out of a sense of duty for his parents and siblings who died far too soon. What Doriel does not recognize at this time,
namely the power of bonds of affect, can be however read between the lines of his encounter with one of the orphan children he helps: “Little Avremele, who lost his mother, looks at me with a sad expression; he wants to know where it hurts. I answer I don’t know. He’s surprised; if I don’t know where it hurts, it must mean it doesn’t hurt. Logical, isn’t it? Then he caresses my forehead and says: There, it doesn’t hurt anymore. And my chest: You see, it doesn’t hurt anymore. I smile at him and tell him that I love him. Between two hospital stays, I have work that sometimes gives me a feeling of satisfaction” (39). In other words, Doriel’s present-day life at this point corresponds to what Laub calls “the loss of a sense of human relatedness” (Laub 79) which the psychoanalyst discusses in relation to the experience of a woman survivor he interviewed and who described herself as ‘someone who had never known feelings of love’ (Laub 79). Like this woman, Doriel appears as a hostage to a self-imposed emotional imprisonment and to a sense of complete responsibility for the pain of the dead dear ones, while being afraid to love in the indifferent world surrounding him. Yet, the child’s silent message which Doriel seems to fail grasping at this early stage, is that love offers a unique potential to somehow cure a burdened soul and, perhaps, an ailing society, but in order for this to happen Doriel’s inherent sense of responsibility for the other is not enough as long as he does not risk to expose himself and allow himself to love the other. Put differently, what is needed to be able and reach beyond a traumatizing state is his willingness to try and “form ties that would promise the possibility of another reality and happiness” via love (225), in which the scars of the past do not disappear but are accompanied by the potential of another, more promising world.

If the encounter with Maya marked Doriel’s failed attempt to carve his present identity out of a void memory that vainly tried to erase the traumatic past, the present-day socially engaged Doriel corresponds to the opposite extreme that has taken hold of his life, dubbed as an
“excess memory” by his psychoanalyst Thérèse Goldschmidt (53). This memory is incessantly haunted by the death of his family members and encompasses a sense of endless responsibility towards them as well as a determination not to love and bear children. Starting from this hostage condition that characterizes Doriel, I will try to probe into the reasons that prompt him to upholding such an extreme stance and I will then see what helps him overcome it. The reasons rest with his daily perception of the indifference, faceless representation subsumed in societal normative existence to which “normal” people unconsciously ascribe. As exemplification, Doriel contrasts his position of a caring and attached person to that of other people who had never known persecution, “the throes of hunger and fear”, but who remain indifferent to suffering, not for one moment stopping to ponder. Instead, “[a]ll these people chatter morning and night, while working and resting; they’ll say anything about anything, without wondering whether their words reflect a desire to enrich the world with a new truth or an ancient promise” (43). From the standpoint of the child survivor who has known extreme frames of life, the present-day society continued to be run by the logic of normative representation which ignores the call of the face and establishes a paradigmatic norm of being human and casts out all others as dangerous outcasts. This is indeed the image that ensues from Doriel’s speech below, “‘Yes, he’s mad, Doriel,’” that’s what people mutter, adding, “Poor guy,” or “Nice guy,” it all depends, for they claim the right to pass judgment, to censure a person who refuses to be like them, a person attached to his life as though it were a sleepy planet or a planet in turmoil, who might ruin them by unmasking them” (43). People’s reactions to Doriel here ultimately reveal a bad conscience of society in keeping with Butler’s idea in Precarious Life that dominant norms of representation suspend the expression of the Levinasian face by establishing rules of the paradigmatically human. The face is captured in representation, establishing the paradigmatic norm only from the
perspective of institutional and officially-geared power structures, according to which Doriel qualifies as “mad”. As Butler explains, this logic of normative representation conceals or defaces the face in the Leviathanian sense and establishes a symbolic identification of certain faces with the inhuman. In other words, these normative schemes “produce ideals of the human that differentiate among those who are more or less human and even produce images of the less than human, in the guise of the human, to show how the less than human disguises itself” (Butler 146). While Butler’s interest is in the media manipulation of the right type of human, Wiesel’s novel additionally brings in discussion present-day society’s establishment of the deviant “mad” human, that is the individual who dares to care for the death of others in distant places instead of enjoying his well-being in the peaceful environment of his immediate surroundings. To this amounts Doriel’s following description of a man’s meditation on war being waged in other locations than the peaceful environment in which he and his family live. The man says:

“We’re poor, but let’s not complain of anything anymore. For we’re happier than the wealthy. We have bread before us, and cool water. And no hatred in our hearts. That’s sufficient. The rest doesn’t count. The rest will come in time.” And after a silence, he goes on: “May God forgive me, I expressed myself badly. I said the rest doesn’t count. It counts, it must count, since, not so far away, among people like us, human beings are killing or being killed. For them, the rest won’t come anymore. And yet, aren’t out happiness or out serenity whole? Shouldn’t we feel diminished, guilty, or at least concerned?” (49)

Basically, the man’s two postures here can be summed up as follows: from the vantage point of a peaceful society at a time when war is being waged in some other place, he first sustains that one should be content with leading a peaceful life and go on with one’s everyday chores while remaining indifferent to sufferings beyond one’s purview; thinking further, however, he subsequently suggests that in fact we need to be concerned for the others’ sufferings and feel responsible, albeit this is an attitude which is labelled as “mad”. The former attitude according to
which one should be happy for living in a self-preserving society in the context of war-ridden far-away places corresponds to the individual’s internalization of normative official discourse. His latter attitude, that of refusing to reduce the face to representation, it dubbed by society as a mad man’s position since it challenges its normative schemes. Child survivors like Doriel usually fall within this category of mad individuals because of their almost measureless sense of responsibility for the vulnerable, persecuted people. This fact already makes us sense a possible recategorization of madness, no longer simply representing a deviant mental condition but a category subsuming those who resist the language of norms and challenge them. In other words, from the vantage point of normative representation practices, Doriel and most of the Holocaust survivors could be qualified as “mad”, i.e. mentally imbalanced because they are not content with their present-day personal welfare; yet, from the vantage point of the vulnerable, their madness already acquires the potential of positive overtones, suggesting a Levinasian ethical stance of a “senseless, incidental goodness in the human, the compassion proceeding from one private man to another, but outside all redemptive institutions, political or religious” and which resists the ideological beginnings of a preaching or promise by which it would risk betraying itself (Levinas Is It Righteous to Be 120). Moreover, Doriel does expose himself yet the problem that initially he only exposes himself to his dead family and not to a living being. Through these insights, Wiesel’s novel already elicits some fundamental ethical questions, namely: what is madness, is it an obvious mental condition or can it also be a socially imposed norm? Can madness be a positive condition and what are the consequences from such a stance? If we answer to this last question in the affirmative, as suggested in Wiesel’s novel thanks to a Levinasian stance, apparent madness becomes the name for an ethical stance of societal critique against the indifference of faceless normative representations, and this is what Doriel covertly suggests.
Moreover, the figure of a mad man is associated in the novel not only with the present-day society, but also with the post-Shoah situation in Eastern Europe. Doriel learns about this during his encounter with camp survivor Samek Ternover, who tells him the story of the last Jewish survivor in the Polish town of Bendin (Bedzin) who was regarded as “mad”. After this man dedicated his life to telling the horrors of what had happened in the camps in the hope “to lift the world from its torpor and its indifference that could lead it to its own annihilation” (249). After people initially listen to him and answer with tears or silence, their attitude changes, they start turning their back on him, accusing him of lying, and yelling at him, “You weren’t even deported; you’re inventing suffering that you never experienced just in order to arouse pity and earn money” (250).

In this scene, Wiesel reintroduces the figure of the supposedly mad man from his memoir *The Night* within a different context. In the earlier book recounting his direct Holocaust experiences, the “mad” man stood for the limits of human belief, which made Jews themselves incapable of believing in the wide extent of the Nazi genocide as late as 1944. In *A Mad Desire to Dance* it is the lingering post-Holocaust prejudice of Eastern Europe which labels a survivor “mad” and charges him for inauthentic experience as long as he keeps recounting the horrors of the past. Once again the human being ends up in isolation, there is prolongation of individual suffering and pain because of the others’ prejudiced perceptions and refusal to listen. With the advent of the Holocaust, madness therefore becomes a continuous sine-qua-non human condition for Jewish experience. In all circumstances, the mad man closely epitomizes the position of the outcast member of society who, ironically, voices its inconvenient truth.

The encounter with Samek further informs Doriel about the lingering anti-Semitic attitude of Eastern Europe after the end of the Holocaust, explaining the decision of surviving
Jews to leave these locations for either Israel or America. Samek tells Doriel of his return to Bendin, the small town in which his brother Romek and his parents used to live before the war. Looking for signs of his family, Samek finds out that their house was inhabited by strangers who angrily draw him out by anti-Semitic imprecations. In this case, violent verbal hostility further insulates Jewish life, the only difference being that in Communist Poland this happens unofficially, in silence. It seems that, at the end of the war, the discrimination promoted by the Nazi ideology has been transferred to the minds of average inhabitants with equally destructive results.

