

The Survival of the Question: Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*

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In 1969, Simon Wiesenthal, already internationally recognized for his work in the *Documentation Center of the Association of Jewish Victims of the Nazi Regime* in Vienna, published an autobiographical narrative based on an exceptional encounter between himself and a dying, repentant Nazi soldier. On his deathbed this soldier confessed to Wiesenthal that he had participated in the murder of hundreds of Jews (including children) and asked Wiesenthal—at the time himself a prisoner in a concentration camp in Poland—for his forgiveness. Responding at the time with silence, Wiesenthal confessed nonetheless to being haunted by the dying man's request, unable to put the matter to rest, both during the period he was interned in the camps as well as afterwards. Convinced of the importance of what he had experienced, he sent the narrative, entitled *The Sunflower: A Story of Guilt and Forgiveness*, to a number of distinguished figures of public life, including theologians, writers, philosophers, politicians and religious leaders. The published text includes their responses.¹

One of the most powerful responses to the narrative came from another survivor, the writer and essayist Jean Améry, who

¹ Simon Wiesenthal, *Die Sonnenblume: Eine Erzählung von Schuld und Vergebung* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1998), hereafter SB. The text appeared in English translation as Simon Wiesenthal *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, trans. H.A. Pichler (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), hereafter SF. Throughout this essay, I cite from the English translation and modify it where it is misleading. When modifying or when the German text is not translatable without remainder, I also include the German in brackets. I regularly cite page numbers from both editions.

claimed that questions of forgiveness in relation to the Holocaust are politically irrelevant, and moreover, have no personal interest to someone who does not share a religious viewpoint or faith. What alone matters, he said, is that what happened to him and others does not happen again.² Simon Wiesenthal, however, ended his testimony by saying almost the opposite: precisely because it can happen again, it is necessary that the question of forgiveness be reappraised:

Should I, should anyone, have forgiven him? Would I, would anyone, have permission to forgive him? Today the world demands of us that we forgive those who through their stance continue to provoke us. The world demands that we close the account and draw the line, as if nothing essential happened.

Many of us who fought in that terrible time, and who still sometimes in their thoughts feel imprisoned by that hell, become silent when faced with this demand for forgiveness.

This question will survive all trials and will continue to remain relevant when the crimes of the Nazis belong the distant past.

Therefore I address it to people, who I believe have something to say about it. It should serve as an appeal (*Aufruf*). For the events that have given birth to this question can happen again.³ (SB 107-108; SF

2 “Whether or not you are an agnostic or a believer, I do not know, but your problem belongs to the realm of guilt and atonement...[Your] problem is a *theological* one, and as such it does not exist for me because I am an atheist who is indifferent to and rejecting of any metaphysics of morality. I think that this is not about individual forgiveness or individual intransigence (*Unversöhnlichkeit*). [...] Since I see the question of forgiveness only in political terms, I must abstain either from approving or condemning your behavior [...] Politically, I do not want to hear anything about forgiveness. For one simple reason, what you and I went through must *not happen again, never, nowhere*. Therefore I refuse any reconciliation with criminals.” (SB 219-220; SF 107-108)

3 I cite the above citation in German in full, as parts of it do not appear in the English translation: “Hätte ich, hätte überhaupt jemand, ihm verzeihen

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Why would someone who had spent almost his entire working life gathering information to bring Nazi war criminals to trial insist so strongly on the question of forgiveness? What connection did he see between the survival of the *question* of forgiveness and the possibility of repetition of these crimes? In this chapter I will attempt to explore these questions on the basis of a new reading of Wiesenthal's narrative and the archive of responses to it in several languages.

Must Forgiveness Be A Speech Act?

Reading closely the citation above from the end of *The Sunflower*, one can note that the narrator refers to two different, yet related requests for forgiveness. The first, which forms the climax of the foregoing narrative, was made by a dying SS-man during the war, i.e., at a moment when the crimes were continuing: "Should I, should anyone, have forgiven him?" After having confessed his crimes to the narrator, the SS-man, who in the narrative is only identified by the first name Karl, asks—even pleads—for a word

sollen, verzeihen dürfen? Aber die Welt von Heute verlangt von uns, daß wir auch denjenigen verzeihen, die uns durch ihre Haltung immer wieder provozieren. Sie verlangt von uns, daß wir einen Schlußstrich ziehen, als sei nichts Wesentliches geschehen. Und viele von uns, die in jener grauenvollen Zeit gelitten haben und die sich manchmal noch in ihren Gedanken jener Hölle verhaftet fühlen, sind vor diesem Verlangen nach Verzeihen verstummt. Diese Frage wird alle Prozesse überleben und auch dann noch aktuell sein, wenn die Verbrechen der Nazis längst einer fernen Vergangenheit angehören. Deshalb richte ich sie an Menschen, von denen ich glaube, daß sie etwas zu sagen haben. Sie soll als Aufruf dienen. Denn das Geschehen, das sie hervorgebracht hat, kann sich wiederholen." (SB 107-108).

of forgiveness, a statement from a representative of the victims, which would presumably mean that he has been absolved of his crimes and can die in peace. While the narrator questions the logic which made of him, a prisoner chosen more or less at random, the one charged with the burden of representing the dead victims, and of forgiving on their behalf, he never questions the request for a word of forgiveness as such, i.e., the presupposition that a statement in the form “I forgive you” is performatively able to effectuate forgiveness and absolution.⁴ This unquestioned (onto-theological) presupposition has consequences for the way the text has been read until now, where the discussion (be it in German, English or French) has most often been limited to the question of whether or not the narrator was morally justified by not saying these words to the dying and repentant murderer, and if the respondent to the text (be s/he Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Buddhist and/or atheist) in the narrator’s place would have acted otherwise.⁵

In addition to the presupposition that a statement such as “I forgive you” is able performatively to effectuate forgiveness, there is its logical inverse, whose consequences for the reading of the text are even more important, i.e., that the narrator’s silence, his refusal to say “I forgive you” at the end of the SS-man’s confession, means that he simply does not forgive or that there is no forgiveness during the scene or afterwards. Counter-intuitively—and even against the narrator’s own interpretation of what hap-

5 For a critique of the notion of performative utterances, see Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 307-330. See also Werner Hamacher, “Affirmative, Strike,” trans. Dana Hollander, *Cardozo Law Review* 13:4 (December 1991) 1133-1157.

