

# **The Recovery of Reason**

Reification and Literary Praxis in Jorge Semprún's Holocaust Novels

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## Abstract in Spanish

La tesis de maestría *The Recovery of Reason. Reification and Literary Praxis in Jorge Semprún's Holocaust Novels* (*La recuperación de la razón. Reificación y praxis literaria en las novelas del Holocausto de Jorge Semprún*) analiza tres novelas autobiográficas del autor mencionado: *Le grand voyage* (1963), *Quel bon dimanche!* (1980) y *L'écriture ou la vie* (1994). El propósito general de la tesis es indagar las posibilidades de la literatura como esfera autónoma de la actividad humana para dar cuenta de un segmento altamente alienado de la historia del siglo XX: el Holocausto. El propósito particular es dar cuenta de esta problemática en las tres novelas nombradas. Para eso, la tesis parte de dos supuestos. En primer lugar, la renuencia de la experiencia del Holocausto a ser absorbida por el discurso testimonial. En segunda instancia, la posibilidad de una articulación de este segmento histórico dentro de la literatura, dadas su autonomía y libertad. El primer supuesto se apoya en una teoría sociológica marxista hegeliana. El segundo, en una teoría marxista, en especial lukacsiana, del arte en general. El análisis textual concluye lo siguiente: si bien las dos primeras novelas dan cuenta de los problemas fundamentales en la relación sujeto-objeto de la sociedad capitalista y del universo concentracionario alemán, solo la tercera novela, *L'écriture ou la vie*, lleva a cabo una simulación de la emergencia auténtica de la experiencia.

## Foreword

This work was written between November 2007 and November 2008 as a Master's thesis in Comparative Literature at the University of Bergen, Norway. The spirit of this work is political. I subscribe the general idea that man either rejects or accepts his objects whenever he approaches them. The intellectual approach should not be different. Sartre said in *Situations* that the true intellectual says *no*, while the false one places himself in a comfortable *I know, but...*<sup>1</sup> I agree with him. I also think that only by having a clear and concrete political stance towards reality will we be able to reconsider, recognize, and correct our mistakes.

The work is a result of my studies at the Universities of Buenos Aires and Bergen. Because of this twofold origin, I have not been consistent in the language of my quotations. Some writers are quoted in their original language, some others in English. I invoke the reader's patience in this respect.

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Gisle Selnes, Laura Ascoaga, and Misha Bowles for criticizing my ideas, proofreading the text, and correcting my English grammar. Bertrand Huwig and Paul Holden have helped me with diagrams and vocabulary. I thank them too. This work could have not been written without the support and care of my friends and family, dispersed on both sides of the Atlantic. There are two people among them whose names I will say: Miguel García and Héctor Enrique Chicote. They are responsible for whatever good value the following pages have and I carry over my shoulders the happiest of all debts to them.

Francisco Garcia Chicote, November 2008

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<sup>1</sup> *Situations philosophiques*, 245. (1990)

## Chapter One: Introduction

...all ideas are deriv'd from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them...

*Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature*

Reality is not, it becomes.  
For that, the participation of thought is required.  
*Lukács, History and Class Consciousness*

### I. General Question

For those who have long since understood that forms of art do not dwell in ethereal realms it is a given that art needs that which it is not as a condition of being. As long as this paradoxical relation between pure art and grimy toil holds, it follows that artistic forms conceal a great amount of uneasiness in their substratum, and yet this uneasiness, and its concealment, is what gives them their genuine honour. It is probably this honour, this primacy over determinations of space and time – genuine art disregards nationalities and its value shows itself immune to the rational development of technique – that has caught the twofold attention of scholars. On the one hand, art has been expected to expand its dominion over other spheres of life governed by blood, cynicism, and senseless forms. The Romantic cult of art constitutes the most relevant case of such a direction of thought. Romantic Idealism turned the critical reflection of art into metaphysics, hence endowing artworks with an authority they do not possess. It neglected the essence of those spheres that stand opposed to art not only because its idealism failed to see violence as a necessary condition for the existence of art forms, but also because its revolutionary ethics would never compromise the quest for a rounded and meaningful life.

Conversely, this attempt to break through the limits of art stands opposed to a meticulous voiding of art's real social contents. This second perspective, which has survived Romanticism and is growing more powerful as these lines are being written, operates with remarkable precision and detail and won't rest until it has managed to sever art's domain from its social substratum. Its supporters point to art's autonomy contending that it rests on ahistorical categories such as "*interesselösigkeit*", "aesthetic features", and "taste". Unlike Jena Romanticism, which developed a hypertrophied theory of art grounded on the ethical integrity of its supporters, the analytical approach exhibits an impoverished and atrophied concept of aesthetics.

The alternatives described above constitute antithetical temptations because each possesses an undeniable core of truth which its counterpart neglects. Both of them are as false as they are true, and hence they come to enlarge the number of false oppositions that dwell within the intellectual interpretation of art: commitment *versus l'art pour l'art*, intrinsic *versus* extrinsic criticism, etc. However, the problem triggered by this particular opposition is crucial to the present work. I shall present it two-fold. On the one hand, art's autonomy is a fact: the forms that it deploys no longer offer ethical guidance in the world. Experience does not serve art either as motive, cause or end, though this does not bear on the fact that artworks may eventually offer guidelines for concrete praxial intervention. *The Tempest*, for example, has played a significant role among revolutionary intellectuals in Cuba. But the truth is that forms of art are forms of art *tout court* only when they cease to illustrate the discourse of experience.

This does not mean, however, that these forms and their materials dwell in Platonic realms. In the sense that they derive from concrete human praxis, they are ethical products, possessing a specific heteronomous relation to history. Ariel and Caliban express the ambivalent European configuration to which native Americans were subjected, they illustrate the false opposition between the *rousseauian bon sauvage* and the brute, libidinous monster whose slave labour accelerated the accumulation of capital in Europe. But *The Tempest's* referentiality is achieved at the cost, or at least because, of its complete fictionality. Shakespeare's success lies in the fact that his work lacks the ethical density that, for instance, Bartolomé de las Casas' *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* required and yet the English play still seems more accurate than the well intended report of 1542.

Therefore, the question of autonomy in art should not lead to an understanding of works in the fashion of obscure, unintelligible monads. On the contrary, it should serve as a starting point for the examination of the ways in which artworks can unveil certain features of human praxis that no other cognitive sphere could grasp. Insofar as they put forward a concrete mode of approaching objects, they configure a concrete subjectivity and become *ipso facto* bearers of a particular ethics. This ethics pervades the object of interest for this work.

## II. Particular Question and Corpus Delimitation

The dimensions in which the aesthetic stance discloses its peculiar cognitive praxis have been thoroughly discussed from the beginning of theoretical speculation in Western cultures. It is not the goal of this work to revisit a vast tradition of philosophical systems that dates back to

Plato's *Phaedrus* and the Aristotelian *Poetics*, and that includes, among others, the works of Kant, Hegel, and Schiller. On the contrary, and even though the adoption of a concrete theoretical stance will be necessary, this work intends to throw light on a much narrower segment by examining three concrete literary works and drawing conclusions from particular and given cases. These are three autobiographical novels of the Spanish-French writer Jorge Semprún: *Le grand voyage* (1963), *Quel beau dimanche* (1980), and *L'écriture ou la vie* (1994).

A fair number of features make these novels remarkably interesting for such an analysis. Not only do they share a conscious attempt to reveal the same past events: all three texts deal with the author's actual imprisonment in the Nazi concentration camp Buchenwald. They also display a problematic relation between the figure of the *memorator*, which, to a certain extent, intends to be identical in every case, and the configuration of the remembered subject, which shows to be different in each case and does not always display the same attitude towards the *memorator*. Taken as a whole, these works are three different aesthetic attempts to unveil a fragment of the same historical praxis and thus they offer a pertinent – and fruitful – phenomenon for an analysis that intends to disclose literature's ability to represent experience.

The generic definition of these works is problematic. The reasons for this instability simultaneously point to the nature of the works, the uncanny substratum from which they retrieve their materials – the Holocaust – and the sort of generic definitions to which the categories of *testimony* and *autobiography* have been submitted in critical theory. We owe Philippe Lejeune and Paul Ricoeur the most serious definitions of *autobiography* and *testimony*.<sup>1</sup> Lejeune defines the autobiographical discourse in terms not of objective, intrinsic textual elements, but of an institutionalized mode of approaching certain texts, by means of which the reader takes for granted an equation of identity between the character's, the narrator's and the writer's names. Lejeune calls this mode of reading *the autobiographical pact*. In order to establish this pact, the text has to present a certain number of elements that enable the identity. These elements can be either paratextual (the work's title, for instance) or textual (*inter alia*, a pronominal stabilization that equates character and narrator).<sup>2</sup>

The complexity of autobiographical praxis lies in the determination of a triple *I* – the flesh-and-blood man, the narrator, and the character – that must compel the *sine qua non*

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<sup>1</sup> Lejeune's most relevant work on this topic is *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975). Ricoeur's definition of testimonial discourse can be found in his *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000)

<sup>2</sup> Equally crucial to the fulfillment of the pact is what Lejeune refers to as *l'espace autobiographique*, that is an interface where non-autobiographical works of the same author are linked with his autobiographical production.

condition of being identical and different at the same time. Lejeune insists on the fact that this triple identity must convey a total value: the autobiographical pact can only be sustained if the equation *author = narrator = character* is never put into question. Yet this tension of identity and difference finds in Semprún's works a remarkable feature: while nothing can be said about the concrete writer, the limits between the textual *I*'s – narrator and character – tend at times to blur and disappear (causing the identity equation to implode) and at other times to configure two different entities (causing the identity equation to cease and thus revoking the autobiographical pact). Whenever narrator and character become separate entities, the discourse tends, as Lejeune wisely notes, towards testimony. That is, the utterance *[I write that] I am I* shifts to *[I write that] I was there* (being *there* ontologically, aesthetically, and ethically different from the two former *I*'s). Semprún manipulates the autobiographical identity by mastering formal devices that have always dwelt in the realm of literary praxis. Paraphrasing a formalist *cliché*, these devices move the equivalence principle from the axis of selection to the axis of combination.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to a definition of *testimony*, Ricoeur stresses the triple deixis that sustains this type of discourses. A testimony value of truth depends on the bearer's ability to convince his recipients that *I was there*. However, as Ricoeur insinuates and Agamben explains, this deictic claim is mainly rhetorical and has a manifold problem if it is conceived of as an authentic means of knowing the real dimensions of the segment it is set to narrate (especially when this segment points to a highly reified and traumatic event such as the Holocaust).<sup>4</sup> We will presently resume this theoretical speculation. In Semprún's works, the category of testimony is not only the one of the objects of the narrator's speculations, it is also a formal device that arranges narrative material.