In addition, after finding his brother Romek – a former member of the Jewish Resistance in France who had a love affair with Doriel’s mother Leah, herself a Resistance fighter during the Shoah – Samek recounts to Doriel his second return to Bendin, this time accompanied by Romek who has taken up a political career and has become an important figure of the Polish government. To Samek’s surprise, the revolting occupants of their family’s house are gone, the house is empty and the police chief explains that they had been “[pun]ished, chased away,” yet, “[w]hat he forgot to mention was that their punishment was of short duration. The day after we left, they were back, the new owners of my parents’ house” (248-9). This scene encompasses the make-believe strategy of Communist officialdom once Romek, a possibly powerful political activist, is the visitor. Hence, the Bendin officials hide the truth Samek had previously discovered as an average Jewish man, and suggest that the anti-Semitic family had been removed from their parental home. In this case the technique used is that of temporary effacement through representation, the suggestion that there isn’t anybody living in their house anymore. This is undertaken for political reasons, in order to prevent an international inquiry, just a façade orchestrated for their delusion, functioning only for the duration of their stay. Put in other words,
the two returns to Bendin show how anti-Jewish prejudice in post-Holocaust Eastern Europe was outwardly dismantled by Communist officials yet silently upheld. The social critique is directed here to this double-standard silent official strategy that apparently condemns anti-Semitism but actually condones it. In such an unwelcoming atmosphere Jews did leave these places, among them Doriel and his parents because the new Communist officials started to accuse his mother of betraying some of its members when she had been held a prisoner; her previously heroic aura as a Resistance fighter thus turned into accusations and the family moved to France.

At this point one is drawn to wonder whether one can correlate these clear cases of prejudice and manipulation in relation to Nazi practices during Shoah and practices of official Post-Holocaust Poland to present-day American representation practices in which the caring individual is labeled as “mad”. I think these cases might be connected in view of the need to remember the past representational practices and their violent uses and to remain vigilant about the persistence of similar practices and their possible negative outcomes in present-day societies; this logic may explain why at first Doriel tries to take up an “excess memory” with responsibility for the dead while seeing love as impossible in an indifferent world.

In the lineage of this costly historical continuum of normative manipulations, then, the novel suggests a needed social critique of both Eastern European post-Holocaust policies and present-day American life, especially in relation to Thérèse Goldschmidt’s and her husband’s professional environments. Thérèse’s husband, Martin works as a librarian and has to meet the publicity demands of wealthy donors on whom the library’s existence depends, and whose only interest is how to attract more people by consumerist, superficial means. The cliché of a spectacle consumer society made up of make-believe, empty images is the pestering reality of
Martin’s everyday life which he cannot escape confronting, since without the donors, there would be no library in the first place.

The same cliché of established professional patterns is what disturbs Doriel in point of Thérèse’s attitude as a psychoanalyst. On their first meeting, she uses her professional ritual, “As usual, I’m polite, courteous, even kind, but not overly so” (52), then Doriel asks her to give up her “routine questionnaire” (57). Given these stalk psychoanalytical postures, Thérèse is initially characterized by Doriel as a clerk mechanically and indifferently performing her job, without any genuine interest in the other: “She asks me additional questions and repeats others in her professional, impassive, impersonal voice, as though she is filling out an administrative form; nothing I can say will make her change her rhythm or tone; a human machine, that’s what she is” (158). Such routine patterns of cross-examinations thus deface the other as an individual and make him become one more bureaucratic assignment. This dehumanizing aspect of professional occupations is what Doriel works to dismantle from his psychoanalytic cure, setting down new rules. More precisely, he asks Thérèse to know her just as she is prone to find out all his secrets and they agree to “proceed on the basis of exchange” (55). In this context, at the next meeting, Doriel returns out of a sense of responsibility for her, or as he explains, “I came back because I am interested in you. I have a feeling you need me more than I need you” (56). Following their subsequent encounters, we see Thérèse’s initial attempts to sidestep her part of the bargain by deciding to destroy her patient’s attempts at destabilizing her and making her vulnerable by keeping silent. After all, she says to herself, “Well, he won’t succeed. I can be strong, stronger than he can imagine” (59). Interestingly, her husband Martin interprets Doriel’s resenting attitude as close to that of his wife: namely he is “stricter and harsher with you precisely because he is frightened (...) you might uncover the true nature of his illness, its true roots” (65). Therefore,
both patient and therapist have the same problem – the fear of exposure which they see as a risk of being further wounded by their past memories. Their meetings become the means by which they finally take that risk, the only way to find a meaningful way to go on. All in all, Doriel’s reliance on an “excess memory” of measureless responsibility to the dead is as costly as the defacing representational practices of his surrounding society because it still turns away from the human face which is alive in its affective load.

