

## **Some Reflections on *Mémoires à Deux Voix*, Elie Wiesel and François Mitterrand**

I read Wiesel's self-effacing dialogue with Mitterrand with a sense first of mounting irritation. So little of Wiesel, so much of Mitterrand and he so intrusive and apparently controlling. As my reading progressed through "Childhood", that changed. Because Wiesel's questions were so gentle, so disarming, they coaxed the most revealing of responses.

It starts thus:

*“Wiesel: We cherish our childhood, we keep coming back to it again and again. We judge it, just as it judges us. What do you say to the child you were?”*

*Mitterrand: I have nothing to say to it inwardly.*

*Wiesel: There's no dialogue between you?*

*Mitterrand: Not really. Nothing meaningful in any event.”*<sup>1</sup>

Just a few questions later, Mitterrand refers to his childhood as occupying an immutable place within; though relatively slight in his total being, it remained important in value — “the purest portion of my personality”. *But the little diamond has remained intact.* [“*Enfin, ce petit diamant qui est là s'est perpetué.*”] He refers to his childhood as an anchor — a reference — but never controlling his actions, only his judgments! He leaves totally unexplained, how his actions could operate independantly of his judgments, like sight after a detached retina.

Later, after evoking with real sympathy Mitterrand's abhorrence for injustice — rather like a teacher so anxious for his favourite pupil to present himself at his best — Wiesel, reluctantly, without shedding affection for the friend he wanted to continue to admire, asks

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the English translation by Richard Seaver and Timothy Bart, Arcade Publishing, New York 1996 of the original French edition of Editions Odile Jacob 1995)

[“Wiesel: Nous aimons notre enfance, nous y revenons, nous la jugeons, elle nous juge. Que dites-vous aujourd'hui à l'enfant que vous étiez?”

Mitterrand: Je n'ai rien à lui dire intérieurement.

Wiesel: Il n'y a pas de dialogue entre vous?”

Mitterrand about René Bousquet. Of Bousquet's Vichy past surely known to Mitterrand; the man who helped fill the human quotas for the Nazi death camps whom Mitterrand once admired and with whom he was once associated. At first Mitterrand tries to glide around the difficulties, reconciling the irreconcilable, hiding behind Bousquet's early judicial whitewash. But faced with that unrelenting, gentle confrontation, Mitterrand then resorts to bombast and half truth; finally rejecting "the little diamond" of his purest self.

*“Mitterrand: First of all, I shall say that over the course of the years I have shed [better translated ‘I have liberated myself from’] the restrictions and restraints of my background, my education, and my early prejudices. I much prefer having followed the path I did, moving increasingly away from the conservative environment out of which I came toward the ideals of the left ... but I **did** make it, and I must confess to feeling a certain pride when I look back and see how far I have come.”*<sup>2</sup>

Observe how he replaces his conservative childhood, not with different values, but different ideas — of the left, as it happens, but it might as easily have been “cohabitation” with Chirac.

What *is* clear is that, as the psychologists would say, this is a man, highly intelligent, with a seducer's desire for approval and more, yet *who never integrated his childhood* — and who compartmentalised so much else of his life. Who could place a conservative Catholic childhood hermetically sealed (as he hoped) from his actions as a person of the Left. Judgment in one box, action in another. Whose Vichy period, with little perceptible transition, was displaced by the man of the Resistance. Who could, after Pompidou's slow decline and death, promise the French people to disclose his health, yet swore his doctor in 1981 to suppress any news of his prostate cancer. And, finally, who managed to live the schizoid existence of an apparently close and companionable marriage with Danielle and his children on the one hand, while maintaining a clandestine liaison with a mistress and their daughter on the other, all brought to the stage at the end, along with the family dog.

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Mitterrand: Non, enfin, pas trop.”]

<sup>2</sup> “Je dirai d’abord que je me suis affranchi au fil des années des contraintes de mon milieu, de mon éducation, de certains de ses préjugés. Je préfère avoir suivi ce-chemin-là, m’exonérant progressivement de l’environnement conservateur qui était le mien, pour aller à la rencontre des idéaux de la gauche ... je l’ai fait et j’en ressens quelque fierté.”

One might intellectualise and justify these apparent irreconcilables. But why then choose so searching an interlocutor as Wiesel, amid all this stage management? One who could say to his friend: *My own feeling is that how you look back at your past is as important as your past itself* [“*Je pense, moi, que le regard que vous portez aujourd’hui sur votre passé est au moins aussi important que votre passé lui-même.*”] ... It is when Wiesel then pleads for some regret, some remorse, that Mitterrand responds in anger with that litany of achievements.

It is as though Mitterrand’s life was like a series of untidy rooms left behind, each door carefully shut. He moves from room to room repeating the process till finally he reaches the last room. There he now sits, with his friend, knowing he is dying, as they engage in that gentle, searching retrospection. Certainly Mitterrand wants admiration, not absolution. His friend, who so admires both his intellect and his sensibilities, tells him the price. But Mitterrand knows the price is too high. He must open all those rooms and let the light in. He will not. He says, in effect, what is the point of travelling so far, if now I must retrace my steps, looking into the dark closed places of those re-entered rooms? Surely the aedifice of a life’s achievements over that long journey is all that counts!

So why then did he choose Wiesel, who did not accept that premise? Was it out of an expectation that Mitterrand’s formidable powers of seduction, exerted on a Jewish friend, would provide the strongest refutation of any lingering ambivalence? A friend who had suffered in the Holocaust, whose testimony would be of such unimpeachable integrity in the eyes of posterity. If so, was Mitterrand’s discernment about his friend so limited that he thought Wiesel would betray his own convictions out of friendship?

Or was there truly a desire to risk all, letting the accounts reconcile as they may? Was there the conviction that, in the end, one must submit for judgment, even if the completed work be shaped and presented to best advantage? Just as earlier he co-operated (to a degree) with the biographer who attempted to reconstruct his tacking between Vichy and Resistance, so he turns himself now to a more searching light.

So indeed we should be grateful. For it takes the empathy of an Elie Wiesel to draw out such insights from so well guarded a man. Had Wiesel been merely repelled, we would know much less. May we not therefore allow ourselves at least a scintilla of admiration for Mitterrand, in choosing such a judge and laying himself open?

Or perhaps the final judgment should be Wiesel's, quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 10 October 1996:

*“There has to be coherence and logic in the political journey of François Mitterrand,” he writes. ‘His refusal to inquire into the Nazi past of certain French people and to put them on trial; his custom of secretly laying a wreath on Pétain’s tomb; his links with former [fascist] Cagoullards; his determination to hide part of his life; and his habit of surrounding himself with Jews — all this must have an explanation.’”*

There was one final sour note in the whole encounter. Mr Wiesel claims that Mr Attali, François Mitterrand's friend and former adviser, used the unpublished manuscript of the Wiesel/Mitterrand conversations for his memoirs, *Verbatim*, pretending the remarks were made to him. He says of this apparent breach of faith; *“this still hurts me”*.

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