The generic inscription of these three texts is to be found within the domain of literature. Semprún's novels embody a larger tradition of literary works not only by means of their formal devices, but also because of an explicit attitude: the three novels possess a high level of reflection in which the conditions of their production are taken as relevant parts. The different narrators constantly refer to their tales as literary products. At first sight, this explicitation leads to two different directions. On the one hand, it recalls a certain concept of

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<sup>3</sup> This work deals with a wide concept of *formalism* that goes beyond the Russian group labeled as *formalists* by the Bolsheviks. The definition that is at stake here points to all those intellectual approaches that tend to emphasize formal devices over determinations of content. Russian Formalism, Czech, French and North American Structuralisms, as well as the whole analytical school therefore fall within this category. The *cliché* I am referring to is Roman Jakobson's famous definition: "The poetic function projects the equivalence principle from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" ("Linguistic and Poetics" 1960)

<sup>4</sup> Agamben's ideas can be found in his *Homo Sacer* (1995)



irony according to which the qualitative difference between what is given in the world and what is (re)created on paper will never be overcome. By constantly stating “this is literature”, this category of irony refuses to blur the limits between fiction and reality. However, on the other hand, Semprún’s insistence on the fact that he is “reviving” his traumatic past in literature encloses a confidence in the redemptive forces of aesthetic labour. Although the dimensions of such confidence vary from novel to novel, the *memorator* always assumes that aesthetic remembrance of a traumatic past may offer a way to redeem the ethical integrity of the living. For the textual configuration of the *I*-subject – Semprún as *memorator* – literature is a sort of praxis that helps to unveil features of the *I*-object – Semprún as character – which otherwise not only would have been unavailable for the cognizant subject, but also highly oppressive for his development.<sup>5</sup>

This state of affairs triggers two groups of questions which the present work will try to answer. On the one hand, how do these three particular cases of literary praxis unmask this oppressive lived past? This question points to the autonomous value of literature. On the other hand, how can these novels help the cognizant subject, that is the subject that goes through the different series of fragmented spheres? In other words, what is the heteronomous statute of literature that enables an overcoming of fragmentation and serve human redemption? Before we can begin the analysis of the novels, we need concrete definitions of the categories of *testimony*, *experience*, and *literature*.

### III. Definition of Categories and Theoretical Frame

At the age of 20, Jorge Semprún, son of a wealthy Spanish republican family, was arrested by German forces in France, where he took part in the Resistance. Detained in France for some months, he was finally taken to *KZ Buchenwald* in Weimar, a working concentrationary facility for political criminals where he lived in ominous conditions until the camp was abandoned by the *SS* due to the imminent arrival of the American forces in April 1945. Given both the complexity of the events witnessed at Buchenwald and his classical education, it is not surprising that Semprún should choose literature as a probable discourse of experience.

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<sup>5</sup> I define the concepts *I-object* and *I-subject* in the following terms. The *I-object* refers not only to the concrete emergences of the subject’s objective counterpart but also to the totality of elements that give form to him. Conversely, the *I-subject* is regarded not only as the emergences of a simulated enunciation in the text – in other words, the function of *narrator* – but also as the totality of textual mechanisms that lie behind these emergences and are responsible for the enunciative *ethos*.

This lack of surprise is rooted in the fact that the question of how to give account of the Holocaust has caught not merely the attention, but also the passion of many thinkers. Right after the war, it became obvious that a simple report would just not do. Thus, this work comes to revisit a well known debate that dates back to Theodor W. Adorno's 1951 claim on the impossibility of art after Auschwitz and Paul Celan's attempts to refute such a judgment.<sup>6</sup> Although Adorno tried to distance himself from his contention's high level of assertion, what is a stake in the very core of his argument is that the Holocaust expressed an abrupt fragmentation between man as a generic subject of experience and the realm of objects that come to constitute the eventual source for that experience. For Marxian thinkers like Adorno or Max Horkheimer, the Holocaust emerges as the extreme case of a process that causes a terrible strangement in the subject. It provokes a painful destruction of the organic links that bond every particular person to his fellows and thus it masks and perverts the meaning of generic human praxis. It is very important to understand that for these scholars experience is a means of praxial intervention on the past that leads to the ethical understanding of the present and offers tactical answers for the future. This "strong" idea of experience will be explained in detail later throughout the work as it constitutes a *key* concept. Now it is enough with understanding that the Holocaust cancelled the possibility of experience because the *I*, which provides the common denominator for a discourse that links past, present and future, lacks continuity.

An important contribution to this topic has been offered by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their book *Testimony. Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. From a clear clinical psychoanalytical perspective, Felman and Laub describe the discourse of the Holocaust and propose general outlines for a therapy that could heal the trauma behind the telling of ominous pasts. Their work partly succeeds in the description of the typical survivor by stressing the loss of the sense of reality as the element that makes testimony impossible.

It is as though this process of witnessing is of an event that happened on another level, and was not part of the mainstream of the conscious life of a little boy. Rather, these memories are like discrete islands of precocious thinking and feel almost like the remembrances of another child, removed, yet connected to me in a complex way.<sup>7</sup>

Loss of sense of reality results from an ominous fragmentation of the *I*, in which the subject operates at different levels that lack interconnection. For reasons that are not explained,

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<sup>6</sup> Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society".

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, 76.

*Testimony* does not examine the event of the Holocaust in the light of the development of Capitalism. On the contrary, the book takes the episode in its singularity, therefore giving the impression that the systematic extermination of people was due to random misfortune rather than to a concrete development of the subjective configurations in society. Consequently, it states that the fragmentation of the *I* offers an insurmountable obstacle to testimony since the subjective stance that was at stake in the traumatic event qualitatively differs from the one available now, at the time of the bearing of testimony. Felman and Laub claim that we should conceive the world of the Holocaust as a world in which the emergence of the Other was no longer possible, a state of affairs in which the perpetrators managed to obliterate any possibility of “sane”, “unviolated” point of reference for the victim.<sup>8</sup> The act of communicating experience, they contend, requires a completely different subjective configuration, and thus the past emerges in ominous and oppressive dimensions every time it is revisited. The authors propose that the reappearance of the past be carried out in a context that formally simulate the lack of the Other. Thus, the dialogic emergence of testimony can be done at the cost of the blurring of those who listen. Enacting the constitutive feature of the therapist, and thus duplicating a founding principle of psychoanalytical therapy,<sup>9</sup> the listener must serve as a formal support for discourse, disregarding his own concrete, historical personality. In the authors’ own words, this listener would be someone who says “I’ll be with you in the very process of your losing me. I am your witness.”<sup>10</sup>

Besides their therapeutical praxis’ probable success, behind Felman and Laub’s contention lies a concept of witness that requires a non-dialectical relationship between subject and object. I ask the reader of these lines to have this problem present throughout the work. Whereas such a conception may prove fruitful in cases where the health of victims is at stake or the future of war criminals has to be decided, it verges on demise not only when it comes to ontological examination of the event, but also when we deal with a concept of experience that facilitates the elevation of consciousness. Subjective intervention on past events should serve as a means of change. However, if such an operation can only be carried out within a context of formal duplication, there is no viable unveiling of the conditions of possibility for that past.

Within the field of Philosophy, the works of Jean François Lyotard and Giorgio Agamben have shown interest in the possibilities of bearing testimony of the Holocaust. The

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> I refer to the concept of *Übertragung*, *transference*. This comparison is not elicited in the book, but I believe that there is enough evidence to support such a connection.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 92.

former was amazed by an extreme case of paradox that seems to be more of an intellectual puzzle *pour epater le bourgeois* than a concrete theoretical problem.<sup>11</sup> In short, this mental jigsaw claims that according to the logic of the testimony, the witness must produce legitimacy by proving that he or she has survived a wrong. But the core of the Holocaust, namely the production of death, is, *qua* death, impossible to survive. No one can tell what happened inside the gas chambers because no one happens to have returned from death. Thus, the absolute witness is impossible and every testimony, as an index denoting the life of its bearer, becomes *ipso facto* a negation of itself.<sup>12</sup> Agamben, on the other hand, puts forward a much more interesting argument that deals with the ethical integrity of the witness.<sup>13</sup> Taking sides with Primo Levi's *La tregua*, the Italian theorist contends that it is impossible for the witness, *qua* survivor, to prove that he has not committed the wrong he claims to have witnessed. In a state of affairs where victims played a crucial role in the reproduction of the conditions of death production, the universality of responsibility points to the survivor of the camp as much as to his guards. Jorge Semprún worked in Buchenwald administrative office, for instance. He was responsible for the efficient administration of enslaved labor. This complex relation of guilt and innocence is expressed by Zigmunt Bauman in the following words: "only he may say he has done everything he could, who paid the price of death."<sup>14</sup> Death, however, is a hard place to come back from and we are forced, hence, to discredit once again the content of truth of the testimony.

All the contentions brought up here claim that the discursive configuration of testimony, mainly based on rhetorical premises, does not suit the complexity of the event it is addressed to represent. This inadequacy is sustained by at least three connected reasons. Firstly, the discursive genre demands a sort of subjective agency that is completely foreign to the kind of subject that corresponded to the Holocaust. This reason undermines the ontological value of the discourse since the subject that bears testimony cannot give an account of the specific subject-object relationships that were at stake in the event because the omnipotence displayed in the discourse does not match the reified, senseless subjectivities of the matter. When the bearer of testimony says "X did Y", he is forced to imply that "X was *totally* responsible for Y". Otherwise his testimony lacks pragmatic strength. However, as we have just seen, the subjective relationships in the Holocaust accounted for a much more

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<sup>11</sup> *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute* (1979).

<sup>12</sup> Georges Didi Huberman managed a sensible refutation to Lyotard's *quasi* nihilism in his 2003 *Images malgré tout*. He argues that it is possible to put forward concrete evidence of the existence of the Holocaust without feeding negationist trends. A detailed account of this perspective is given in chapter four.

<sup>13</sup> In *Homo Sacer*.

<sup>14</sup> Zigmunt Bauman *Modernity and the Holocaust*, (1991)p. 92

complex situation. In the second place, the genre's ethical aspect, that endows the survivor with the qualities of a good man, is invalidated by the probable suspicion that the individual may be responsible for the deaths to which he is now bearing testimony. Given that testimony demands an explicitation of the survivor's ethical configuration, any discourse addressed by this genre has to be false. This second argument undermines the ethical value of testimony. Finally, the genre's teleological principle, which asks for an active participation in future events by the conscious assimilation of what has happened, verges on demise. Having already hanged a fair number of Nazi officers and with this action pretended that justice was served, what would we need a testimony of the Holocaust for? Provided that the two first obstacles were finally surmounted and the true dimensions of the event were available for communication, what good would they do to a reified society that is not in position to learn anything?

Behind the variety of forms in which this fifty year old debate has appeared and reappeared, there is an undeniable rational element that points to the actual inviability of the discourse of experience. If we are to subscribe the Marxian thesis that includes the Holocaust within the concrete developments of Capitalism, it follows that the event's mechanisms of destruction duplicate the modern subject's behaviour towards his objects, a behaviour characterised by its formalism, its indifference to the integrity of the object, and its moral vacuity.<sup>15</sup> It becomes necessary, therefore, to direct our attention towards an analysis of the historical configurations of subject and object that are at stake in market society.

Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* outlines this configuration by analysing the foundations of bourgeois thought. Expanding Marx's classical distinction between value of use and exchange-value, the Hungarian philosopher asserted that all subjective expressions in bourgeois society duplicated the same principle that based commodity production, namely the supremacy of exchange-value over value of use. Thus, as Lucien Goldman and Martin Jay have wisely noted, Lukács achieved a thicker notion of reification that not only could grasp the foundations of commodity production, but also shed light on the grounding principles of subjective stances in Capitalism.<sup>16</sup> *The concept of reification thus points to a double interaction: a specific sort of subjectivity generates by means of reified praxis an alienated domain of entities. Conversely, the resulting*

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<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the Holocaust that provides concrete arguments for such a contention, see Bauman, *Modernity and Holocaust* (1991). Adorno and Horkheimer's 1947 work *Dialektik der Aufklärung* offers a more metaphysical interpretation of the event. Also, Bertolt Brecht's *Mutter Courage* (and its famous opening phrase: "Fascism is the continuation of Capitalism by other means") and Lukács's *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*. (1954)

<sup>16</sup> Goldman's *Lukacs et Heidegger* (1973) and Martin's *Marxism and Totality*. (1984)

*objectivation triggers the reproduction of an even more reifying subjectivity. Since it works at the core of subjective praxis, this process affects each and every domain of reality and merges as the grounding structure for both praxial and conceptual intervention on things.* Not only do the specific means of Capitalist production display a reified relation to objects, but also the general theoretical stance in which human understanding is framed to conceptualize and throw light on the structure of the universe appears equally corrupted. Material labour produces reified objects in the sense that far from enriching human's subjectivity these objects arise as oppressive entities that hide their rational bond to the subject. They are not produced according to their finality, they are not made regarding their content, they are basically objectivated because a certain, contingent, and capricious phantom – or *invisible hand* – has granted them a specific exchange value. Similarly, things are conceptualized in intellectual labour regardless of their objective integrity because they stand before the reified subject as distant and obscure entities, their ontological statute being unintelligible. Locke, a founding father of bourgeois thought, considers subjective intervention and reality as two completely different domains by contending that

*...general and universal belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only signs, whether words or ideas. (...) When therefore we quit particulars, the generals that rest are only creatures of our own making...<sup>17</sup>*

According to Lukács, reified thought finds canonical expression in Kant's formalism, where the possibility of knowledge is not based on the object's integrity – which Lukács equates to the notion of value of use – but on the subject's production of forms – due to its formalism and disregard of the thing, a cognitive correlate to the exchange-value. Subjective production of forms means for Kantism the imposition of categories, or “thought forms”, in accordance to which perceptual data is organized. Thus, what things are apart from the perceiving subject we cannot say, and objects come to being only as a result of a judged situation. The product of this praxis is a formalized, stabilized entity which denies any particular, given content. The omnipotence of the subject is gained at the cost of the object. What is more, not only does the subject's attitude to other fellow subjects respond to a formal objectification according to transcendental categories, but also the subject's conceptualization of himself must follow the same rules of objectification. To secure the existence of knowledge, the modern subject has to think of himself as something different from himself.

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<sup>17</sup>*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), pp. 210-1.

The *I* is split into two: either the subject of cognition or his object, but each part has to neglect its counterpart in order to save the honour of thought. This dualism within the self, which conforms the essence of man since commodity production became hegemonic, is what is at stake in any attempt to grasp reality. Testimonies of the Holocaust are not an exception. Because they are arranged in accordance to a logic of justice and responsibility that does not regard the true complexity of the Holocaust, these discourses are forced to display an arbitrary attitude towards the past, thus splitting the bearer's *I* into two.

We should keep in mind, though, that the "arbitrary" form in cognitive discourses is sustained by the belief that the real core of the object cannot be grasped. The Lukácsian conceptual category that gives theoretical expression to an analysis of the kind bears the name of *second nature*, and offers cognitive devices that throw light on the understanding of the world of phenomena as an oppressive constituted environment: men have produced a world of objects that no longer offers guidance and support to them. On the contrary, second nature becomes a hostile environment in which reality appears as a series of static events that have primacy over the subject and reject any kind of intervention. Man is reduced to an object of his own craft, an alienated being deprived of meaning, experience and teleology. He finds himself strangled and fragmented: his *deactivation* can only put forward a contemplative approach to the objects he has produced but over which he has no control whatsoever. Thus, reification is not only a subjective praxis that builds an obscure reality. It is also the consequent reified cognition that the subject can have from that reified world.

If we examine testimonial discourses in the light of this line of thought, it is clear that they are characterized by a subjective manipulation of past events in accordance to a definite rhetorical plan of self edification. Paraphrasing Adorno, nothing in the past is worthy of attention except that for which the testimonial subject has itself to thank.<sup>18</sup> But this omnipotence over things leads, as I have just explained, to a complete opposite result: man finds himself subject to the suffocating legality of second nature. Testimonial discourses effect a subjective praxis that intends to seize a complex and obscure realm of entities (memories) by imposing foreign teleological and ethical projects on them. We pour into syntax that which will grant us a honorable recognition in terms of what we *are* in the present. However, such an imposition, which constitutes a necessary condition for any testimonial discourse, causes a breach in the rational *continuum* of the self. Insofar as the subject

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno's phrase, from his *Aesthetic Theory*, is: "Nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank. The truth for such freedom, however, is at the same time unfreedom, unfreedom for the other." (1970, "Natural Beauty" section)

volatilizes his past, his own generic statute, he must alienate his *now* from his *then* and set himself up as two different entities: a subject and an object. However, this breach can never be rooted on a complete separation of the entities, as the discourse's value of truth requires the assumption that he who speaks be the same as the one he speaks of. As Paul Ricoeur has wisely put it, testimonies are based on a triple deixis articulated in the utterance *I was there*.<sup>19</sup> The resulting instability caused by this *a posteriori* identification has a great number of both ethical and theoretical consequences. *To begin with, the enunciative I regards his objective counterpart as something different from himself and therefore displays three interrelated attitudes towards his past: he volatilizes it, he is volatilized by it, or he contemplates it.* All three stances result from the same crucial violent repression which lies behind the fragmentation of subject and object. This means that in a prototypical testimony, the bearer does the same violence on his past as the violence he was a victim of. He reifies past the same way past has reified him.

In psychoanalytic thought the emergence of the subject is granted by repression, and therefore objectivation, of that which was once the *same*. It would be ridiculous to argue against this general process of alienation which grounds the very ontological status of man both as a psychological being – insofar as his *ego* is the product of the repression of desire – and as a social being – insofar as his praxis consists of the objectivation of his self through the giving of form. Alienation is, and will always be, a basic process of human life. However, the peculiar mode this process has achieved in capitalism depicts a state of affairs where objectivation comes to life as Dr. Frankenstein's monster.

This work believes, however, that there is a path towards the overcoming of this obstacle. When resignifying Kant's distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, Hegel asserted that the former tends to grasp reality in terms of definite entities, and understands it as a realm where each event is identical to itself and therefore different from any other. Reason, (*Vernunft*) on the contrary, is able to overcome differences and grasp the potential unities behind each apparently static event. Unlike Kantism, Hegelian systems try to overcome the former's insurmountable distinction between what things are in themselves and the operation of reason. Thus, they contend that the subjective grasp of reality becomes true only when each event is described according to all its potentialities, regarding praxis as a necessary part of reality. As Herbert Marcuse put it, "something is true if it is what it can be, fulfilling all its objective possibilities."<sup>20</sup> While human intervention on reified environments

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<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> *Reason and Revolution* (1941), p. 25.



tends to be opaque to reason, because the events in second nature stand before the subject as natural laws, static and unaware of the subject's situation – yet they are, as we have noted, historically constituted – the domain of art could eventually offer a model for action, since its statute not only permits but also requires the simulation of a *true* praxial intervention.<sup>21</sup> It is in this sense that we can account for an aesthetic stance that conceives of art as realist insofar as it simulates real, *true* praxis.<sup>22</sup> This work subscribes this idea by believing that *reality is not, it becomes, and for that, the participation of reason is required.*<sup>23</sup> Art displays a domain of freedom where intervention succeeds and potentialities can eventually arise. Art has become reason's *Verhalter*; aesthetic praxis shows the path towards the recovery of reason.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. A Short Review of Previous Criticism

Unlike other Holocaust autobiographists, Jorge Semprún enjoyed immediate success.<sup>25</sup> Translated into several languages, crowned with the prize *Formentor* the year after its publication, his first Holocaust novel *Le grand voyage* also impressed scholars. The first serious analysis of the 1963 novel didn't appear, however, until 1969, when the Hungarian theorist Péter Egri published his book *Survie et réinterprétation de la forme proustienne. Proust – Déry – Semprun*. Egri's analysis is considered by later scholars a landmark in Semprún criticism, although they do not share with him either the same concept of literary praxis or the same notion of criticism. Egri, far from the psychoanalytical approaches of his successors, carries out a pseudo-Lukácsian analysis in which he spells out the formal characteristics of Semprún's prose, comparing them with Proustian mechanisms for the depiction of remembrance. The study's central claim is that while displaying similar formal devices, Semprún deeply differs from Proust in the social significance that his forms attain. It is certainly curious that Egri's contention on the basic difference between Proust and

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<sup>21</sup> Even though Lukács was the first one to develop the theoretical implications behind this defining property of literature, it is already explicated in Aristotle's poetics. (Section 1, part IX).

<sup>22</sup> Marcuse explains: "Thinking could come to understand the world as a fixed system of isolated and indissoluble oppositions only when the world had become a reality removed from the true wants and needs of mankind. [...] The fulfillment of reason's task would at the same time involve restoring the lost unity in the social relations of men." *Op. cit.*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> This phrase belongs to Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, but it has been partly modified. *Thought* has been changed for *Reason*.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Schiller played a crucial role for Lukács and Marcuse's theoretical contentions. Famous is his phrase from the *Letters* (1791): For –for endelig å si det i én setning- mennesket leker bare når det i ordets fulle forstand er menneske, og det er bare helt menneske når det leker.

<sup>25</sup> Take for examples Primo Levi, whose 1947 *Se questo e un ommo* was not welcome until 1958, when Eunadi's edition caught the public's attention, and David Rousset's 1946 *L'universo contrationnere*, which was never welcome.

Semprún has not been taken up by any of the later analyses, taking into account that all of them refer to Egri as the first serious attempt to conceptualize Semprún's work. One exception is Jack Sinningen's *Narrativa e ideología*, a work that analyses Semprún's narrative development throughout the years and claims to see a much more democratic prose in the late sixties, when the author was expelled from the Party's totalitarian hierarchies.

The interest in Semprún's work grew after the publication of his second Holocaust novel in 1980, *Quel beau dimanche!* The fact that the author was separated from clandestine activity and began to play an important role in the democratization of Spain may have to do with the increasing popularity of his works.<sup>26</sup> What confronts these studies to the analyses of Egri and Sinningen is the formers' interest in the configuration of the categories of *witness* and *testimony*, and specially the aesthetic representation of the Holocaust. Unlike the two named above, these studies stem from perspectives of thought that stress singularity rather than totality. Not only do they analyse the Holocaust in the light of a singular event, but also they approach Semprún's texts as if they were the expression of a singular *psyque*. Ofelia Ferrán and Brett Ashley Kaplan, for instance, refuse to see Semprún's works as "social novels" because they claim that these texts shed light on psychological mechanisms of individual trauma. They rely on "Freudian" readings of the Holocaust such as the one postulated by Felman and Laub, and subscribe the general hypothesis that the aesthetics of the Holocaust conform, in Semprún's case, a narrative correlated to the *fort-da* principle for trauma overcoming in Freud's work *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. As we shall see in due time, these thinkers suspend any kind of discussion on the autonomous status of literature and they go from one domain (concrete therapy) to the other (aesthetic simulation) with no transition.

Within this perspective of thought it is also worth mentioning a somewhat relevant number of studies that, while not exclusively focusing on the writer's production, take Semprún as an example for their general contentions on the relationship between Holocaust and aesthetic practices. I refer to the works of Patricia Gartland, Theodore Ziolkowski, David Ohana, Van Kelly, and Georges Didi-Huberman. Special attention should be drawn to the work of Monika Neuhofer *Jorge Sempruns Auseinandersetzung mit Buchenwald*, a 350-page analysis from 2006 that examines the author's multiple strategies to represent his concentrationary experience throughout his literary production. In this respect, Neuhofer's work constitutes the most serious and thorough account of Semprún's work.

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<sup>26</sup> In 1964 he was expelled from the Communist Party, where he possessed a very high rank in the *politburo*, after being accused of dubious behavior. After that, he became a public figure and started working with the leftist PSOE for the process of democratization in Spain. From 1988 to 1991 he served as Felipe González's Minister of Culture.

## V. Method of Analysis and Concept of Criticism

For what has been said in the first three sections of this chapter, this analysis stresses the configuration that each novel discloses for the subject / object relation. This relation finds, as it has been already noted, an even more complex status in the chosen cases inasmuch as both terms arise as separate legalities at the cost of a violent exercise. Autobiography depicts a state of affairs in which the object stands as both an autonomous and heteronomous event, as a necessary alienation of the subject, but at the same time an affirmation of the latter's enunciation. We have seen, however, that the split of the subject leads in second nature to an ominous retaliation in which the object turns its back to the subject and submits it to oppression. This problem is central in Semprún. In order to examine the dialectics of subject and object this thesis proposes a Marxist method of analysis which had in Lukács its foremost proponent. In short, two praxial moments conform this method: "typical description" and "logical saturation".