**Child Survivors and Postmemory Generations Finding another Way: The Risk of Exposure, Ethical Encounters and Emotional Memory**

Not surprisingly, as the therapy continues, and as recorded in the psychoanalyst’s notes, Thérèse starts to better grasp her own self by exposing her never mentioned ailments. Like her husband, she is a daughter of Holocaust survivors so there is a personal degree of interest to deal with a child survivor from the very outset, but which she only later notes as being a taboo topic between her and her husband: “We’ve never uttered the word under our roof. If perchance someone mentions it on television, Martin scowls, as though he is being personally attacked. He gets up and turns off the television set. After a long, awkward pause, our conversation resumes, calm and fruitful, each of us safeguarding, in our heart of hearts, a very secret, fragile, and vulnerable area belonging to our parents, whom we want to protect without really knowing why or for how long” (75). Thérèse’s and Martin’s postures here encompass the parents’ traumatic memory of the Holocaust passed through the grid of children’s unlived but deeply felt sensitivity. This is *postmemory*, defined by Marianne Hirsch as the memory children of Holocaust survivors inherit from their parents’ experience and that powerfully shapes their identity by a “sense of belatedness and disconnection” (Hirsch 244), especially since it is not directly their own. In the case of the two spouses, the vow of silence that they have bestowed on
this traumatic past is an attempt to avoid what Miller calls the “betrayal” of parents, of their sense of privacy, which is an inherent requirement for the act of bearing witness, a “broken bond [which] is essential to the making not only of autobiography but of history” (Miller 124). Thus, in refusing to follow any television discussion of the topic, Martin shows an unwillingness to engage in such debates because of a feeling of fear and helplessness⁴ in point of his parents’ vulnerability. In that, he seems to refuse bearing witness, as if afraid to face the “confirmation of both separation and relation” to one’s parents (Miller 124) which such a stance would subsume. Nevertheless, by refusing the “betrayal” of parents, these survivors’ children unconsciously betray themselves, i.e. they run away from facing their disturbing traumatic memory and they fail to expose themselves to the other, so they miss the chance to overcome their own embodied sense of trauma. Instead, they choose to live with an empty memory that avoids a topic of which their knowledge is indirect at best but which also affects their present-day life which they don’t openly face but hide under the mask of silence. In the case of Thérèse and Martin, this corresponds to their unspoken-of failure to bear children.

Only the encounter with Doriel’s traumatic memory makes Thérèse overcome her silence about not having children after ten years of marriage even if both she and her husband wanted to, as if his suffering draws her awareness that - in a society dominated by a tendency to forget the existent - the recuperation of a latent memory of the existent might be the only hope one might have to lead a meaningful life. As a consequence, she finally admits that both she and her husband have avoided facing the facts, that she could not remain pregnant. Thus, the husband

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⁴ Martin’s posture here is close to an episode recorded by Susan Sontag in Regarding the Pain of Others: a woman living in Sarajevo during the 1991 Balkan war switches the channel once footage of the destruction of close-by Vukovar is shown. Sontag explains this woman’s stance as different from detached observers who choose to be indifferent; in the case of people involved in such tragedies, the decision to turn the television off is a case of “fear and helplessness” (Sontag 100). Following Sontag, I believe that Martin’s gesture is also a case of fear and helplessness but in relation to his parents’ vulnerability, to his sense of shame for being an outsider to their traumatic experiences which he decides to leave untouched.
kept suggesting she was afraid to have children in view of her career, by such questions as “You’re afraid for your career?” or “Do you really think that a good mother can’t take care of her patients?” (72) Thérèse confesses the actual truth in her notes, writing how “He didn’t understand anything about the situation, or at least he pretended not to. And I kept silent. A taboo subject. Not to be broached. Actually, I was lying by omission to my husband. Yes, I was afraid. Afraid of his not liking me. Afraid of remaining alone, of being abandoned for not giving him a child” (73). This shows that, as Thérèse and Martin talk over the psychoanalyst’s obsessive fixation on Doriel, and of the latter’s feeling ashamed to love, they are drawn closer to each other and to exposing themselves. First, Thérèse admits her fear of losing her husband since she cannot have a child, then Martin in turn exposes himself by spelling out his own fears: “I’m afraid sometimes. Afraid of living a diminished existence, like a useless object. To feel my body go on its own, without my soul. And conversely: afraid of finding myself abandoned, deserted, betrayed by my reason. In short, afraid of dying before dying” (163). Husband and wife become aware of each other’s vulnerability thanks to the undoing experience occasioned by an encounter with traumatized Doriel. Soon afterwards, Thérèse, the initially impenetrable psychotherapist, proves to have her own disturbing thoughts and lose track of Doriel’s recounting his visit to a Communist writer, becoming totally “absent” (185). For Doriel, this moment marks in fact a positive note – it breaks the conventional level which captures the other’s face in the normative vocabulary of representation from the perspective of the scientific rule according to which understanding corresponds to reducing meaning to clear-cut reason. This meeting, however, becomes an encounter of faces – following Thérèse’s change of mood by her “inattention close to distress” (185). In other words, for the first time, Thérèse risks directly exposing herself to her patient: “Okay, it concerns my private life. I don’t have children. There. While you were talking
about some people’s attraction to Buddhism, an unrelated thought suddenly wormed its way into my mind: he has a friend and I don’t have children” (186). Doriel thus discovers that even the apparently impenetrable other is vulnerable and in need of protection. If “void memory” and “excess memory” equally capitalized on a latent memory of the dead under the form of respectful silence or responsibility, they kept one blind as to the latent memory of the existent, which is equally important and the only one that can help one find and lead a meaningful life.