6 Some readings resist this temptation. See, for example, Elisabeth de Fontenay in Simon Wiesenthal, *Les Fleurs de Soleil* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004) 199-213. For an appraisal of the different responses in English, see John K. Roth “Who Needs Forgiveness? Further Thoughts on the Moral Dilemma Posed by Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower*” in *Anti-Semitism: The Generic Hatred: Essays in Honor of Simon Wiesenthal* edited by Michael Fineberg et al. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007) 165-176.

pened—I will argue that the narrator’s silence does not destroy all possibility of forgiveness. Because of this silence, which is indeed unchangeable, irreparable, another deeper possibility of forgiveness, one that would take place under other conditions, and on the basis of different philosophical and religious presuppositions, may *perhaps* survive.

Mirroring the position of other survivors, for example Primo Levi and Ruth Klüger, the narrator will later in the story justify his decision not to answer the SS-man’s request by arguing that he does not have the power or authority to forgive in the name of those who have been murdered: only the victims, those who have been wronged, can forgive what has been done to them, which is now impossible. He says: “I did not have the power to forgive him in the name of others” (*Ich hatte doch nicht die Macht, ihm im Namen anderer zu verzeihen*) (SB 92; SF 82).⁶ This position, which certainly conforms to a dominant tendency in rabbinical Jewish thought⁷ (and even finds expression in Kant and Dostoevsky)⁸, is articulated later in the story in a discussion with

7 Ruth Kluger: “How can I “forgive” the murder of my teenage brother when I have had my life, and he didn’t get to have his? And perhaps the adult I am now cannot forgive even in the name of the child I was then. This was not a free decision, I would explain: it was simply not in my power to grant the kind of absolution that is implied in the plea or demand for forgiveness.” Ruth Kluger, “Forgiving and Remembering” in *PMLA* 117.2 311. In response to Wiesenthal, Primo Levi wrote: “You did right...But, of course, nothing is resolved through this refusal, and it is understandable that you were left with doubts.” (SB 143; SF 191)

7 “Les fautes de l’homme envers Dieu sont pardonnées par le Jour du Pardon; les fautes de l’homme envers autrui ne lui sont pas pardonnées par le Jour du Pardon, à moins que, au préalable, il n’ait apaisé autrui.” Michna Yoma (85a-85b) cited in Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris: les éditions de Minuit, 1997) 29. “The faults of man towards God are forgiven by the Day of Atonement; faults towards one’s fellow man are not forgiven by the Day of Atonement, unless the fellow man has been appeased beforehand.” (translation mine).

8 “Guilt (*Schuld*) can never be discharged by another person, so far as we can judge according to the justice of our human reason. For this is no transmissible liability which can be made over to another like a financial indebtedness (*Geldschuld*) (where it is all one to the creditor whether the debtor himself

an apprentice Catholic priest, who is also a political prisoner of the Third Reich. His name is Bolek. In the last days of the war he shared a wooden plank (*Pritsche*) with the narrator in the death block at Mauthausen. In response to the narrator's inquiry as to how he would have responded to the SS-man's request, Bolek assumes the counter position in the debate, and asserts that within Christianity the most important criterion for forgiveness is genuine repentance. If the offender has shown such repentance, his or her request for forgiveness should be granted, even if it is not addressed specifically to the one who has been wronged by the offender. However, it is important to point out that Bolek's position in the discussion is not simply stable. His position acknowledges the narrator's difficulty and shows itself to be flexible:

We talked for a long time, but came to no conclusion. On the contrary: Bolek began to falter in his original opinion that I ought to have forgiven the dying man, and for my own part I became less and less certain as to whether I had acted rightly. Nevertheless, the discussion was rewarding for both of us...each had a better understanding of the other's views. (SB 92; SF 83)

One can argue that Bolek is the narrator's exemplary interlocutor, (providing one can argue also a coded suggestion to Wiesenthal's readers as to how to engage with the moral dilemma of the text).

pays the debt or whether someone else pays it for him); rather it is the most personal of all debts, namely a debt of a sin (*Sündenschuld*), which only the culprit can bear and which no innocent person can assume even though he be magnanimous enough to wish to take it upon himself for the sake of another." (translation modified). Immanuel. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) trans. Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson with John R. Silber (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960) 67. "I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive... [T]oo high a price is asked for harmony." Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* Translated by Constance Garnett (New York: The Lowell Press, 1969) 269.

This is because he, like the narrator, becomes progressively *less certain* of his position in the course of the conversation, and because he, unlike most Christians, has also experienced the horrific persecution of the Nazi concentration camps first hand:

In Auschwitz he endured the most inhuman treatment, for the SS knew that he was a priest in training and never tired of inventing new humiliations for him. However, his faith remained unbroken. (SB 89; SF 80)

It is possible—even necessary—to take the “Jewish” position in the debate to an extreme and suggest that it is never permissible to assume the authority to forgive, even for those who could legitimately lay claim to it, because in so doing forgiveness (which should be free and generous) is unavoidably reduced to an economy of exchange.⁹ Moreover, Maurice Blanchot will argue that the sovereignty implied in the statement “I forgive you” is such that it affirms the moral superiority of the subject before it renounces it. In so doing, the wrong is not only not forgiven, but becomes irreparable. In *The Writing of Disaster* Maurice Blanchot transvaluates forgiveness by writing:

Do not forgive. Forgiveness accuses before it forgives. By accusing, by stating the injury, it makes the wrong irredeemable (*irrémissible*). It carries the blow all the way to culpability. (*Il porte le coup jusqu'à la culpabilité.*) Thus, all becomes irreparable; giving and forgiving cease to be possible.¹⁰

In this passage, Blanchot argues for the necessity for an interdiction on forgiveness understood as a statement. For this reason, it is important for the argument I am proposing in this essay. In order

⁹ This is Jacques Derrida's position. See J. Derrida, “On Forgiveness: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible,” *Questioning God* eds. John Caputo et al. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001) 23f.

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) 89. See also Sara Guyer's reading of this passage in “The Pardon of the Disaster” in *Sub-Stance* 35:1 (U. of Wisconsin Press, 2006) 85-105.

for forgiveness to remain possible, one must not say: “I forgive you” for in so doing one *cannot not* at the same time also accuse the one who is addressed, and thus confirm culpability, and erase any traces of nonknowledge and undecidability that remain in the interval between the blow (*coup*) and this confirmation. Such traces, Blanchot seems to argue, are necessary for any forgiveness without injury to have a chance.