Typical description calls for a static analysis of the devices that underlie the subject / object relation in each novel. It reorganizes textual phenomena so that it can give detailed account of the subject's *ethos* in his totality by adscribing to him a certain type of personality. Such hermeneutical attitude takes for granted that each character expresses – in a way that no living person would ever do – a certain type of subjective stance. A "type" is defined here as a theoretical expression for a concrete mode of subjective intervention.<sup>27</sup> In a sense, this concept does not differ much from Max Weber's category for sociological analysis. In time, the reader of this thesis will understand why Semprún depicts his characters as Jacobine terrorists or European socialdemocrats. The second moment, logical saturation, consists of developing *in extremis* the conditions of possibility for such a stance in the hope to unveil eventual contradictions. If we are to subscribe the general Hegelian statement according to which something is true only if it fulfills its potentialities, then a close examination on the ways these types sustain the course of action becomes crucial. In the case that a given type finds its ontological support in the events its ethical configuration refutes, this second moment would pass a negative judgment on it. Within the European canon, Thomas Mann's character from *Death in Venice*, von Aschenbach, offers the best example for such a case: his perverted desire for libidinary destruction underlies his ethics of disciplinary integrity. The

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<sup>27</sup> Lukács's best definition of *type* is in *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (1954).

contradictions come to the surface in the examination of the ways in which this specific type works in action. This is why this analytical moment is dynamic; it regards action as the crucial element in a narration in the sense that it throws light on the hero's ethical plan. As Lukács has already noted, the Hegelian Marxist analysis in literature subscribes the general Aristotelian principle according to which literature represents concrete men in possible action.

Therefore, if literary praxis "completes" subjective stances by depicting their potentialities and taking their consequences to an extreme, literary criticism has to display a corresponding attitude with the texts it examines. This relationship is crucial because it gives supporting reasons to the concept of criticism that this thesis subscribes. Analysis must "complete" the work by signalling those features that lie behind its essence and thus helping it express the typification it proposes. But it must help this typification *vis à vis* a concrete problem that goes beyond the limits of literature. While literature simulates dereification because it displays a dynamic understanding of reality in which its subjects – both narrator and heroes – intervene on the object so that it can be true, criticism must carry out dereification by intervening on the text so that it does not appear as a static description but rather emerge as a dynamic object that can help to solve other problems in other spheres. Walter Benjamin has mentioned this idea in his Doctoral thesis when he defined the concept of Criticism of the Jena school.

[I]n complete antithesis to the present-day conception of its nature, criticism in its central intention is not judgment but, on the one hand, the completion, the consummation, and systematization of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute.<sup>28</sup>

This is why each chapter is divided into two different parts. The construction of types conforms a necessary condition for the unveiling of eventual ontological instability, since the question posed to the novels refers to a simulation of a given ethics. Because of the particular definition of literature that was offered above, a narrative may achieve a simulation of praxis that could unveil what the Frankfurt school has called *das noch nicht Seiende*.<sup>29</sup> In other words, an emergence of a traumatic past in parameters of legitimate experience. In order to understand these claims better, let us now see how the thesis is structured.

## VI. Hypothesis and Brief Description of the Thesis' Total Structure

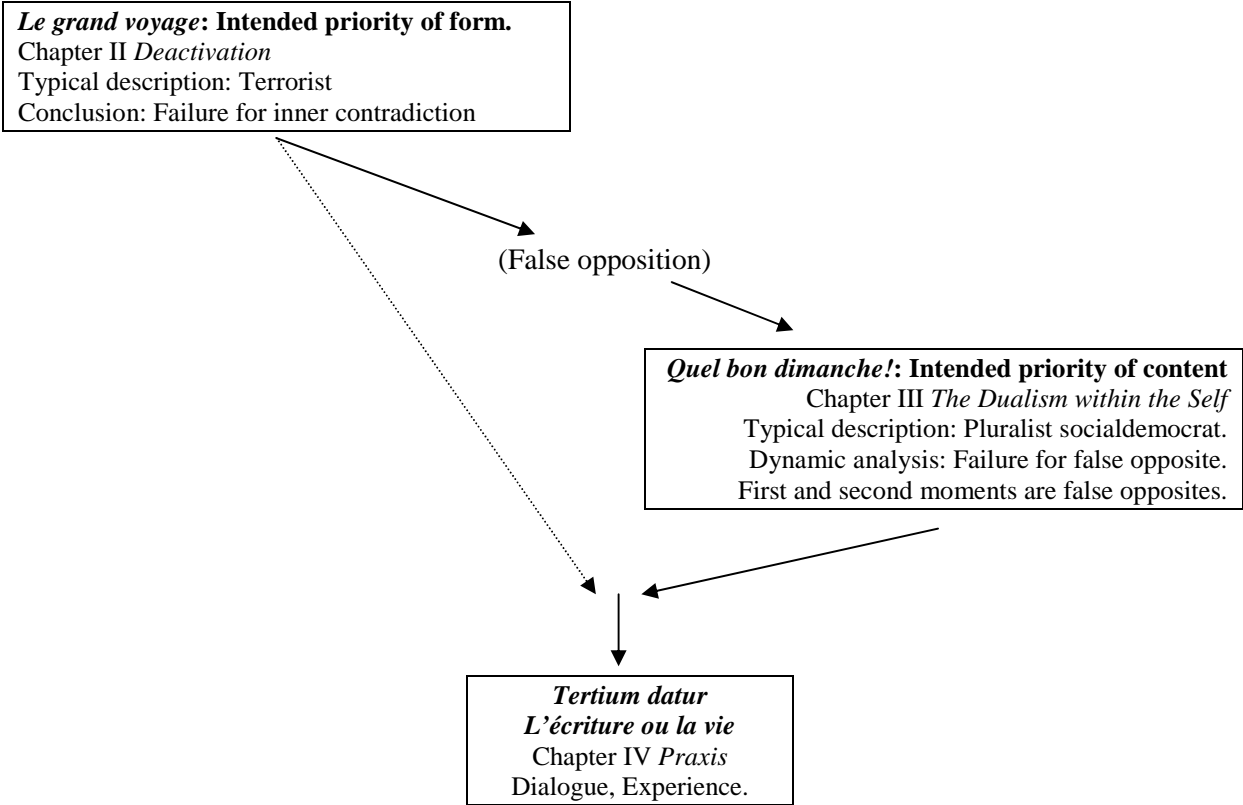
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<sup>28</sup> *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1920), p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> The phrase is Adorno's and the passage from where it comes explains the dialectical idea of memory and future in the Frankfurt school. "Weil aber der Kunst ihre Utopie, das noch nicht Seiende, schwärz verhängt ist, bleib sie durch all ihre Vermittlung hindurch Erinnerungen..." (*Ästhetische Theorie* 1970, p. 204).

In view of the ideas expressed, the present work intends to examine the configurations of the *I*-subject and the *I*-object in the three novels mentioned above, as well as the type of relationship between these two *I*'s in each text. The analysis of the two *I*'s will shed light on literature specific role in the emergence of experience within the boundaries of a reified world. As we have seen, the autobiographical breach within the self that entails the appearance of an *I*-subject and an *I*-object duplicates the peculiar mode of objectivation that is at stake in second nature. It is also, and principally, the intention of this thesis to give sufficient arguments to the following claim: only in the 1994 novel, *L'écriture ou la vie*, does the aesthetic labour on non-aesthetic materials favour the emergence, however ephemeral, of an ethical solution to both the specific problem of the tale of past events and the general question of *de*-reification. The proposition that authentic aesthetic stances throw light on domains of human praxis that are foreign to the merely aesthetic is the basis of the theoretical framework of the current work, though – as I have already said – this does not put in question the general statement on art's autonomy.

The work's central thesis will serve as a hermeneutical basis for the reading of the three novels. I will therefore pursue aesthetic devices and aesthetic labour of contents so as to give account of the obstacles and advances of each text in this respect. Each of the following three chapters contains an analysis of one of the novels. The thesis' argument looks like this:



The first chapter, *Deactivation*, states that the formal devices used for the elaboration of content are not oriented towards the integrity of experience but follow, in general lines, the spirit of testimonial discourses. Thus, *Le grand voyage* depicts the paradigmatic failure of the appropriation of experience inasmuch as it deploys a state of affairs in which the peculiar complexity of the subject-object relationship is not taken into serious consideration by the narrating *I*. The novel displays an ethics of praxis where subjective intervention disregards the integrity of content. Given the unsurmountable unity between subject and object that bases this autobiographical attempt, this disregards backfires on the subject itself, provoking a tragic fall for him and his narrative.

*Quel bon dimanche!* shows an opposite configuration. The chapter *The Open Self* examines the devices on which this difference is based. From the very beginning, the text seeks to undermine heroic configuration and disposition of materials in terms of cause and effect. Linearity, singularity, and chronology are one by one overlapped by their opposites, giving the 1980 text an openness lacking in the closed narrative of 1963. Although this novel still operates with a distinct configuration of the *I*-object, its depiction differs from the previous one because there is no heroic intention. On the contrary, the *I*-subject simulates a state of affairs in which the object is not manipulated demonically, but emerges in its integrity as a potential solution to suffering. In the sense that it intends a retreat of the violent imposition of forms over content, this novel can be understood in opposition to its predecessor. However, the consequent relativism in which it falls is nothing but another expression of the same tragical subjective deactivation.

*Finis coronat opus*. The final chapter regards *L'écriture ou la vie* as a successful attempt to recover reason as a means of conciliation and consolation. The first section is therefore devoted to the formal devices that structure the text and lead to a blurring of the *I*'s that could not be achieved in the previous novels. While the blurring in the previous texts was only achieved in the form of an obliteration of the subject as a deviation of the narration's project, *L'écriture ou la vie* manages to simulate a state where both subject and object could cohabitate without suffering. The second section of the chapter, *Consolation*, examines the theoretical implications of literature's ability to unveil reification.

Finally, a conclusion will serve as a *coda*, trying to connect the arguments of each chapter and formulate a concluding idea on the relationship between literature and experience.

## Chapter Two: Deactivation

### a. Introductory Remarks

*Le grand voyage*, Jorge Semprún's first Holocaust novel, recounts a five-day journey in a sealed train from a Nazi detention facility in Compiègne, France, to KZ Buchenwald, Weimar's concentrationary camp for political prisoners. The traveler of this journey, one of the 120 passengers in the sealed boxcar, is the novel's main character Gérard, who displays a double identification with narrator and author. *Gérard* is not only the narrator's objective counterpart because he shares with the latter the *I* pronoun; he also happens to be Semprún's actual pseudonym in the French Resistance. This double bond anchors *Le grand voyage* within the domain of autobiography in the terms defined in the introduction. The journey's depiction, which stretches throughout 240 pages, also includes episodes that have taken place both before and after the trip. A simulated praxis of memory is the condition of possibility for the emergence of these episodes that are not contained within the five days of the journey. Those *prior* to it are generally simulated remembrances of the character, while those narrative cores situated after the time he spent in the train are always simulated recollections of the narrator.<sup>1</sup>

*Le grand voyage* also displays features that grant the book a place in the realm of literature. *Qua* literature, the 1963 novel possesses a rather instable configuration because it displays an epic-like formal disposition to narrate a matter whose nature *per se* collides with the spirit of epicity. In other words, the text tends towards a structuring of materials that is resisted by their very peculiarity. The tension originated by the form and content contradiction is certainly not an exclusive property of this novel. On the contrary, we know from the works of the young Lukács and Erich Auerbach that this very uneasiness characterizes the novel as a modern genre. In this sense, *Le grand voyage* does not differ from its peers. As a novel, it produces forms of storytelling that neglect the essence of the matter it works with. This formal "oblivion" results, in the cases where the genre reaches its apotheosis, in a tragic revenge of matter over form. Don Quixote and Frederic Moreau are magnificent examples of the form and content inadequacy upon which the modern novel is founded.