Only after this moment does Doriel renounce to his almost completely submerging in mystic-like narratives of uncertain encounters which had been a typical retraction for survivors brought about by the failure of Western ethics, as indicated in Doriel’s statement that “noting the failure of Western culture as an ethical response, men living in the Auschwitz era inevitably turn to the other side, the side of mysticism. The unspoken attracts them more than the clearly articulated” (151). Indeed, the ethical failure of Western culture is indicated by its proliferation of imprisoning representation practices which Thérèse also initially upholds. Only the encounter with the other’s vulnerability undoes her sense of failed being and occasions the possibility of a change. In this way, Wiesel’s novel upholds Butler’s adding to Levinas’s notion of responsibility for the other’s vulnerability; unlike the French philosopher who insists on its need to be nonreciprocal and measureless, Butler insists on the need of a recognized ““common” corporeal vulnerability” (Butler 42) as a basis for humanism. Butler explains that only when vulnerability is perceived and recognized, can it “come into play in an ethical encounter”, while the act of “recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of vulnerability itself” (Butler 43). Reciprocal exchange thus becomes a sine-qua-non condition in the struggle between ourselves out of which one can dare create a future in relation to the other. The measureless responsibility of “love without concupiscence” which Levinas celebrates and which characterizes
Doriel’s “excess memory”, Martin’s decision to become an archivist and Thérèse’s decision to serve as a psychoanalyst of Holocaust survivors, is incomplete if one runs away from exposing oneself. This implies a responsible answer to the other’s exposure but also the possible betrayal of the other by the fear of also exposing oneself.

Meanwhile, as Thérèse sees that Doriel continues to run from exposure and human relatedness and, instead, suffers immensely, she decides to interrupt the psychoanalytical cure, explaining her decision by helplessness, the impossibility to help her patient as long as his fight is with God, and his decision is that of avoiding human society altogether, seen as a corrupted world of self-interest that God had tacitly allowed to happen. Thérèse’s diagnosis that “Persecuted by the gods, you flee from human beings” (241) echoes Doriel’s previous doubt of God in relation to his orphan status: “I didn’t question the existence of a supreme judge governing the universe of men, but I questioned his justice. One day, echoing the remarks Gittel had once made, I asserted that, if pushed, I could accept the tragically premature and absurd death of my parents. Perhaps they had sinned before the Eternal and He had punished them. But what about their progeny, their little orphan? What were his sins? Why had he been condemned to grow up and live his life without them?” (231) Doriel’s position here underscores Miller’s point that “our ideas about identity are interwoven with the notion that the self is bound up in plots of family time” (165), in a family score on whose figuring out we spend our entire life; as long as the parents were alive, they determined the score; now it’s the orphans’ turn “to figure it out, dole out the guilt” (Miller 171) and, as Miller explains, the child is to have no place in the family plot unless he invents it. After the long time spent in assuming an immeasurable guilt for the dead by taking up an “excess memory”, Doriel finally decides to expose his parents’ secrets and, through this, himself, betraying the parents’ and his entitlement to privacy in bearing
witness. Significantly, Thérèse performs an unorthodox gesture, she gives her notebooks to Doriel, notebooks in which she has not only openly commented on his state, but also on her growing sense of self-awareness. In that gesture, the therapist has totally exposed herself to and passed the “gift” of exposure to Doriel, a Derridean-like gift of smoke since, for the first time in the novel, she lights a cigarette in the patient’s presence, and is willing to listen to him without the pressure of psychoanalytic billing hours.