On the other hand, or as another dimension of the same aporia, simply refusing to forgive is perhaps also never fully justified, particularly if, as the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch has noted, it is always possible to take advantage of and profit from the position of being innocent.¹¹ Indeed, this may be a reason why the narrator, despite the monstrous injustice done to him and the inequality that remains between him and the dying SS man, still feels disquiet for having left the room in silence.¹²

The question remains for the reading of *The Sunflower*, and also more generally, if forgiveness may—and even must—be communicated otherwise than with the words “I forgive you.” This is not to ask if the same semantic content may be expressed by different means, but rather if forgiveness may take place without being accredited to the sovereign, or more rigorously, phantasmatic power of the subject. The question bears not only on the subject’s power to forgive, but also on the subject’s power to acknowledge guilt and request forgiveness, which is generally considered within both Judaism and Christianity to be the necessary pre-condition. If “I forgive you” credits phantasmatic power to the subject, so too does the “I apologize” and the “please forgive me.” Is an ac-

11 “The person who forgives...does not profit from the advantageous position that his innocence confers upon him, he does not keep for himself this privilege of alone being infallible, impeccable and irreproachable, and he renounces every monopoly that he may have upon this position, he sacrifices therefore (*il fait le sacrifice*) a very brief and precarious superiority which perhaps is due to chance” Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Philosophie Morale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998) 1146; Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness* trans. Andrew Kelly (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2005) 161-162.

12 I will explore this possibility further below.

knowledge of guilt or request for forgiveness possible without being expressly said by a subject, without a subject *being able* to express it as such? Such questions ultimately lead one to ask if forgiveness can mean something else than *closing the account and drawing the line*, as the narrator (following an entire tradition of thinking about forgiveness) seems to presume in the long citation from the end of *Die Sonnenblume* with which this chapter began:

But today the world demands of us that we forgive those who through their attitude continue to provoke us. The world demands that we close the account and draw the line (*einen Schussstrich ziehen*), as if nothing essential happened. (SB 107; SF 97)

Even though Simon Wiesenthal does not ask the questions mentioned above, (perhaps never even thought of them), they belong to the future opened up by his and others' resistance to demands to close the account and draw the line (*einen Schlusstrich ziehen*), and correspondingly, to the announcement made at the end of the testimony that the question of forgiveness will survive all trials and remain relevant when the crimes of the Nazis belong to the distant past.

The Speculative Economy of Christian Confession

I will return again to this announcement below; but before doing so I would like to suggest that the questions formulated above open the possibility of another reading of *Die Sonnenblume*, one that to my knowledge has not been undertaken before. One can begin, or continue, this reading by drawing attention to the narrator's conviction that the SS-man has expressed genuine remorse. Whether or not such remorse is sufficient to justify forgiveness is one of the central questions posed by the text. One can point out, however, that unlike the request for forgiveness, the SS-man's expression of remorse is not directly *said* to the narrator as such:

In his confession there was true repentance (*Reue*), even though he did not admit it in so many words. Nor was it necessary, for the way he spoke and the fact that he spoke to *me* was a proof of his repentance. (SB 61; SF 53)

“So this Lemberg fellow showed signs of repentance, genuine sincere repentance for his misdeeds – that at least is how you described it. “Yes”, I answered: “I am still convinced of that.” (SB 91; SF 82)

The SS-man does not apologize to the narrator, yet he confesses to him in detail the atrocious murders in which he took part. In the course of the confession his body trembles and convulses. His phrases are often broken up (*abgehacken*). The narrator notes that there was nothing in the SS-man’s confession that did not conform to a sequence of events of which the narrator was already aware.¹³ While the narrator does not believe he is the correct addressee for this confession, he does take into account that the SS-man could have called for a priest, which not only would be in accordance with the principles of the Catholic religion of his childhood, but also easier and more assured. With a priest the dying SS-man would be much more likely to receive “absolution” in the form of the response he desperately wanted. The ethical element, however, consists I would argue in the renunciation of such a calculation on forgiveness. The SS-man’s decision affirms, without regard to the instructions of the Catholic Church, that repentance, the acknowledgement of guilt, has force and meaning only if addressed to a “Jew”, i.e., to one who is a victim of the genocidal violence in which the SS-man has taken part.

And yet, precisely because the addressee is a victim, a man who could—and in all probability will—die tomorrow of the same genocidal violence, the force or meaning of the SS-man’s repentance is at best difficult to situate, at worst derisory. Pressuring

13 “I knew how the story would end. My own country had been occupied by the Germans for over a year and we had heard of similar happenings in Bialystok, Brody, and Gródek. The method was always the same. He could spare me the rest of his gruesome account.” (SB 48; SF 41).

a prisoner destined to death, *eine Leiche auf Urlaub*, to listen to the confession of a dying perpetrator is also an act of violence. Several times during the interview the SS-man must stop the prisoner from trying to leave the room by grabbing his arm and pleading with him. After, the narrator will testify that the interview had laid a heavy burden on him.¹⁴

Here was a dying man—a murderer who did not want to be a murderer but who had been made into a murderer by a murderous ideology (*unbarmherzigen Ideologie*). He was confessing his crime to a man who perhaps tomorrow must die at the hands of these same murderers. (SB 61; SF 53)

In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough. (SB 61; SF 54)

However, what makes the violence of the interview particularly intense is not the SS-man's confession, shocking as it is, or even less, the genuine remorse that the narrator believes he is able to read in it. What makes the violence particularly intense is the request for forgiveness itself. This violence is obscured by the debate as to whether or not the narrator was morally justified at the time to respond with silence. Counter-intuitive as it may seem, the SS-man's request for forgiveness is culpable and even inexcusable under the circumstances.

I think that he is now coming to what he wants from me. I can-

¹⁴ “The encounter with him was a heavy burden on me, his confession had profoundly disturbed me (*mich im Innersten aufgewühlt*)” (SB 63; SF 55). One may juxtapose the SS-man's address with that of Pope Jean-Paul II in the year 2000. In Rome, and later in Jerusalem before the Western Wall, the pope addressed his repentance for the violence and intolerance of those in the Catholic Church *to God*, with the Jewish people as a witness. For the role of the Vatican *Curia*, and in particular, Alois Hudal, (the German bishop in Rome), in helping Nazis escape to South America after the war, see Hella Pick *Simon Wiesenthal: A Life in Search of Justice* (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1996) 127f. For the Pontiff's historic address, see “Liturgy of Repentance” in *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah* United States Catholic Conference (Washington, 2001).

not imagine that he ordered me here only to have a listener. (*Ich kann mir nicht vorstellen, daß er nur nach mir verlangt hat, um einen Zuhörer zu haben*) (SB 60; SF 52) [...]