Because it concerns the ontology of the novel as a genre, this is not the place to discuss the theoretical implications that follow from that inadequacy. However, an analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Péter Egri presents an analysis of *Le grand voyage*'s time structure in his book *Survie et Réinterprétation de la forme proustienne. Proust – Déry – Semprun*.

that could trace the real dimensions of this tension in *Le grand voyage* would offer fruitful ideas when the time for theoretical discussion comes. The reason for this privileged position points to the 1963 novel peculiar status: its demands to be understood as an autobiography. I have anticipated in the introduction when defining the autobiographical genre that the question of form and content makes a curious turn when the subject narrates himself. Equally conditioned by requisites of identity and difference, autobiography can only succeed if the split made over the subject, that results in an *I-subject* and an *I-object*, can still hold an eventual unity in ethical, aesthetic, and ontological parameters. Because it anchors itself within the generic realm of utterances in which man narrates himself, the autobiographical novel makes the process of adapting form to content and *vice versa* more explicit than ever. After all, it is no longer a matter of conforming a mad man to a world of market perversion, as in the cases of Don Quixote or Frederic Moreau. Now it has become a question of adapting one to oneself.

Thus, the following two sections examine *Le grand voyage* in the light of this tension. While the first one offers a description of the subjective types that the novel develops, the second section speculates on the value of truth of these types. The two sections analyze the configurations of the *I-subject* and the *I-object* so as to contend a twofold thesis. On the one hand, the peculiar way in which the autobiographical stance is carried out in Semprún's 1963 novel fails to honor the ethical and ontological objectives it carries *qua* autobiographical literature. This failure is due to a mode of narrating the past that tends towards a simulation of the primacy of form over content. As we have seen in the introduction, the subjective attitude towards reified experience tends either to a total submission of the form or to a violent volatilization of content so that it encompasses the subject's plan. The 1963 novel illustrates the second of these two options. On the other hand, a given subjective disposition always comes from a given objective configuration regardless of the sort of intentionality that the form expresses on a surface level. Even if *Le grand voyage* depicts the collision between a kind of narrative form and the peculiar material this sort of subjective form intervenes on, the former is sooner or later "corrected" by the latter. *Lato sensu*, the inadequacy between form and content is never such in the last instance.



## b. The Deactivated Subject

Nothing in the world of phenomena can be explained by the concept of freedom, the guiding thread in that sphere must always be the mechanics of nature.  
*Kant, Second Critique*

### I. The Camp as a Black Box

From a Formalist perspective, the novel's fabula mainly concerns the character's journey to and from the camp where he was detained for almost two years.<sup>2</sup> In a lesser degree, it also deals with episodes from the character's early youth and a few memories from his stay in the camp. However, if we consider Boris Tomashevski's distinction between *bound* and *free* motifs, the episodes on the camp tend towards irrelevancy since they play no significant role in the constitution of the fabula. Moreover, their appearance in the novel is contingent and infrequent. Thus, it becomes evident that the representation of the experience in Buchenwald, an event which without any doubt confers vital density on the narration, is consciously avoided. The stay at the camp appears in *Le grand voyage* as a black box whose inner mechanisms do not serve as tangible materials for narration, and yet the narration retrieves sense from the camp's permanent presence as the *telos* of the trip.

There are, however, two moments in which Buchenwald is narrated. These two moments do not depict the camp in itself but constitute the novel's closest approach to its experience and cease whenever the characters touch the threshold of the camp. In addition to this, these two episodes present a retreat from the autobiographical unity between narrator and character.

The first of them takes place as a contingent remembrance of the *memorator*. As a free motif, it emerges without any logical bonds with the precedent narrative cores thanks to a metonymical displacement in which a particular signifier obtains such strength that it imposes itself over the narrative logic and dictates a shift in the course of the *syuzhet* seemingly at

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<sup>2</sup> According to one of the founding theorists of Russian Formalism, the category of *fabula* deals with a logical abstraction of elements (*motifs*) conceived in terms of causality and chronology. It consists of minimal narrative elements that are either *bound* (an eventual obliteration would bring serious consequences to the causal and chronological chain) or *free* (they do not play any substantial role in the outcome of the fabula). Unlike the category of fabula, the concept of *syuzhet* points to the way in which the material is narrated, its unity being the category of *priem* (device). See Tomashevski's 1928 *Teoría de la literatura*.

odds with the narrator's plans.<sup>3</sup> This mechanism of the representation of memory is recurrent in all of Semprún's works and constitutes the writer's clearest kinship to the Proustian form.<sup>4</sup>

The episode in question recounts the arrival of Jewish children to the camp, who alight from the train that has brought them from Poland together with hundreds of starving, when not already dead, grown-ups. Once the SS have escorted the surviving adults to the inner precinct, they return with dogs and set out a macabre game. The episode narrates how the weak children are hunted down one by one by the dogs as they attempt to reach, in an absurd and desperate run, Buchenwald's inner gate. None of them reaches it, and the episode ends by describing how the SS officers spare the victims' suffering by putting a bullet in their heads, meters away from the iron gates that deviously declare *Jedem das Seine*.

It is important to note that this episode constitutes the first of two in which the principle of the first person narrative is suspended. As explained before, the limits of the event are given in both autobiography and testimony in a first person narration by the *I*-object's perspective and therefore serve as a subjective confirmation for the narrator. But this particular case is formed without the presence of the main character, whose position in the event is never clear. When we read the episode, we never know if he is a participant, a witness, or a God-like omniscient narrator. By being told in the third person, the episode of the hunted children does not give any ethical grounds for the constitution of the *I* – since it does not enact the triple deictic involved in the utterance *I was there* –, and the relation between the character and the event is, or appears to be, contingent.

Monika Neuhofer notices the episode's peculiarity and defines the problem it implies in the following terms: she claims that *Le grand voyage* alternates two forms of understanding the event of the Holocaust. Whereas one tends to include the KZ machinery within the concrete process of class struggle and therefore refuses its extraordinariness (“*Aus der Sicht des Kommunisten Semprun bildet Buchenwald keine Besonderheit...*”), the other one expresses a more private, intimate perspective that would belong to the narrator as a particular being. In opposition to the main constitution of the *syuzhet*, which structures materials within a

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<sup>3</sup> This “primacy of the object” is still a subjective simulation, since the mechanisms of literacy do not allow any authentic stream of consciousness, let alone when large narrative units are at stake.

<sup>4</sup> The simulation of metonymical displacement as a means for the irruption of dense remembrances has served as a starting point for the psychoanalytical readings of Ferrán and Kaplan. Egri, on the other hand, realises that this use of Proustian devices in Semprún acquires a completely different significance, as they partake – or they are set to enable – of a much more complex intentional project. “...Semprún ne manque jamais, chaque fois qu’il emprunte des motifs à Proust, d’imprimer à ces motifs comme un changement de direction en les intégrant de façon originale parmi les lignes de force d’une autre vision du monde, d’une autre attitude, d’autres expériences personnelles, pour les transformer en éléments inséparables de la vision moderne, réaliste, socialiste... [...] ... les allusions à Proust ne sont point dues au hasard.” Egri, *op. cit.* pp. 140-141.

grid of relative values, Neuhofer correctly notices that this episode emerges as an absolute, an isolated core with no comparison or opposition. The tension between these two discourses grows as the one cements the dimensions of the other:

...das im KZ Erlebte sperrt sich gegen jede Form der Integration. Und es entzieht sich vor allem der Mittelbarkeit: Das Lager erscheint in *Le grand voyage* als Leerstelle, bei der jedes Erzählen abbrechen muss, die folglich immer nur umkreist werden kann. [...] Die "Histoire des enfants juifs" stellt somit sowohl eine Ausnahme als auch den Kern des ganzen Buches dar. [Sie] symbolisiert als Geschichte aus dem Lager den Ursprung und Grund allen Erzählens...<sup>5</sup>

The withdrawal of the autobiographical form in the episode, a form which Neuhofer equates in this novel to the Communist perspective of historical integration (*die Form der Integration*), should be understood, she proposes, as an ethical decision of the narrator. The death of innocent children expresses a bestiality that should not be used to build the *memorator's* integrity. To support her contention, the German scholar quotes Semprún's own words: "Il faut que je parle au nom des choses qui sont arrivées, pas en mon nom personnel. L'histoire des enfants juifs au nom des enfants juifs."<sup>6</sup> However, my thesis will propose a concrete reading of the novel claiming that the episode's peculiarity does not result from an ethical decision of the narrator, nor that its features are ultimately different from the rest of the novel.

Buchenwald's second appearance in the novel displays, unlike the first one, a logical bond with the preceding configuration of the story as it constitutes the very end of the trip to the camp, the closing section of the novel.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, this episode constitutes, unlike the one just mentioned, a bound motif. Semprún's character marches from Buchenwald's train station to the camp's inner precinct. But the episode in question is similar to the other because the main character's march is totally narrated in third person. The suspension of the autobiographical genre by the third person imposition leads to the reconfiguration of the character, who ceases to be expressed in terms of an *I*-object and obtains instead a name (Gérard). It also makes the *I*-subject melt into thin air and abandon all bonds with his character, who is left alone in his defeat, in his alienating march towards the precinct, along the avenue of stoned eagles set out to guard the camp.

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<sup>5</sup>Neuhofer, Monika. « *Écrire un seul livre, sans cesse renouvelé* » *Jorge Sempruns literarische Auseinandersetzung mit Buchenwald*. Pp. 132-135.

<sup>6</sup>Jorge Semprún. *Le grand voyage*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963. P. 193. When quoted, the number in parentheses refers to the number of page of this edition.

<sup>7</sup>His march is isolated from the rest of the novel as it embodies a whole twenty-page chapter, separated from the preceding two hundred pages.

Thus, the suspension of the autobiography generic properties is deeply related to the emergence of the event that sustains the novel's density of meaning. We could even say that the autobiographical form in *Le grand voyage* sustains itself from a non-autobiographical core. Based on this problematic relation, it is clear that the text works with a double distance in the two cases above. First, the novel mentions the camp in several occasions, yet Buchenwald as an actual *locus* for narrated events always stays outside the scope of narration. Second, the closer it gets to the camp's inner precinct, the weaker the identity between narrator and character becomes. Inasmuch as the text's ethical status is mostly granted by the narrator's authority as a competent witness, such weakness entails a loss of reality. It results in the deactivation of the subject not only because he, as a survivor, fails to give account of an objective situation he as a generic subject is responsible for – after all, the camp *is* a rational product –, but also because he, as the narrator of his tale, fails to hold his identity to himself as a character, and ends up taking an “objective” stance as if the matter of his narration embodied an external reality outside his control. His objective counterpart, the novel's main character, is constructed in the second section in the fashion of a robot, upon which the narrator, who takes up the role of a forsaking God, has no control whatsoever.

Certainly, both mechanisms of subjective deactivation – the negation of Buchenwald as a matter of narration and the appearance of third person narrative cores – are connected. They both display a state of affairs in which the subject does not recognise the narrated matter's rational core – as we have already seen, reality is a social product –, but approaches it as if it was of external – irrational – nature. As a result, the *I* isolates himself from the reality upon which he intervenes, emerging as an isolated entity, an autonomous being. Curiously, the macabre autonomy triggered by these mechanisms of deactivation leads to the destruction of the self, to his senseless dissolution. Whether this extreme reification of human rationality, this turning of Buchenwald into a black box, constitutes an isolated feature of *Le grand voyage* or, on the contrary, it embodies a much more extended stance of subjective deactivation that lies behind the 1963 text's constitutive principles is a question the following lines will try to answer.