In the eyes of the French critic, the gift which closely corresponds to Levinas’s notion of mad goodness or human responsibility, is best illustrated by the image of tobacco which consumes itself in the smoke, as an object of pure and luxurious consumption that produces a pleasure not meant to meet any natural need of the organism, so that “the offering and the use of tobacco gives access to honor and virtue by raising one above the pure and simple economic circulation of so-called natural needs and productions, above the level of the necessary. It is the moment of celebration and luxury, of gratuity as well as liberty” which opens “the scene of desire beyond need” characteristic of the gift (Derrida 113). Highly relevant, Derrida also notes how tobacco seems to consist in consumption and expenditure of which nothing natural remains, just as Thérèse’s gift is a coring away of her own self that ends with interruption of her psychoanalytical cure, but this does not mean that performing goodness does not leave a trace and that it is simply annihilated; on the contrary, Derrida states that “the annihilation of the remainder, as ashes can sometimes testify, recalls a pact and performs the role of memory. One is never sure that this annihilation does not partake of offering and of sacrifice” (Derrida 113). In other words, even if choosing to end her sessions, Thérèse does not altogether disappear from Doriel’s life but leaves a symbolic trace of her goodness in this one’s memory, a trace that helps Doriel to finally expose himself.
Thus, only after the psychoanalyst has recognized her vulnerability and defeat above does Doriel tell her the story of his rich fortune, explaining how he could afford her paychecks and finally daring to expose himself. In a nutshell, Doriel’s fortune is due to a wealthy Holocaust survivor, Samek Ternover, bestowed upon him in their face-to-face encounter from 1956, a meeting which is intriguing by its ironic lot: though Samek has managed to fulfill himself materially in the aftermath of war, he is heirless, the possessor of a vain fortune, his and that of his dead brother Romek. To increase the irony, Doriel becomes the benefactor of this fortune because of the forbidden love between Samek’s brother, Romek and Doriel’s mother, Leah inside the Resistance. Consequently, Doriel’s earlier accusations against Romek as being inhumane and dishonoring his family seem to materialize in Romek’s self-imposed punishment to leave his family’s fortune to Leah’s child. This is at least how Doriel previously interpreted Romek’s act before the psychoanalyst: “Now I understand some things better. His attitude toward me later. His generosity. His bequest. To make amends, to atone, that’s what he hoped. But he demeaned everything he touched. He wounded my mother and humiliated my father” (127). However, Romek’s persisting wish to take his farewell from Leah and to name Doriel as his heir also prove to Doriel that love can sometimes overcome negativity. Though Doriel-the child was an obstacle to Romek’s fulfilling of his love, in the name of love, Romek bestows his fortune upon him and overcomes the sorrow of having no descendants of his own by passing on a legacy of hope to Doriel. Because of that, Doriel is to be forever connected to the man he initially despised and learns that love conquers hatred and inhumanity and Romek’s gesture out of love helps the mother’s lover recover humanity in Doriel’s eyes. More importantly, it allows Doriel to recover his trust in the resorts of humanity.
In light of this, love and the performance of humane acts become the means to overcome the traumatic state of the Holocaust survivor. Doriel takes a first step away in acknowledging the error of living in solitude and he takes a decisive step on exposing himself to 36 year old Liatt, an American young woman born in Jerusalem, and only daughter of Holocaust survivors, whom he meets in a café. Their encounter refuses the logic of reason and follows the grid of risky exposure with which they both struggle as different generations of Holocaust survivors. As a child survivor, Doriel has tried to run away from his own exposure in the name of not betraying his dead family’s memory, considering he does not have the right to love and that, anyway, love is corrupt in the present-day indifferent world. As a child of Holocaust survivors in possession of postmemory, just like Thérèse and Martin, Liatt has been unexplainably torn between a desire to bear witness to a reality both outside and within herself and the fear of betraying her parents’ right to private suffering. As Doriel notes, “Perhaps it [being the daughter of Holocaust survivors] conceals her impulses, her irrational whims, her curiosity about everything that is out of the ordinary, her rejection of the standards imposed by a hypocritical society, adrift and doomed to perish from its fear of boredom” (262). Yet, what if responsibility for the ones who suffer does not only encompass taking up guilt for the scars of the past? What if responsibility for the future is also at stake? After all, their past scars made them aware of bonds of affect and their power to create an alternative reality to that of worldly indifference, one in which caring and love still keep a sense of humanity alive. In this reality, exposure of vulnerability and undoing one’s complacency of being are the guiding lines by which one can still hope to become human. In the name of this irrational call, the two strangers go away and Liatt acknowledges her unconscious, affective answer to the other’s call: “Giving in to one of your whims, I let you tear me away from my customers, my workplace, my milieu, my entourage, my habits. No
explanation and maybe no reason” and “your gift is madness” (263). This paradigmatically Levinasian scene celebrates “mad” love-for-the-other for its power to disturb one’s obstinacy in being and transform one into a vulnerable hostage immeasurably responsible for the other, unlike the limiting norms of society. As a result, the recognition of exposure is what unites the two lovers; thus, Doriel talks of his psychoanalyst’s understanding of his problems as represented by an “acute guilt complex for having outlived my parents and siblings. Which is why I refused to imitate them – in other words, I didn’t marry, didn’t start a family, didn’t have children” (267). Liatt answers with kindred sincerity, avowing that she initially accepted to date him, a wealthy man, in the hope that she would thus raise the jealousy of the man from whom she had just separated. In other words, here, the two lovers re-categorize understanding not as a matter of knowledge but of illuminating affect out of the lived experience of persecution, and which allows the weak to see how much the self is determined by ties with others.