He sat up and put his hands together as if to pray. "I want to die in peace, and so I need..." (SB 61; SF 54)

"I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know if there were any Jews left..."

I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace." (SB 62; SF 54)

The request for forgiveness at the conclusion of the confession is a speculative teleological reappropriation. It recuperates the non-calculating, aneconomical character of the remorse, *which does not express itself as such*, back into the sphere of calculation on the future and self-interest. The SS-man asks for forgiveness because he wants to have his conscience appeased, so that he may die in peace. The expression of remorse, absurd as it may seem under the circumstances, could still in the dying moments of his life have lead to some political statement or action, which would unambiguously affirm his non-commitment to the SS and the Nazi project of the Final Solution. But the onto-theology of Christianization, the speculative economy of Christian confession stands in the way of such a possibility.¹⁵

The SS-man has no moral grounds on which to ask for forgiveness, not only because his crimes are unforgivable, but because as a member of the SS in Nazi occupied Poland, he also continues to benefit from his crimes *even in death*. It is from this supplementary injustice that Wiesenthal's testimony draws its title, *The Sunflower*, which refers to the sunflowers that marked the graves of the dead Nazi soldiers that the narrator saw on the

¹⁵ The term "speculative" is employed here in both senses: economic and philosophical.

path from the Janowska concentration camp to the Lemberg *Hochschule* where the meeting with the SS-man took place.

The flower heads seemed to absorb the sun's rays like mirrors and draw them down into the darkness of the ground as my gaze wandered down from the sunflower to the grave. It seemed to penetrate the earth and suddenly I saw before me a periscope. Colorful butterflies fluttered from flower to flower. Were they carrying messages from grave to grave? Were they whispering something to each flower to pass on to the soldier below? Yes, that is just what they were doing; the dead were receiving light and messages (*Botschaften*).

Suddenly I envied the dead soldiers. Each had a sunflower to connect them with the living world. For me there would be no sunflower. I would be buried in a mass grave, where corpses would be piled on top of me. No sunflower would ever bring light into my darkness, and no butterflies would dance above my dreadful tomb. (SB 19; SF 14)

As mentioned above, Wiesenthal's text was first published in French translation in 1969, where the title *Die Sonnenblume* was rendered *Les Fleurs de Soleil*.¹⁶ Why should an autobiographical testimony written in German, dealing with questions of guilt and forgiveness for crimes committed in the name of 'the German people', have been published firstly in another language? The French title, *Les Fleurs de Soleil*, refers to more than one sunflower. In this way it unambiguously invokes the sunflowers described by the narrator in the passage cited above. The German title, however, while also invoking this passage, preserves a relationship to singularity, which is an essential aspect of Wiesenthal's approach to justice and guilt.¹⁷ *Die Sonnenblume* refers most likely to the

16 Simon Wiesenthal, *Les Fleurs de Soleil* trans. Denise Meunier (Paris: Stock, 1969). The first German edition appeared a year later: Simon Wiesenthal, *Die Sonnenblume* (Hamburg: Hoffman and Campe Verlag, 1970).

17 Simon Wiesenthal outright rejected the thesis of collective guilt as a fundamental principle of his work. He justifies this decision in the following terms, which are worth citing at length: "To begin with: Even though I have not spoken my prayers in the language of the Bible since childhood, I am

sunflower that *this* SS-man will have on his grave. Facing death with a burning and unappeased conscience, the SS-man knows in advance that there will be at least a sunflower, and this is consoling; as is the thought that there will be a living mother who will mourn for him, and a room of his own in which to die. When making his deathbed confession to the narrator, the SS-man does not take into account that his addressee, just like his victims, will have been deprived of all these things. Had he done so, it would have been impossible for him to request forgiveness—at least in the same way.

“Everywhere military cemeteries sprang up. I heard they were well tended and on every grave were growing flowers. I like flowers...”

Therefore he knows that we will get a sunflower when he is buried. The murderer will own something even when he is dead...And I? (SB 58; SF 51)

That the SS-man does not sufficiently take into consideration the historico-political abyss, the incommensurabilities between his own position and that of the narrator, is not by chance. The recognition of such incommensurabilities is incompatible with

deeply aware of the moral value of biblical subject matter. In the story about Sodom and Gomorrha Abraham wrestles with God saying, if there are only ten just individuals, or nine, or eight, or seven—then don't destroy them. God answers: There are no just individuals. Abraham's struggle here was a struggle against collective guilt. Nothing that stands in the Bible is accidental, and I recognized that I must reject the idea of collective guilt. Secondly: We Jews have been the victims of the collective guilt theory for 2000 years, and we have stood up against it. Why should contemporary Jews, who were not alive 2000 years ago, be held responsible for the death of Jesus on the cross? These two considerations have led me to consistently stand up against collective guilt with respect to the Germans, the Austrians, or other nationalities for more than 40 years. My work in the Documentation Center is aimed at pointing out individual guilt and it thus stands as the categorical antithesis to collective guilt.” Cited in Maria Sporrer and Herbert Steiner, *Simon Wiesenthal: Ein unbequemer Zeitgenosse* (Wien: Orac, 1992) 66f.

the speculative teleological structure of his confession, which, in order to function, presupposes that there is a common measure, a basis on which to exchange offers and requests of forgiveness. In order for there to be reconciliation, both parties, the one who confesses and the one to whom the confession is addressed, must *at some level* be able to identify with one another as the same, as fellow human beings. In the section of the *The Phenomenology of Spirit* addressing the dialectic of evil and its forgiveness, Hegel describes confession and forgiveness as a movement of reciprocal recognition of two opposing self-consciousnesses. This reciprocal recognition is grounded in an act of putting oneself on the same level (*sich gleich machend*), recognizing the other against which one is opposed as in essence the same, which is to say, one-sided, finite, “wicked” (*böse*):