## II. Alleged Sense of Reality

*Memorator* Semprún says that the multiplication of death and suffering, of torture and starvation provokes a loss of the sense of reality.<sup>8</sup> In due time I shall explain how this subject matter has proved crucial throughout Semprún's literary production. In the concrete case of his 1963 novel, the loss of the sense of reality exclusively concerns the world of the *I*-object, as it never becomes the grounds for reflection over the conditions of possibility for autobiographical narration.<sup>9</sup>

As the train arrives in Germany, it crosses the Mosel valley. The character manages to get a glimpse of it through the boxcar's barbed wired window and retrieves, starving and exhausted as he is, a feeling of consolation. The valley, the reader soon realizes, offers the character a certainty of reality.

Je ferme les yeux et ça chantonne doucement en moi: vallée de la Moselle. J'étais perdu dans la pénombre, mais voici que l'univers se réorganise autour de moi... [...] Il est là. Il est simplement là, il n'a rien d'autre à faire. Je pourrais mourir maintenant, debout dans le wagon bourré de futurs cadavres, il n'en serait pas moins là. La vallée de la Moselle serait là, devant mon regard mort...(13-14)

The presence of the valley triggers a "wild happiness" ("*cette joie sauvage*" p. 17) in the mind of its perceiver. The contingent, unprovoked emergence of natural beauty in the opening pages of the novel seems to point to that "primacy of the object" enclosed in the experience of nature.<sup>10</sup> Discovering the possibility of harmony in nature means for the desperate subject a sort of relief that triggers hope. Finding beauty in first nature relieves the burden involved in the subjective belief that happiness is entirely a human responsibility. Finding beauty in nature gives hope in spite of all the subject's atrocities. This is, roughly, the Adornian account for the experience of nature. However, Semprún's 1963 text simulation of the experience of natural beauty cannot be regarded after Adorno's parameters. Submitted to closer scrutiny, the episode of the valley does not describe an authentic encounter with nature, a bare contact of man with that which is his absolute Other. What seems to strike the traveling prisoner is the valley *qua* labored nature:

C'est la lumière de ce paysage qui invente mon regard. C'est l'histoire de ce paysage, la longue histoire de la création de ce paysage par le travail des vignerons de la

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<sup>8</sup> *Le grand voyage*'s opening paragraph narrates, in fact, the character's effort to reestablish his control over time and space in the suffocating atmosphere of the boxcar. Ferrán and Kaplan (*op. cit.*) examine this episode with psychoanalytical categories.

<sup>9</sup> In the novels that followed *Le grand voyage*, however, the issue obtains a much wider dimension and explicitly affects the narrator's self awareness and, by extension, his ontological and ethical statuses.

<sup>10</sup> The phrase "primacy of the object" is Adorno's ("Vorrang des Objektes" in *Aesthetische Theorie*). Certainly, this primacy has scarcely anything to do with Kant's concept of the sublime. This will be satisfactorily explained in the third chapter of this thesis, when analyzing Semprún's 1980 novel *Quel beau dimanche!*.

Moselle, qui donne à mon regard, à tout moi-même, sa consistance réelle, son épaisseur. (17)

Thus, the “wild happiness” triggered by a perception of the valley makes a violent turn and becomes a recognition of the Same rather than an encounter with the Other. The index of certainty is given, as the course of the episode tells us, not by the primacy of nature over human destructive *ratio*, but by subjective, non-reified generic essence. Since he is impressed by man’s labor understood not in particular cases but in a generic concept, Semprún’s character seems to be mentioning here a well known Hegelian Marxist principle according to which man’s essence consists in the unveiling of the object’s immanent laws through praxial interaction.<sup>11</sup> From this dialectical perspective, man and nature mirror one another as each possesses its counterpart in its ontology. This sort of reflection supports this work’s interest in the indifference of form towards content, since it contends that non-reified praxis consists in a subjective form-giving that respects the contents’ immanent laws.

But if we throw a closer look at the Mosel episode, we will conclude that its density goes beyond these reflections. Two pages later the narrator reveals what I take to be the true mechanism that is set to grasp reality in *Le grand voyage*. It is not the bare encounter with what is given, nor the confirmation of a non-reified human praxis, *but a specific positioning of the subject in relation to the matter he interacts with*. As we read through the pages, we soon realize that the predicates assigned to the valley, both aesthetic and nonaesthetic features, can only come to consciousness once the *I* has freely given up being in the valley. *Cold, distant, serene, beautiful, real*, and *distant* predicate the valley in spite of the subject, but they can only confirm his existence if they are perceived from the *harmful, hot, unreal* and *sharp* boxcar, through its barbed-wire window. The valley grants sense of reality not because of its inner and peculiar features, or at least not only because of them. It confirms the certainty of being mostly because it has been estranged from the subject. Only when the character situates himself outside the object – let us remember that he regards this positioning as a consequence of his rational and free actions – and an insurmountable, painful, and violent limit is erected between them, does the subject confirm himself as an existing being. Supported by this perspective, the character reaffirms his privileged situation in relation to the valley’s inhabitants, carriers of what in German Romantic terms would be *natural naïveté*.

The main practical consequence for this self-confirmation is that the very act of self awareness precludes any concrete action towards the object, while it decrees, at the same

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<sup>11</sup> Such unveiling is achieved by the praxis of beauty. A much more detailed explanation of these ideas will be given later on this work, as it contains the rational foundation of the thesis.

time, an abstract identity between subject and object. The character finds the sense of his being in the valley's primacy. The – alleged – grasp of reality is achieved at an abstract level, but denied in the concrete realm of subjective praxis. The emergence of the subject is done, in *Le grand voyage*, at the cost of his praxial deactivation. In the light of this reading, the 1963 text operates with a flat concept of natural beauty that merely points to the oppressive aspect of the man-made. As the young Lukács accounted in his *Theorie des Romans*:

Die Fremdheit der Natur, der ersten Natur gegenüber, das moderne sentimentalische Naturgefühl ist *nur die Projektion* des Erlebnisses, dass selbstgeschaffene Umwelt für den Menschen kein Vaterhaus mehr ist, sondern ein Kerker.<sup>12</sup>

Praxial deactivation and abstract subjective confirmation constitute correlate configurations raised from the subject's decision of distancing himself from the world he, as a generic being, is responsible for. The peculiar stance of distance and separation at work in Semprún's novel is supported by both metaphorical and metonymical devices throughout the novel. That is, mechanisms that condense and strengthen the spirit of the Mosel episode and devices that shift its significance to other configurations by means of correlations.

When it comes to metaphorical devices, the episode's configuration is enhanced by two distinct remembrances entangled within the episode of the Mosel valley, each affecting either the *I*-object (the perception triggers a memory *prior* to the episode) or the *I*-subject (the remembrance of the perception triggers a memory *a posteriori*). Both depict moments in Semprún's life in which his arrogance granted him a pleasant internal victory, but inflicted a total defeat in terms of his interaction with objects and fellow subjects. The first of these two memories presents the character as a young high school student that mocks, in front of his peers, the ignorance of a Geography teacher. The remembrance is allegedly triggered by the character's attempt to know whether he has any recollection of the Mosel river. Concluding he possesses none, he assures himself, however, that his knowledge of Central Europe is quite thorough. He remembers being questioned at school about European railway history.

J'avais sorti le grand jeu et je lui avais même collé les noms des trains. Je me souviens de l'Harmonica Zug. « Bon devoir », avait-il noté, « mais trop exclusivement basé sur des souvenirs personnels. » Alors, en pleine classe, quand il nous avait rendu les copies, je lui avais fait remarquer que je n'avais aucun souvenir personnel de l'Europe centrale. L'Europe centrale, connais pas. Simplement, j'avais tiré profit du journal de voyage de Barnabooth. Vous ne connaissez pas A. O. Bournabooth, monsieur

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<sup>12</sup> Lukács, Georg. [1916] *Theorie des Romans*, p. 62.

Bouchez? A dire vrai, je ne sais toujours pas s'il connaissait A. O. Barnabooth. Il a piqué une crise et j'ai failli passer en conseil de discipline. (13)<sup>13</sup>

The second recollection belongs to the *I*-subject as it takes place after the experience of the valley. The signifier that links this episode to the Mosel one is a glass of wine from the Mosel region that the prisoner was given to drink. It describes a dance with a girl right after the American invasion forces have taken control of the camp and offered the inmates pleasures they had long been deprived from. Once again, the character's arrogance concedes a rhetorical victory on his side, but makes the girl, and with her the promise of love, go away.

The valley episode, placed along the novel's first thirty pages, is shaped in a fashion that provides a specific subjective configuration. Such configuration speaks for an omnipotent inner disposition of the self, while precluding any approach to the world of alienated objects. From this examination can a hypothesis regarding the question posed above be anticipated. The depiction of the camp as a black box is not originated, as Neuhofer believes, by the inclusion of a qualitatively different discourse. Rather, it would express the extreme articulation of a concept of reality that pervades the novel.

Knowledge and, by extension, sense of reality, are granted by the qualitative gap between the inside and the outside, a gap erected by the subject himself, by his rational freedom. For there is nothing more certain nor ubiquitous in *Le grand voyage* than the subject's severe rational configuration in terms that approximate, at times, epical heroic dispositions.

### III. *Post Festum* Heroism

The devices that confer ethical configuration on the character stand out among those textual mechanisms that can be considered metonymical displacements of the valley episode. As such, two related, yet contradictory, features ground the *I*-object: his heroic inner disposition on the one hand and his atrophied mode of praxial intervention on external realms. The following paragraphs will offer a detailed explanation of this phenomenon.

The hegemonic mode of subjective interaction in *Le grand voyage* takes the form of the contemplative act of looking. As we have already seen, the act of looking provided a deactivated retrocaption of the object within the subject's consciousness in the Mosel episode.

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<sup>13</sup> There is little chance that Semprún's Geography teacher knew nothing of this person, whose real name was Valery Larbaud. French poet, critic, and translator who lived in the first half of the XXth Century, Larbaud was a wealthy and cosmopolitan petit bourgeois who spoke six languages and gained extended recognition for his translations and journals among the French literary public.



This *modus operandi* has expression in several situations. There are at least three constant elements in all of them. First, there is *stasis*. The act of looking, and its quest for a sense of reality, is carried out in a total contemplative stance. Stillness arises not only as a voluntary positioning of the subject, but also indicates that nothing else is moving. Echoing the old *cliché* that the owl takes flight only at night, the character interacts only once action has taken course. Second, the configuration of a *limit*. The subject freely and consciously situates himself behind a physical barrier that only his eyes can surmount. Finally, the act of looking results in a reaffirmation of the self that is followed by a certain feeling of *frustration* as the inability to take action becomes, to some extent, evident. Frustration was already present in the episodes of the Geography class and the dance.

Among the numerous examples of this metonymic displacement, two are very enlightening. Once the American forces have taken up the camp's administration, the clandestine Communist brigades of the camp, in which Semprún took part, are disarmed and demobilized. Without much to do, Semprún and his comrades pay a visit to Weimar, Buchenwald's neighboring city. On their way back, Semprún spots a middle class house located on the Ettersberg's valley. The building offers, as the character realizes, a privileged view of the camp. He gets rid of his companions and violently storms into the house.