Significantly, after hearing the woman’s name, Liatt, Hebrew for “you’re mine” and which he associates with “the gift of Liatt”, Doriel decides to give herself “my new name” (264) marking a new beginning – and he chooses Od, a Hebrew word that can have two meanings: “with an ayin in means ‘again’. With an aleph, the word could mean ‘thank you, I will give thanks’” (265); his previous name, Doriel was an endearing form of the Hebrew word for generation (“dor”). How could one interpret this scene of (re)naming? I see it as the protagonist’s shift from a self-centered sense of memory and life, obsessively responsible for the legacy of past generations, to recognition of exposure to the living other by embracing the risk of the unique existent that requires one’s equal responsibility for both the past and the future. After all, the new name, Od, means “again” – namely the hope for creating a beautiful world of living like the one the protagonist knew before the Holocaust thanks to his parents’ love. But Od also means
“thank you” – an act of gratitude towards the other, since it is only thanks to the other that I can make sense. As a result, Od notes that “[i]t’s been ages since I’ve been so deeply moved. Or so deeply worried” (264). Finally, out of this encounter between suffering affects and exposed vulnerabilities, the letters Doriel used to write to his dead parents will have “another reader: our child” (274), since Liatt is pregnant by the end of the novel and the previously lonely man ends up overwhelmed by “a mad desire to dance” (274).

At this point, just one more detail needs to be mentioned in order to answer the main question of my essay, namely what does a child’s terrified smile tell us about post-Holocaust Jewish American identity? I refer here to Doriel’s reason for finally choosing to have Liatt at his side: “It’s because of your smile. I’ve always known that I would love a woman who had the smile of a [terrified] child” (272). The enigma of the “terrified smile” is here finally illuminated. It is not merely an instance of madness as mental deviance or the sign of pain for the loss of one’s siblings and parents, as it was apparent at the beginning of my analysis, but the trope of a Butlerian-Levinasian assumed exposure and responsibility for the other, an identity aware of trauma and its dangers and, yet, capable to smile, i.e. to continue living and transmit an alternative reality of happiness and a desire for justice to the next generation as represented by the son. In other words, Wiesel’s novel finally celebrates bonds of affect as the means to survive after the Holocaust and forever connect the individual with the others, transmitting what Des Pres calls “the anxiety of responsibility” (40) or the ability to respond as a form of social conscience.

Bonds of affect in Wiesel’s novel therefore create a form of memory that emphasizes a social dimension of life and allows the preservation of one’s humanity, an idea which is beautifully presented in an article that historian Ross Poole devotes to the relation between
collective and individual memory and between collective memory and history. Poole finds a name for this kind of memory structured around *bonds of affect*; he calls it “emotional memory”, a memory encompassing the idea of love and moral commitment and which is not a “promising” or a matter of “will and performance” but a case of “feelings that inform our will and our actions” (Poole 155).