By putting itself on the level with the doer (*dem Handelnden*) on whom it passes judgment, it is recognized by the latter as the same as himself. This latter does not merely find himself apprehended by the other as something alien and disparate from it, but rather finds that other, according to its own nature and disposition, identical with himself. Perceiving this identity and giving voice to it, he confesses this to the other, and equally expects that the other, having in fact put himself on the same level, will also respond in words in which he will give utterance to this identity with him, and expects that this mutual recognition will now exist in fact. His confession (*Geständnis*) is not an abasement, a humiliation, a throwing-away of himself in relation to the other, for this utterance (*Aussprechen*) is not a one-sided affair, which would establish his disparity with the other: on the contrary, he gives himself utterance solely on account of having seen his identity with the other.¹⁸

Within the Hegelian logic, it is essential that the confession of wickedness be said to the other, posited as a speculative proposition: “I am so.” (“*Ich bin's.*”) Only by being expressed in

18 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: F.Meiner Verlag, 1988) 345. G.W.F. Hegel, “The Beautiful Soul, Evil and its Forgiveness” *The Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 405.

language does the innerness of self-consciousness step forth into concrete existence as a universal self: “*Das Dasein des Geistes als unmittelbaren Selbsts*.”¹⁹ Likewise, the forgiveness offered by the other self-consciousness must also be expressed as a spoken, speculative proposition. It is the expectation that the other reciprocate, by recognizing its own one-sidedness, and identification with the one who has confessed. The refusal to reciprocate is the hard heart (*das harte Herz*), who, in clinging to the divisive thought, in rejecting any continuity with the other, is therefore henceforth in the wrong. Hegel reads muteness (*Stummheit*) on the part of the one who should forgive as the most extreme form of the rebellion of the Spirit that is self-certain (*die höchste Empörung des seiner selbst gewissen Geistes*). The renunciation of this self-certainty is a necessary movement in exchange for which inner conviction is translated, or rather, sublated (*aufgehoben*) into objective knowledge that is mediated by the recognition of the other. Identification understood as equalization (*Ausgleichung*) is the very possibility of this economic transaction: equalization not at the level of wickedness or sin, but of the human beings, the self-conscious subjects who are not reducible to their sins.²⁰ The renunciation of self-certainty in the reconciling “yes” belongs to the teleological progression of history, understood as the dialectical unfolding of the absolute. The act is taken back into the Spirit. It is internalized, mourned,

19 For more on the fundamental role that Hegel gives to language as *Logos* throughout the phenomenology, see Jean Hyppolite *Genèse et Structure de la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit de Hegel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946) vol. 2, 493f.

20 In an important early theological text, “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate”, Hegel also treats the dialectic of the remission of sins. There he writes: “Before the law the criminal is nothing but a criminal...but because punishment does not come from an alien law, since on the contrary it is from man that the law and the right of fate first arise, a return is possible to the original situation, to wholeness. For the sinner is more than a sin existent, a character that has committed a crime (*eine Persönlichkeit habendes Verbrechen*), he is a man, crime and fate are in him. He can return to himself again.” G.W.F. Hegel *Frühe Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986) 353-4; G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writing* trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) 238.

healed. The memory of the deed remains, but as a moment of the whole, it is no longer the life of the Spirit, which manifests itself as absolute in the word of reconciliation (*das Wort der Versöhnung*):

The true, i.e., the *self-conscious* and *existent*, equalization of the two sides is necessitated by and already contained in the foregoing. The breaking of the heard-heart, and the raising of it to universality, is same movement which was expressed in the consciousness that made confession of itself. The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind. The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as existent negativity and limitation, straightway vanishes. The *self* that carries out the action, the form of its act, is only a *moment* of the whole, and so likewise is the knowledge, that by its judgment determines and establishes the distinction between the individual and universal aspects of the action.²¹

It should be underlined that I do not consider Hegel to be simply wrong to identify the fault of one-sidedness or self-certainty, nor is he in my view mistaken to think both the offer and request for forgiveness on the basis of an elementary need for recognition. The essential point, however, is that the dialectic logic, whose force is reconfirmed in *Die Sonnenblume*, is hopelessly insufficient. In particular, it insufficiently accounts for silence, which it interprets as one-sided self-certainty: the hard heart that does not break. In the early theological essay, “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate”, Hegel explicitly identifies this one-sided refusal with the spirit of the Jews, which *hates*:

22 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* op. cit. 238. G.W.F. Hegel, “The Beautiful Soul, Evil and its Forgiveness” *The Phenomenology of Spirit* op. cit. 407. In “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate” Hegel makes the same point even more vividly: “The deed (*Tat*) still subsists, but only as something past, as a fragment, as a corpse (*tote Trümmer*). That part of it which was a bad conscience has disappeared, and the remembrance of the deed is not longer that conscience’s intuition of itself; in love, life has found life once more.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings* op. cit. pp. 238-9.

In the spirit of the Jews there stood between impulse and action, desire and deed, between life and trespass (*Verbrechen*), trespass and pardon, an impassable gulf, an alien court of judgment. When, then, they were referred to love as a bond in man between sin and reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), their loveless nature must have been outraged (*empört*), and, when their hatred took the form of a judgment, the thought of such a bond to their minds must have been the thought of a lunatic. For they had entrusted all harmony among men, all love, spirit, and life, in an alien object.²²

According to his biographer, Hella Pick, Simon Wiesenthal considered *The Sunflower* to be his most important book, not only because of the questions it raises, but also because “it sets out to demolish what he sees as a ‘widespread perception of the Jew as a hater. I set out to show that if Jews do not forgive, it is because they are not empowered to do so...’”²³

The extreme injustices described by Wiesenthal’s testimony, and the consequences they have on the victims, bear witness to the limits of the presupposition of a common humanity as the speculative basis for both requests and offers of forgiveness. Despite the fact that the narrator believes in the genuineness of SS-man’s remorse and even admits at two points in the narrative to feeling compassion (*Mitleid*) for him (which is a form of empathic identification with the other), this under the circumstances is hopelessly insufficient.²⁴ The insufficiency lies not only, as the narrator points out, in the request that he, abusively, substitute himself for the SS-man’s victims and forgive in their name, but also—and more importantly in my view—in the motivation behind such a request to “win paradise economically.”²⁵ The SS-man

23 *ibid.* 240. Translation modified.