« *Aufmachen* », je crie, « *los, aufmachen !* »

Je réalise que je suis en train de gueuler comme un S.S. [...] Regarder, je ne cherche rien d'autre. Regarder du dehors cet enclos où nous tournions en rond, des années durant. [...] Il faut avoir été dedans, pour comprendre ce besoin physique de regarder du dehors. [...] Je m'approche des fenêtres de la salle de séjour je vois le camp. Je vois, dans l'encadrement même de l'une des fenêtres, le cheminée carrée du crématoire. Alors, je regarde. Je voulais voir, je vois. Je voudrais être mort, mais je vois, je suis vivant et je vois. (152-154)

The second episode acquires a more complex dimension as it disentangles a much wider aspect of the character's self. Like the first one, it takes place after the deactivation of the camp as a working facility. A handful of well intended girls visit the camp to bring some consolation to the ill. They ask for a guided tour and Semprún, full of bitterness, offers himself as a learned guide. He willingly exposes the girls to the rotten mount of dead bodies that the escaping *SS* didn't have time to cremate.

« Mais ça n'a pas l'air mal du tout », a dit l'une d'elles... (...) Et je me suis mis en marche vers le bâtiment du crématoire. « C'est la cuisine, ça? », a demandé une autre fille. [...] Je les fais sortir du crématoire, sur la cour intérieure entourée d'une haute palissade. Là, je ne les dis rien du tout, je les laisse voir. Il y a, au milieu de la cour, un entassement de cadavres qui atteint bien quatre mètres de hauteur. (...) Je pense, en regardant les corps décharnés, aux os saillants, aux poitrines creuses... je pense qu'il

faut avoir vécu leur mort, comme nous l'avons fait, nous qui avons survécu, pour poser sur eux ce regard pur et fraternel. [...] Je me retourne, elles sont parties. Elles ont fuit ce spectacle. (72-76)

The episode's complexity lies in its dichotomist value. If the character ever achieves a pure and fraternal look on his dead comrades, then it is at the cost of arrogantly exposing these silly girls to the dead. A perverted administration of innocence lays the condition of possibility for a pure and authentic look. As in the window episode, the character realizes the excess of violence that his actions involve, but this awareness never surpasses an abstract level. The girl he humiliates during the dance and consequently loses belongs to the group he has exposed to the dead in a tourist manner.

Semprún's *persona*, a twenty year old Red terrorist, has evidently taken very seriously Marx's statement on irrational determination: "The traditions of all the dead generations weight like a nightmare on the brains of the living".<sup>14</sup> The narrator's literary counterpart pretends, indeed, not to have any kind of prehistory, any kind of historical determination. He most certainly has it, and one of the goals of this work is to prove it. What is pertinent to stress here is the fact that his subjective project intends to persuade the reader that each and every act he goes through corresponds to a previous free rational choice. In this, he makes sure to differentiate himself from other characters; not only the Nazi officers who torture and guard him, but also his fellow French terrorists whose reasons for armed activity are tainted with Nationalist sentiments. Tortured, detained, and starving, the *I*-object is situated in a privileged stance in relation to his fellow humans. In a long discussion with a German guard, Gérard claims:

Je tenais simplement à dire qu'à cette question du soldat allemand d'Auxerre : *warum sind Sie verhaftet?* Il n'y a qu'une réponse possible. Je suis emprisonné parce que je suis un homme libre, parce que je me suis vu dans la nécessité d'exercer ma liberté, que j'ai assumé cette nécessité. De la même façon, à la question que j'ai posée à la sentinelle allemande, ce jour d'octobre : *warum sind Sie hier?* et qui se trouve être une question bien plus grave, à cette question il n'y a non plus qu'une réponse possible. Il est ici parce qu'il n'est pas ailleurs, parce qu'il n'a pas senti la nécessité d'être ailleurs. Parce qu'il n'est pas libre. (47)

Proud of what he has done, the character embodies a rational hero inasmuch as his actions lack external determination. He is not French nor Spanish, as he wasn't born in France nor has

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Written between 1851 and 1852, this work defines the categories of historical agency by examining the concrete case of the French Second Republic. In clear opposition to bourgeois thinkers, Marx contends that historical processes in Capitalism are not carried out by heroic will nor mechanistic determination, but by a dialectical dynamics in which both elements define each other. The quoted phrase clearly points to the fact that men do not intervene on objects at will, regardless of their concrete social and private histories.

he grown up in Spain. His family plays no role whatsoever, as he has always been alone. He speaks German, French and Spanish.<sup>15</sup> At the age of seventeen, he had already read Hegel, Marx, and Lukács in German and managed – or at least he makes us believe so – to find a concrete resolution in the dialectics of tactics and ethics. This is why he becomes a terrorist, unlike many of his brothers in arms, who are governed, he claims, by irrational Nationalist drives. This teenager is in fact presented as a concrete expression of the Totalizing Subject, as the materialization of the Subject of History. As such, he is unique among his peers, regardless which side they belong to. The boy from Semur, one of the characters of the novel, is a clear example of a Nationalist fighter. He was detained in France and Gérard spends five days in the train leaning against him. Their dialogues frame the emergence of the different episodes, giving the novel an air of homogeneity. Both the main character and the narrator display an arrogant, and yet compassionate, stance towards the boy from Semur, whose name is never mentioned. The boy dies just before the train arrives at the camp, just before the autobiographical unity is suspended.

In this sense, the 1963 novel deals with a sort of prisoner that contrasts with Primo Levi's distinction between *i sommersi e i salvati* ("the drowned and the saved") in his 1947 book *Se questo è un uomo*. Levi's distinction differs from Semprún's ethical conformation in the sense that Levi believes that the camp experience can never be the possibility for heroic constitution since the camp obliterates within its fences the feeling of humanity. Levi states that both drowned and saved have lost every parameter of ethnicity. In accordance to this conceptualization, the Italian writer has mastered a picaresque representation of his concentrationary experience in *Se questo è un uomo* and, specially, in *La tregua*.<sup>16</sup> In Semprún's case, however, the camp's production of atrocities triggers a dialectical dynamics that springs, by means of a negating principle, the constitution of heroism:

Nous regardons monter sur la plate-forme ce Russe de vingt ans et les S.S. s'imaginent que nous allons subir sa mort, la sentir fondre sur nous comme une menace ou un avertissement. Mais cette mort (...) nous sommes en train de la choisir pour nous-mêmes. Nous sommes en train de mourir de la mort de ce copain, et par là même nous

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<sup>15</sup> Ofelia Ferrán (*op. cit.*) claims that Semprún's ability to locate himself outside any kind of spatial determination enables an aesthetic production of remembrances that not only matches Cicero's definition of the art of memory, but also puts him in a privileged relation to language and linguistic *poiesis*.

<sup>16</sup> "Noi non crediamo alla piú ovvia e facile deduzione: che l'uomo sia fundamentalmente brutale, egoista e stolto come si comporta quando ogni sovrastruttura civile sia tolta... [...] Ci pare invece degno di attenzione questo fatto: viene in luce che esistono fra gli uomini due categorie particolarmente ben distinte: i salvati e i sommersi. Altre coppie di contrari (i buoni e i cattivi, i savi e gli stolti, i vili e i coraggiosi, i disgraziati e i fortunati) sono assai meno nette, sembrano meno congenite, e soprattutto ammettono gradazioni intermedie piú numerose e complesse." Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.79. For a thorough analysis on Levi and the picaresque, see JoAnn Cannon's "Storytelling and the Picaresque in Levi's *La tregua*."

la nions, nous l'annulons, nous faissons de la mort de ce copain le sens de notre vie.  
(54)

However, Semprún's heroic uniqueness is relative. The reader of *Le grand voyage* learns of the existence of a friend of Semprún's, a German fellow terrorist called Hans, whose description is surprisingly similar to the one Semprún draws for his own Gérard. Hans, a German Jew, is an excellent example of how individual rationality and freedom prevail over external determinations in *Le grand voyage* since his political activity demanded the conscious negation of himself as a historical being. Hans fought together with Semprún in the French resistance against the Germans not because he was a Jew, or because of the violence they perpetrated against the Jewish communities. These elements, the enemy's nationality and its object of extermination, were circumstantial and demanded a corresponding violence on Hans's historical statute. He had to deny himself, by means of a rational choice, as a German and a Jew. But unlike Semprún, Hans has disappeared without a trace and every attempt to find him fails. After the war, Semprún travels around France in the hope of getting information on his friend's whereabouts. With the help of testimonies and recollections, he concludes that his friend took part in a battle. But no one he comes across can ever give account of what happened to Hans after that armed confrontation with German forces.

## V. The Farsical Ascending Icarus

Hans's absence could eventually be understood within the narration's greater failure to give account of that which sustains its ontology. As I have said earlier, the camp's experience is not only obliterated, but also presupposes a change in the novel's narrating principle. As the object *per definitionem*, the camp can not be grasped in autobiographical terms, but must be handled, to the extent that this handling is possible, with a violent distance from the self. The emergence of Hans as a character would have meant, due to his similarities with the main character, an objectivation of the self. Such an objectivation would have led to a reflection on the very conditions of possibility of objectivation in general. It would have triggered a cognitive stance over, in Kantian terms, the *transcendental I*. However, *Le grand voyage's* hegemonic mode of objective retrocaption calls for a contemplative stance that alienates the subject from the target of perception. The heroic disposition matches this configuration in the sense that it denies any ethical implications in the outcome of the events. Semprún's counterpart is never guilty of anything. If we turn our attention to the category of the narrator, it is possible to state that the same contemplative and deactivated stance structures the macro

configuration of the 1963 text, as well as it grounds the reflection about its conditions of possibility. The following lines will offer an exposition on these devices, and close the present section.

The novel's opening phrase, « *Il y a cet entassement des corps dans le wagon, cette lancinante douleur dans le genou droit* », marks the generic inclusion of the next two hundred pages. It immediately presents the identity upon which the autobiographical genre is based: both narrator and character refer to the same entity. The demonstrative pronouns' deictic value enforces, together with the present tense as the hegemonic tense of events, the *I – I* identity which in prototypical cases should only be sustained by the manifestation of the first person pronoun. This identity is abandoned at the end of the text, when the trip finishes and the character's mechanical inclusion in Buchenwald's lethal machinery is recounted. As we have seen, the episode is estranged from the rest of the novel as it constitutes a separate section. From what has been argued, we could conclude that the novel's structuring devices duplicate the character's mode of objective interaction, as the narrator must distance himself from matter as he intends to narrate it: *this – cette* – becomes *that – celle-là*. The distance of the third person implies a negation of the narrator as his subject matter has always been himself. This negation destroys the subjective configuration of the autobiographical novel inasmuch as it abandons the deictic affirmation upon which the narrator has validated himself throughout the text: the underlying claim *I was there*.

The same mechanism of deactivation is present in the narrator's reflections over the possibility of storytelling. In one of these reflections, he argues that every attempt to narrate his past is fruitless if it hasn't been forgotten yet. Referring to a manuscript prior to *Le grand voyage*, he states that [*c*]e n'est pas encore maintenant que je pourrai raconter ce voyage, il faut attendre encore, il faut vraiment oublier ce voyage, après, peut-être, pourrai-je le raconter. (129)

For the narrator the persistence of memory is too dense to be poured into syntax. For him, in spite of his Marxism, the manipulation of matter into forms implies the *a priori* negation of matter. His tragedy lies in the simple fact that in his autobiographical novel both form and matter refer to the same entity, and violence on the former means, *ipso facto*, violence on the latter. As we shall presently see, that he has to sacrifice his heroic picture of himself in the gates of hell is not fortuitous at all.