Within such a project, the praise of *bonds of affect* after the Shoah stands for a needed transmission of “response-ability”. As Geoffrey Hartman has shown in relation to other of Wiesel’s writings, this can happen by underscoring the potency of memory as a moral response to the dead, since “[m]emory should become, Wiesel has said, an ‘irresistible power’, one that gives the dead their due, that tells their story – rather, brings them back to tell their story, even if it was buried with them in an unknown place. Only then is there a chance for catharsis, and so, perhaps, a ‘clean fear’” (Hartman 110). In Wiesel’s particular case, this meant the use of latent memories (i.e. “inventing a memory for those who did not survive”, Hartman 110), and bonds of affect. In this way, both latent memories and bonds of affect are means to explore the “complicated relationship between memory and witness, witness and history” and they show the centrality of memory “as a process at the ethical center of being human” (Katz and Rosen XVIII), translating the “duty to tell” as well as “the realization that it cannot be told” (Wiesel, “Afterword” 157). What ensues is a needed but incomplete act of transmission, as illustrated by Wiesel’s confession elsewhere that once “having spoken, we realize that what had to be said remained, and perhaps had to remain, unsaid” (Wiesel, “Afterword” 157).

Therefore, the constitutive features of emotional memory, imagination (i.e. the role of latent memory sustained in Wiesel’s book) and bonds of affect (related to the act of transmission) become the foundational tools for an ethical approach informing post-Holocaust
literature and historiography. Imagination is paramount for allowing life to continue because one of the hardest problems in a burdened person’s life is the impossibility of telling, the inadequacy of language to express the feelings and memory of a traumatic event; to such a person, the only way to get closer to an always eluding understanding of the past may be an attempt to imagine and tell other stories and other feelings, which are alike yet different since, as British art historian John Berger notes, “Much pain is unshareable. But the will to share pain is shareable. And from that inevitably inadequate sharing comes a resistance” and “a redefining of dignity and hope” (John Berger, The Shape of a Pocket 164). Or as psychoanalyst Marc E. Agronin recently noted, Holocaust survivors teach us relevant “lessons of fire”, the first of which he identifies with Berger’s above claim, namely that “the perpetual sadness of many older survivors is not to be healed but shared,” the search not being that for a therapy but that of “the attentive presence of a doctor and others to serve as the next generation of witnesses”. After all, from the very beginning of Wiesel’s novel, Doriel wanted his psychoanalyst to leave aside the set patterns of her profession and respond to him humanely, so his act is a form of resistance against the present-day society’s logic of normative representation which stifles the existent. Following this line of action, from the experience of pain enclosed in the image of a “terrified smile” comes a second agency of emotional memory, besides its therapeutic function: that of opening the door for ethical agency for the new generations as represented by Doriel’s unborn child at the end of the novel by escaping the uniquely past-related overtones of a “void” or “excess memory” which prevent one from bearing witness in the name of protecting the dead parents’ private life. By deciding to bear witness, i.e. to expose his parents and thus also themselves, on one hand, Doriel, Liatt, Thérèse, or Martin betray their parents but, on the other hand, they make possible an alternative reality from that of indifferent normative representations thanks to love.
Their emotional memory which tries to reconcile one’s duty for the past with one’s responsibility for the future resonates to other people and their experiences, allowing them to get a glimpse of traumas’ lived dimension and to try and find a way out by social conscience. In this respect, Agronin identifies another equally relevant lesson inculcated by the Holocaust, the hope subsumed in human relatedness which has kept one of his patients alive in the camps. As the woman recalls, “When we had to stand at attention for hours, we stood together, propping up one another when weak. When we dug ditches we did it together, one holding and moving the arms and shovel for another who didn’t have strength that day. We were desperate, but never alone.” The psychoanalyst concludes that hope and faith make up “the primal gifts of life that we share” and we can transmit in love to the next generation, what Doriel finally does at the end of A Mad Desire to Dance. And if one is tempted to ask over time, What can be passed on of this experience to the new post-Holocaust generations?, one might find an answer by considering a Wiesiel-like relation that author Jonathan Safran Foer has emotionally established with the maternal grandfather he never met – Louis Safran, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust but lost his first wife and daughter in the extermination camps, coming to the U.S. and dying in 1954, over two decades before the birth of his grandson. Foer remarks that “There should be a name for those things that one feels one has always known without ever having learned. And a name for those things that are central to one's life without ever being thought about or felt.”

What might this name be? Perhaps this is not just a memory of a trauma (be it one’s own or another’s), but Wiesel’s image of a child’s terrified smile, of the elusive human will to exposure, an emotional memory running on an inherent ethical drive.

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5 The quote from Jonathan Safran Foer is part of the author’s email exchange with journalist Joyce Wadler and was included in Wadler’s New York Times article from April 24, 2002, “Public Lives; Seeking Grandfather’s Savior and Life’s Purpose”.

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