24 Hella Pick, *Simon Wiesenthal: A Life in Search of Justice* op. cit. 78.

25 “I admit I had some pity (*Mitleid*) with the fellow.” SB 92, SF 83. “Vorhin habe ich noch etwas wie Mitleid mit dem Sterbenden empfunden.” SB 54.

25 “*emporter le paradis économiquement*” Charles Baudelaire, *La Fausse Monnaie*, see Jacques Derrida, *Donner Le Temps* 1: *La Fausse Monnaie* (Paris,

wants to have his conscience appeased and yet still keep a sunflower on his grave. In confessing his crimes to the narrator, *nothing at bottom is really risked*. Had he chosen or been persuaded to take some political action in favor of his victims, or in their memory, (however feeble, however seemingly meaningless under the circumstances), he would have had to, at the very least, renounce the consolation of a sunflower.

The Ethical and the Hyper-Ethical

As I noted above, according to his biographer, Wiesenthal wrote *The Sunflower*, because he wanted to counter the widespread perception of the Jew as a hater. Wiesenthal foresaw, one might say, an old/new anti-Semitism that arises out of the testimony of the Holocaust itself, a sort of self-fulfilling circular logic that takes the refusal or inability of the Jews to forgive what happened as another reason to hate them. To resist this logic is no simple matter. On the one hand, as mentioned several times, the narrator of *The Sunflower* defends himself by arguing that he does not have the right to forgive in the name of others. On the other hand, however, he is not completely satisfied with this self-justification. Even though he believes he is able to account in moral terms for his decision to remain silent, he remains troubled by it. Moreover, being troubled by what happened is also something about which he does not have good conscience:

Was I right after all to tell them what happened? I should think of the five men in the “pipe” (“*Schlauch*”) who had been shot that day. Was this SS man more to me than they were? [...] I feared that Arthur, the cynic, might say: “Just look at him, he can’t forget a dying SS man while countless Jews are tortured and killed every hour.” Then he would add something that would deeply affect me: “You have let yourself be infected by the Nazis. You are beginning to think that the Germans are in some way superior, and that’s why you are worrying about your dying SS man.” (SB 69-70; SF 62)

Galilée, 1991).

One might very tentatively inscribe Wiesenthal's narrative within a long and painful history of Jewish fascination with—even love for—the gentile, 'Christian' other. The narrator is quite aware that he has no right to think obsessively about this man who is guilty, when so many who are not guilty in this manner have gone to their deaths unremembered and un-mourned. But he cannot dispel his disquiet. It is stronger than he is. It follows him even into the death block at Mauthausen. The disquiet takes him 'beyond' the realm of the 'ethical,' if by 'ethical' one presupposes the ability to account for one's thoughts and actions and give reasons for them:

Was this true? Did my unrest (*Unruhe*) come from my subconscious (*Unterbewußtsein*)? What drove me again and again to think about the encounter in the hospital? Why had I never been able to put it behind me? Why was this meeting (*Begegnung*) not finished and done with (*nicht abgeschlossen*)? The last question seemed to be the most important. (SB 90; SF 81)

One can say that this disquiet is the realm of the hyper-ethical, inasmuch as it bears witness to a surplus of responsibility that does not allow itself to be satisfied with pre-given rules, codes, norms, axioms—be they 'Jewish' or 'Christian.' The narrator asks himself if his disquiet comes from his *Unterbewußtsein*, his sub- or unconscious. Shortly after the meeting, another one of the narrator's friends, Josek, seeks to reassure him by saying that he would have acted in the same way towards the SS-man. And yet, unlike the narrator, he claims that he would have done so with full awareness and intention (*ganz bewußt und mit voller Absicht*). In Josek's estimation, the narrator had acted more unconsciously (*mehr unbewußt*):

“I can see you are not entirely pleased with yourself. But I assure you that I would have done the same as you did. The only difference perhaps is that I would have refused forgiveness with full awareness and intention (*ganz bewußt und mit voller Absicht*). You acted more

unconsciously. And now you do not know if it was right or wrong.
But believe me: it was right." (SB 73; SF 65)

Here one might say that the narrator receives from his friend the "I forgive you" that he had denied to the SS-man. But this does not remove his disquiet. Recognition from another self-consciousness (who is 'the same,' a fellow prisoner) may perhaps provide temporary relief, but it does not make the symptoms disappear.

In the willingness to take seriously the possibility of unconscious motivations, as well as in the attention he gives to dreams, hallucinations and jokes, Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* is quite unusual among the testimonial literature of the Holocaust. Wiesenthal has an uncommon sensitivity for what escapes the sovereignty of the living present.²⁶ Such sensitivity is not unrelated to the demand for justice, above all, when this demand is felt to be unconditional. While the narrator of *The Sunflower* affirms that he did not believe that he would survive the war, he says that he never doubted that the Nazis would be called to account for their crimes. Even if the text reports that the prisoners cannot but laugh at the hope that God will save them, there is yet one thought in which the narrator says he never lost faith. Against the supreme principle that "might is right," Simon Wiesenthal helps us to read the Derridean thesis that justice, if there is any, is undeconstructible:²⁷

I had still not lost the faith (*Glaube*) that the world would repay them for their crimes—despite their pompous victories, their measureless jubilation at battles they have won, and their boundless arrogance. The day will yet come when the Nazis will have to hang their heads, as the Jews do now. (SB 41; SF 35)

One of the questions that surprisingly has not been ex-

26 Wiesenthal's other autobiographical novel *Max und Helen* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1981) also contains dream reports and is attentive to the question of unconscious motivations.

27 Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: the Mystical Foundations of Authority," *Cardozo Law Review* (vol. 11: 919, 1990) 944f.

plored in any of the secondary literature about *The Sunflower* that I have encountered is whether there is a relationship between the central event recounted in the narrative and the work that Wiesenthal was to undertake after the war. Even the glaring irony has to my knowledge not been commented on, i.e., that the narrator, the ‘Jew,’ chosen apparently at random to listen to the SS-man’s confession and to grant him forgiveness should be the one who will become the world’s most famous ‘Nazi hunter.’ One can even go further and ask if this traumatic encounter is not what gave Simon Wiesenthal his singular vocation? While I believe one must ask this question, it is impossible, of course, to know with certainty, (even if Wiesenthal had himself affirmed this provenance of his work.) What one can say, however, is that the narrator’s disquiet (*Unruhe*) strongly suggests that he does not feel completely innocent for what happened.²⁸ Even if his refusal of the SS man’s dying wish is just (and I believe it is), I would suggest that the narrator cannot foreclose the possibility—even the inevitability—that he gains something from this refusal, that he benefits from the opportunity that has been given to him, when, all of a sudden, between victim and perpetrator the tables have been turned. The narrator is, as it were, guilty automatically, by virtue of a logic, which makes it impossible for him not to profit from being ethical and just:

He sat up and put his hands together as if to pray.

