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LITERARY COMMENTARY

“The Pawnbroker” at Fifty

By D. G. Myers

Fifty years ago this week Edward Lewis Wallant’s novel *The Pawnbroker* was published. While it is customarily described as one of the first American novels to examine the moral and spiritual consequences of the Holocaust, the truth is that Wallant’s novel has been superseded by later fictional accounts that perform the examination with a keener insight derived from deeper historical knowledge. *The Pawnbroker* is not really a Holocaust novel at all. It is something different. And at least when it comes to the American novel, something better. *The Pawnbroker* is one of the last examples of a genre that has largely disappeared from American shores — the meaning-making novel, the novel with something to say, the novel with an overt and unembarrassed message.

In a short review in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* — the only notice the paper took of the novel — staff writer Morris Gilbert praised Wallant for his “great insight into the wretched world he

describes.” But there are really two worlds in *The Pawnbroker*, and both of them are wretched. Sol Nazerman manages a pawnshop in Harlem, practicing “the ancient, despised profession” of Jewish moneylender. At the age of forty-five, he has neither friends nor heart (“Haven’t you got a heart?” a customer whines, bargaining for more money. “No,” Sol answers. “No heart”). But he is also a scholar and an intellectual, a former professor at the University of Cracow, whose family was murdered by the German Nazis before his eyes. Imprisoned at an unnamed death camp, he was impressed into the Sonderkommandos, although Wallant does not appear to know the term, and is tormented by what becomes of him in the constant presence of death:

The smell of burning flesh entered him, and it was as though he ate the most forbidden food. A great and eternal sickness began in him. The smoke of their bodies was blowing north when this hideous hunger hit him. He lusted for rich meats and heavy pastries, had an insane yearning for wine and coffee. He dug his clawlike fingernails into his thighs to punish himself for not praying to that fleeting, greasy smoke. But all he felt was this great desire for food. And then his lust turned to a hunger of the loins, and he wondered at the monster he was.

Unlike William Styron, who boasted in *Sophie’s Choice* that he had thoroughly studied the “historical account,” reading books by Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Olga Lengyel, Eugen Kogon, and Bruno Bettelheim before starting his own, Wallant relies only upon his own imagination, aided by conversations with a Holocaust survivor whom he knew personally, to recreate the experiences of a Polish Jew in the camps. Although historical ignorance (or half-learning, in the case of

Styron) is a defect in most novelists, it is unexpectedly an advantage for Wallant. He is not trying to fill in the emotional blanks of the historical record. He is trying, quite explicitly, to write a *symbolic* account.

Nobody could get away with it today. Wallant was writing at a time, though, when historical ignorance of the Holocaust was widespread and unavoidable, except among a few scholars. Gerald Reitlinger's *Final Solution* (1953), the only English-language history to date, had been issued by a small publishing house in a small print run (the *New York Times* did not get around to reviewing it). Raul Hilberg's comprehensive 700-page *Destruction of the European Jews* was not published until two months after Wallant's novel appeared.

Wallant also wrote long before the psychologists' term of art *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD) was coined. Nor was the Holocaust, for him, an "incurable wound," as Edmund Wilson spoke of it in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941) — a special variety of "morbid psychology," with the literary treatment, as in Sophocles, "clinical" and "up-to-date in the physical science of his time." For Wallant, the Holocaust was a mythic, nearly religious event, a sort of reverse Sinai. The Jews at Sinai were terrified by the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; they begged Moses to mediate between God and them, lest they die. The title character of Wallant's novel has passed through a similar experience: "His memory was screened off, his hopes had long ago been amputated." Because he

had approached too closely to the infinite evil that is the reverse image of God, he had been

cauterized of all abstract things. Reality consisted of the world within one's sight and smell and hearing. He commemorated nothing; it was the secret of his survival. His very name is symbolic. Sol Nazerman is a *nazir* man, a post-Holocaust Nazerite who avoids the intoxicants of modern life, not because he is consecrated to God, but because his experience at the limits of experience has separated him from the mass of men. His pawnshop is a front for a gangster's money-laundering operation, but Nazerman does not care where his own money comes from. He lives in a large house in Mount Vernon with his sister's family, who depend upon him for financial support. He is contemptuous of them, and barely less so toward his mistress and her father, who also survived the Holocaust. "How did he get like that?" asks a doctor who comes to treat him. "Some bad accident or what?" "A very bad accident," Nazerman replies. "Of birth. He was in the camps."

Nazerman feels neither grief for his wife and children who died in the camps nor pity for the blacks of Harlem who frequent his store, asking for small loans on badly used objects. He is, by his own admission, barely human. He is "like a creature embedded in a plastic block." Although he is not suicidal, he is not eager to prolong life either: "enough of this," he says, "*too much of this.*"

The novel moves relentlessly toward the event that finally shatters Nazerman's block of plastic. Jesus Ortiz, his black Puerto Rican clerk,

who planned to rob him, is shot dead while trying to shield Nazerman from another robber's bullet:

All his anesthetic numbness left him. He became terrified of the touch of air on the raw wounds. What was this great, agonizing sensitivity and what was it for? Good God, what was all this? *Love*? Could this be *love*? . . . Oh no, not love! For whom? All these dark, dirty creatures? They turn my stomach, they sicken me. Oh, this din, this pain and thrashing.

To put it as bluntly as possible, Nazerman is saved by Jesus and is reborn — into conscience, human feeling, responsibility. He phones his nephew Morton, an aimless art student whom Nazerman had scorned, to come take Jesus's place and learn "the ancient, despised profession."

The ending is far too neatly symbolic, especially to fifty-years-wiser ears. But that is also part of *The Pawnbroker's* distinction and charm. Compared to the ease of flow in many recent novels, whose writers studied in creative writing workshops to polish a verbal surface to a high gloss, Wallant's novel is stiff and awkward and amateurishly bold. In the second decade of the 21st century, no American novelist would give his characters names like Nazerman and Jesus. A minor character would never look upon the hero and say, "That man *suffer!*" Religious symbolism is now taboo, direct statement shameful. But as a consequence, you will never again have the experience of reading a novel that is heavily laden with *significance*, not unless you are willing to read a novel that is at least fifty years old.

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