“I want to die in peace, so I need...”

I sensed that something couldn’t get past his lips. But I wasn’t there to encourage him, to help him. I remained silent. (*Aber ich bin nicht*

28 While in the death block at Mauthausen: “I realized that I only had a few days to live, or at best a few weeks and yet I remembered the SS man again and his confession. His eyes were no longer completely hidden; they looked at me through small hole in the bandages. There was an angry expression in them. He was holding something in front of me—the bundle that I had refused to accept from the nurse. I must have screamed.” (SB 87; SF 78)

dazu da, ihn zu ermutigen. Ich bleibe stumm.) (SB 61; SF 54)

When the narrator avows “But I wasn’t there to encourage him,” there is a moment of hardness, of non-compassion: a refusal to be generous. At that moment, the narrator cannot be called simply a victim or even only an eyewitness. In exchange for this moment of hardness, non-compassion, the narrator transcends his position as a Nazi victim to become one who in silence passes judgment on a murderer. His action no doubt is different from one who escapes, or who takes up alms, but it is potent nonetheless. Perhaps even—one might speculate—a life-affirming predatory instinct has been awoken in the course of this traumatic meeting with the dying SS-man, one that will sustain Wiesenthal in the infinitely patient and frustrating research to which he will consecrate his energies after the war. And thanks to which a great many Nazi perpetrators, mass murderers, could not sleep.²⁹

I believe, more than Wiesenthal said, this encounter with the SS-man was a question of life and death. For had he done what the dying SS-man had asked him, he would have at that moment compromised the sacred exigency within him to remain alive, not for his own sake, but for the sake of the victims to whom he wanted to give justice, and in all probability in particular for his mother, Rosa Wiesenthal, whose murder several weeks before the

29 It is estimated that thanks to Wiesenthal’s work for more than 60 years in the *Dokumentationszentrum* in Vienna, over 1100 Nazi war criminals were brought to trial. During the celebration of his 90th birthday, Wiesenthal asked his audience please not to make a hero out of him (“*Bitte, macht aus mir keinen Helden*”), the reason for this, one can argue, is that, more than his achievements, his life and work bear witness to religious, ethical and political aporias and the silences that accompany them. For more information, see Simon Wiesenthal *Antisemitism: the generic hatred: essays in memory of Simon Wiesenthal* (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization ; Verbe et Lumière-Vigilance, 2007) and *I Have Never Forgotten You: The Life and Legacy of Simon Wiesenthal* documentary video directed by Richard Trank & Marvin Hier (Simon Wiesenthal Center, 2007).

encounter with the SS-man is mentioned briefly in the narrative.³⁰

The Survival of the Question

One can read *The Sunflower* as a request for forgiveness for being just:

Forgive me this my virtue;
For in the fatness of these pury times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg.³¹

How to think the responsibilities of memory, justice and education in an epoch when the trials are over and the eyewitnesses are dead? By the announcing the survival of the question and calling the world to respond to it, Wiesenthal puts the very question of forgiveness to work in the service of the memory of the victims for future generations. One can read *The Sunflower* as the invention of a powerful resistance machine to the world's demand for closure and normalization:

Today the world demands of us that we forgive those who through their stance continue to provoke us. The world demands that we close the account and draw the line, as if nothing essential happened. [...]

This question will survive all trials and will continue to remain relevant when the crimes of the Nazis belong the distant past.

Therefore I address it to people, who I believe have something to say about it. It should serve as an appeal (*Aufruf*). For the events that have given birth to this question can happen again. (SB 107-108; SF 97)

30 "I thought of my own mother who would never write me another letter. Five weeks previously she had been dragged out of a ghetto in a raid." (SB 35; SF 29)

31 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act 3, Scene 4. (Hamlet is speaking to his mother, Queen Gertrude).

It is a structural element of *The Sunflower* that there are many voices, differing and incompatible opinions, both within the narrative proper as well as beyond it. What is the purpose of such a debate? Why does Wiesenthal call for it and promote it, even among those who he could safely presume would have great difficulty agreeing with the decisions made by his narrator? In all probability, it is because he believes that such an open debate, *without restriction on dissent*, will best serve the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and the education of future generations. The ongoing debate, the ever-renewed *Auseinandersetzung* with the past, is alone what will keep the memory *alive*.³² (This is the beginning of an answer to the questions I asked in the introduction, concerning why a Nazi hunter would insist so strongly on the importance of the question of forgiveness.)

The first editions of *The Sunflower* included commentaries on the part of individuals that Wiesenthal had personally written to and asked. Later editions, however, include responses from others, such that with each new edition there is effectively a new text, containing a mixture of old and new commentaries, either written specifically for one of the eight languages into which the text been translated or otherwise recopied from other editions. What is created across the various publications of *The Sunflower* is thus also a testimony of time: each new edition is a palimpsest, containing responses which testify also to new historical events, changes in the perception of the Holocaust as well as cultural and linguistic specificity. In responding to the narrative, many readers also testify in their own name to ethical dilemmas and injustices

32 “The children of Nazi victims and the children of the Nazi perpetrators live side by side in Germany and Austria; they have no choice but to coexist. How can we find a way of living together so that we will never again have a generation growing up either as victims or as perpetrators? I believe that there is no other solution than to examine closely the past, over and over again, (*uns immer wieder mit der Vergangenheit auseinandersetzen*) and to learn from it. Simon Wiesenthal, from a lecture given at the Symposium “Überleben der Shoah” im Wiener Rathaus, November 1997. Online. Internet. September, 2011. Available: <http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at>.

that they themselves have ‘experienced’ (political dissidents, religious leaders, writers, activists, survivors from other atrocities, even a famous member of the Nazi elite).³³

Before All Questioning

One can yet ask if, despite its prophetic character, Wiesenthal’s affirmation of the survival of the question is still too much of a solution. To what extent do the aporias to which Wiesenthal bears witness exceed the question, and the authority of the questioning attitude? What are the limits of the presupposition that ‘forgiveness’ can be posed as a question and discussed as such? Must not forgiveness (be it as an offer or request) remain unavowed, indeed unavowable in language, if it is to resist recuperation into an economy of exchange; if it is to remain heterogeneous to any determination of the order of knowledge, of the self-presentation

33 Albert Speer’s response to the narrative consists in recounting the details of a meeting he had with Simon Wiesenthal on May 20, 1975. At the conclusion of the meeting, Wiesenthal gave him a copy of *Die Sonnenblume*. The meeting was preceded by a six-month correspondence between the two men. It appears that Wiesenthal was indeed willing to forgive Albert Speer, if forgiveness amounts to saying: “For me, Herr Speer, you are a new born baby.” What was important for Wiesenthal was that Speer was unwilling to submit his conscience entirely to a logic of calculation on the future and self-interest. This is what Wiesenthal said about him: “I said to him, “I was at your trial, I saw your defense counsel’s despair when you suddenly said you wanted to account not only for yourself and what you had done, but also for the actions of the government of which you had been a member. Without this testimony, you would have gotten ten years at the time; however, if everything we now know from available documents and other sources, had already been disclosed then, you would have been sentenced for life or even to death. But,” I told him, “our legal system would be absolutely meaningless, if someone who admitted his guilt and served his sentence were not allowed to make a new beginning. For me, Mr. Speer, you are a new-born baby.”” From a lecture given at Technischen Universität Wien, June, 1988. Online. Internet. July 2009 Available: <http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at>. The critic Lawrence Langer has suggested that Albert Speer functions for Wiesenthal as a substitute for the SS man to whom the narrator had remained silent. See Lawrence L. Langer, *Preempting The Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998) 179f.

of an appropriable meaning?

In his reading of *The Sunflower*, Ulrich Baer has drawn attention to an *unstated* demand to listen as the un-thought precondition for all discussions of atonement, guilt and forgiveness in relation to the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis.³⁴ Can one think of listening as *already* a kind of forgiveness, even if this listening is violently imposed, as is very dramatically the case in *The Sunflower*? As several commentators have pointed out, at no point in the interview does the SS man ask the narrator for his name: “I don’t know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough.” (SB 61; SF 54) During the interview the narrator does not only refuse to respond to the SS man’s request for forgiveness, he does not give reasons for his refusal or otherwise say anything to the dying SS man of what is going through his mind. At the conclusion of the confession there is a radical interruption of communication between the two men.

There was an uncanny (*unheimlich*) silence in the room.

I looked through the window. [...]

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. Between them there seemed to rest a sunflower. I had made up my mind and without a word I left the room. (SB 62; SF 55)

The silence between the two men in the room is an infinite silence, frozen, as it were, in time. After the narrator leaves

34 “Even the most humble and commendable discussions of atonement, guilt, and forgiveness—whether they concern spiritual atonement, material reparations, or restitution in general—are necessarily haunted and threatened by the unstated presumption that the other side is capable of participating and listening.” Ulrich Baer, “The Hubris of Humility: Günter Grass, Peter Schneider, and German Guilt After 1989” *The Germanic Review* 80 (Winter 2005) 53. Elsewhere Baer speaks of the willingness and capacity to listen as the “imaginary *Vorgriff*, or implicit mental projection, that renders an appeal for forgiveness possible.” *Ibid.* 51. The reference to the imaginary, the phantasm, indicates that this projection or fundamental presupposition not need be ‘real’, present, or well grounded in order to be effective. This recalls what Hélène Cixous calls “dreamexistence” (*rêvexistence*).

the room, there will have been no way to rectify or change it. It is irreparable. In this sense, one could even say that the narrator's refusal is like a murder. What is the relationship between the silence between the two men in the *Sterbezimmer* and the burning need to bear witness and solicit responses from others? Could it be that the narrator feels responsible for the SS-man's death, as if he had lent a hand in it by refusing to assent to his last wish? Even further, might the narrator also feel responsible for the mass murders themselves, as if he, unwilling inheritor of the SS man's confession, were also responsible for the SS-man's responsibility?³⁵

It is certainly possible to read *The Sunflower* as a request for forgiveness for being unable to forgive, if 'forgiveness' means closure, drawing the line, renouncing the demand for justice. However, it is also possible to read *The Sunflower* as an inventive, poetic gesture of forgiveness granted to the SS-man, to whom the narrator feels bound by virtue of his remorse (despite its hopeless insufficiency). In Hebrew, the name 'Shimon' (Simon) means the one who has heard (Genesis 29: 33). Because the narrator has heard the SS-man, this is enough for Bolek, the apprentice priest, to believe that the SS-man has been forgiven, that he has died in peace:

He died in peace because you listened to his confession. It was a proper confession (*richtige Beichte*)—even without a priest [...] Through his confession—though it was not a formal confession—his conscience was liberated and he died in peace because you listened to him. (SB 91; SF 82)

35 "The survivor's guilt for the death of the other, this forgiveness asked *a priori* by the living as survivor—this is what, making us *a priori* guilty for the death of the other, transforms this death into something other than a natural death: forgiveness begged confesses guilt and transforms the death of the other into a murder. [...] My own are the victims of murder, those who do not die of a natural death, since, actively or passively, I feel I have lent my hand to their death. This is also what one calls love....One also finds in Blanchot and Levinas this thought of death that is always a murder." Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality" in *Acts of Religion* ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

This listening is not simply a choice, the decision of a sovereign subject. Listening is no more a choice than the compulsion to speak, to testify to what has happened. Simon Wiesenthal has listened so well that he can (or so he would ask us to believe) recall the smallest details of a meeting that had taken place twenty-five years prior to the first publication of *The Sunflower*. He will have planted a sunflower for this repentant Nazi in the form of a testimony, to remember him and connect him with the living—even to remember a part of his name (Karl). Perhaps this is forgiveness, if forgiveness means a new beginning without a definitive end or closure of the past. One can say that listening is the ‘yes’, or more precisely, the ‘yes, perhaps’ of forgiveness.³⁶

³⁶ As a final thought, I would also like to suggest that *The Sunflower* could also be for Wiesenthal’s mother, Rosa. After the war, the narrator meets the SS-man’s mother in Stuttgart. In an act of compassion, about which he is also later conflicted, he does not tell her who her dead son was and shatter her faith in his inherent goodness.