### c. The Dualism within the Self

« Je ne devrais peut-être ...  
bouleverser l'ordre du récit.  
Mais c'est moi qui écris cette  
histoire et je fais comme je  
veux. » *Le grand voyage* (23)

« ... on n'est jamais tellement  
libre d'aller où l'on veut » *Le  
grand voyage* (23)

#### I. The Falsehood of Terrorism

In the first section of this chapter I have examined the configurations of the *I*-subject and the *I*-object. I have claimed that such configuration is based on a specific sort of subject-object interaction called *deactivation* and, as such, it is ubiquitous enough to give account of a total analysis of the novel. By *total analysis* I refer to a reorganization of structures that can eventually encompass the totality of the significant elements in the 1963 text. Nevertheless, the analysis has been mainly descriptive. In the present section I will examine both the ethical and theoretical implications of the specific subject-object configuration contained in *Le grand voyage*. By the end of this chapter the twofold thesis mentioned in the introductory remarks of chapter two will have been explained. On the one hand, this thesis states that form collides with content and therefore the autobiographical project fails as it can not shed light upon the event it tries to unveil. On the other hand, form and content select each other and therefore Semprún's novel gives concrete expression to the Hegelian contention that *form is the part of content made form and content is the part of form made content*.<sup>17</sup> The two claims in this thesis do not contradict each other. Rather, the one implies the other. Thus, while the first section has offered static accounts of both subject and object in *Le grand voyage*, this closing part will focus on a dynamic examination of these accounts, analysing the consequences they unveil in their interaction throughout the narration, and the possibilities for a genuine communication of a reified experience they contain.

Let us begin with a characterization of both the *I*-subject and the *I*-object. From what has been said before it follows that they present themselves as complete, rounded subjects. Although, as we have seen, the unity between them is problematic, they arise as autonomous

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<sup>17</sup> In Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being* (1978).

beings. In the character this autonomy is based on his “pure” ethics. In the narrator it is based on his discarding memory and his total control of narration. Both are “terrorist” because they regard themselves completely different from the reality they come from. *Gérard* is a terrorist, the narrator proudly states.<sup>18</sup> And the narrator himself manipulates the narrative form, at least in the first section of the book, as he pleases arguing that he has God’s rights over his production.

Let us now turn to the conditions of possibility for this “terrorist” stance. As it was noted at the end of the previous section, oblivion is presented in *Le grand voyage* as the fundamental condition for the telling. Only when the density of past events has melted away does the narrative manipulation of matter occur. What the narrator means with this density is not mentioned anywhere in the text, but taking into account the analysis presented so far we could say that this density involves a sharp element that would resist narrative categorization, or at least might resist the sort of narrative categorization that Semprún’s “heorism” triggers. This irreducible element points to the primacy of the object, a situation in which matter’s immanent laws collide with the subject’s will for control. Because memory constitutes the primary source for materials in the novel, this collision is expressed by the emergence of remembrances that operate autonomously in spite of the *I*’s intentionality. It is not oblivion regarded in terms of complete obliteration of recollections what is at stake here. The call to forget actually refers to the dissolution of memory’s autonomy, its ability to irrupt and suspend the *I*’s alleged indivisibility, reminding him of his heterogeneous constitution.<sup>19</sup>

What kind of implications would the recognition of a heterogeneous constitution imply for *Le grand voyage*’s subjective stance, that holds its subjects, narrator and character, in the conviction that they are totally free, rational, and pure men surrounded by total corruption? The following paragraphs will try to understand the novel’s “problem” – its inability to sustain the autobiographical discourse – in the light of this question, which results from the narrator’s claim that he has to suppress memory – to an extent, himself – to narrate his past – to an extent, himself.

Accepting a heterogeneous constitution of the *I* would immediately lead to reconsidering both the *I*-subject’s participation in the production of the syuzhet and the ethical ground upon which the *I*-object stands. It would lead to reconsider the terrorist stand. The two

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<sup>18</sup> Semprún’s character – and his actual *nom de guerre* – is Gérard Sorel. The greatest theorist of voluntarism and radical sindacalism, read both by Fascists and Communists, was the French Georges Sorel (1847 – 1922).

<sup>19</sup> By “constitutive heterogeneity” I understand all determinations that counteract the totalizing *mise en scene* of the subject and play a defining role in its constitution. The term refers to the subject not only as a psychological individual, but also as a social being and discursive agent. A definition that links the studies of Marx, Freud, Bakhtin, and Ducrot is given by Jacqueline Authier’s article “Hétérogénéité(s) énonciative(s)”

*I*s, we shall remember, stand in the conviction that their ontology is one and pure, and thus qualitatively opposed to their surrounding objects. Admitting, however, that the *I*-subject's condition for storytelling depends on the suppression of an ominous memory reveals an internal contradiction because he himself is formed by that memory.<sup>20</sup> Several reasons support this contradictory relation. To begin with, bound-determinations of the *I* would be at odds with Semprún's free-rational-man picture because they would conform a prehistory of the soul, Marx's nightmare over the brain of the living. But the narrator's picture of himself as character is so extreme that his "Communist" terrorism unmasks a kinship with the *self-made-man* of Capitalist ideology.<sup>21</sup> Admitting external determination to the *I*'s constitutive process would alter both the object and the subject's ethical considerations. Then we would realise that reification plays a decisive role in the constitution of the *I*. Because the *I* as unity would be conformed by elements that, although historically his, stand opposed to him now. In this sense, the narrator is admitting an uncanny constitution of his self by negating it.<sup>22</sup> Had he accepted it, he would have realised that he himself encloses the same nature of that he wants to annihilate. As we saw in the introduction to this work when the category of second nature was introduced, the limit of human praxis in a reified society is not set by – first – nature. There is nothing qualitatively superior to us that determines the viability of our praxis in second nature. On the contrary, the objects whose violent irruptions clash against the subject's omnipotence are man-made. As such, they enclose an intentionality and an ethics of production. Semprún's repressed memory is an example of how subject and object are two interwoven entities, rather than two separate realms. The Lukácsian "cage" into which modern life has turned differs from the Greek Thebes in the sense that men are not strangled by any Sphinx.<sup>23</sup> Modern tragedy lies behind the absurd verification that man's limitation is not given by the Other, that praxis does not clash against forces superior and foreign to it, but against a reified manifestation of the Same.

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<sup>20</sup>And, as Freud once said in "Writers and day-dreaming", "What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate."

<sup>21</sup> Let the reader of *Le grand voyage* not be confused by the narrator's use of Proustian devices. As explained earlier in this chapter, the simulation of metonymical displacements is set to enable heroic edification, towards what Egri understands as the integration of subjective – individual, private – times and suprasubjective – classist – times. "... le cauchemar évoqué par Semprun est d'une nature différente de l'angoisse décrite par Proust. Le cauchemar de Semprun traque des hommes absolument normaux dans une situation anormale bien déterminée, sous forme d'une expérience historique collective." Egri, *op. cit.* p. 157.

<sup>22</sup> The reader may have noted that I am implicitly manipulating Freudian concepts. In principle, and despite Lukács's violent rejection of Psychoanalysis, there are no theoretical elements that would make a Marxist appropriation of Psychoanalysis impossible, as Trotsky believed and Marcuse carried into effect.

<sup>23</sup> See above, Lukács's passage from *Theorie des Romans*.



The immediate consequence of this state of affairs points to the vacuity of any terrorist stance, including that which Semprún so proudly manifests. Based on metaphors such as the tower of Babel and Moses' war against the Egyptian empire, the so-called Marxist defence of terrorism claims that Communist activity attempts to turn into immanence a transcendental objective.<sup>24</sup> This does not merely mean that the goal Communist political activity tries to achieve qualitatively differs from the given realm of social relations, but also that this objective is located outside current society. Logically, since this defence tends towards a conception of immanence and transcendence that still lingers within static categories of the being, it becomes an objective necessity to erase the given structure of legality and to submit moral questions for the exclusive sake of the transcendental objective. Only because he knows that murder and oppression are beyond tolerance is Moses in a position to murder the first born of the Egyptian ruling class. It was Lukács who, in 1919, distancing himself from the spirit of his early dialectical *Theorie des Romans*, conceived of praxis as a rational link between immanence and transcendence:

Therefore, to weigh up and understand correctly the contemporary economic and social conjuncture, the true relations of power, is never more than to meet the *prerequisites* for correct socialist action, correct tactics. *It does not in itself constitute a criterion of correctness.* The only valid yardstick is whether the *manner* of the action in a given case serves to realize this goal, which is the essence of the socialist movement.<sup>25</sup>

Will and reason prevail over ontology, as if the latter conformed a different realm of reality apart from the other two. This Lukácsian defence of political violence *à la* George Sorel matches Semprún's terrorist stance because it withdraws ethical considerations from the perception of reality. If we turn our attention back to the character's intended divestment of heterogeneous conditioning, we will see that this divestment correlates to the subjective disregard of social juncture that Lukács proposed in 1919. Gérard has to be nude and pure in order to be able to negate his surrounding world. Similarly, the narrator has to be nude and pure, even if this means negating the very object of his narration, to narrate. However, the point is that while Babel's architecture and Moses' atrocities could hold for a pre-modern

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<sup>24</sup> Both Babel and Moses' war against the Egyptians give exemplary support to the Marxist account of terrorism. When it comes to the former, Dostoevsky wrote in *Brothers Karamazov* that "socialism is not only the labor question, or the question of the so called fourth state, but... the question of the Tower of Babel which is deliberately being created without God, not for the sake of reaching heaven from earth, but for the sake of bringing heaven down to earth." The latter case is depicted by Thomas Mann in his short story *Das Gesetz*.

<sup>25</sup> In Lukács [1919] *Tactics and Ethics*, p. 29 (the emphasis is mine). After becoming a member of the Communist Party in 1918, Lukács wrote a series of articles and essays from 1919 to 1923 that clearly differ from the spirit of *Theorie des Romans* and *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*. Certainly, these articles were meant to have an immediate effect on the turbulent course of events, rather than contribute to the theoretical development of dialectical thought, as is clearly the case of the two works mentioned above. Of all these "incensing" articles, his *Tactics and Ethics* is perhaps the most enlightening.

configuration of the *I* in which God conforms man by setting limits to his praxis, these metaphors are not adequate when applied to the current complexity of human actions. This complexity refers to the disappearance of Heaven as the colliding force against which man stands. Far from challenging a Sphinx, Semprún's character deals with a world of sharp entities that find their origin in human praxis. The German extermination system was not an impersonation of the devil, but a concrete development of – reified – productive forces. The *Is'* negation and arrogance against reality fail to understand that they are a part of that reality.

Reified reality exhibits three related features. *First*, transcendence, if still an operational category, can not be regarded as a different domain of existence, since Heaven is hidden beyond perception and interaction. *Second*, by accepting that the surrounding entities are man-made we are forced to agree that the modern subject discloses an ethical stance whenever he deals with things whose existence he believes to be autonomous. There is no such thing as neutrality since every subjective stance implies *Parteilichkeit*. As Lenin once said, love letters are always written for or against a particular woman.<sup>26</sup> *In the third place*, a praxis that confronts subjects to objects as two estranged entities duplicates such estrangement within the subject as he must depict himself as an object of himself.

Thus, it becomes clear why Semprún's terrorist stance based on the obliteration of his true historical determination is doomed. Regarding the first of the three elements listed above, the concept of transcendence should be supported by immanent configurations of the Same. To find a transcendental objective within reified, hostile objectivities requires a thorough knowledge of the surrounding world, an action that clearly contrasts with the terrorist's volatilization of reality. As we shall see in chapter four, this actually takes place in Semprún's 1994 novel, *L'écriture ou la vie*. However, *Le grand voyage*'s perspective on this issue is:

Je ne devrais peut-être parler que de ces promeneurs et de cette sensation, telle qu'elle a été à ce moment, dans la vallée de la Moselle, afin de ne pas bouleverser l'ordre du récit. Mais c'est moi qui écris cette histoire et je fais comme je veux. (24)

When it comes to the second element, this thorough knowledge implies, among other things, a conscious and mature awareness of guilt. Understanding emerges as a condition for action as it leads to the recognition of features that are present both in the subject and the object. By suppressing reality by means of mere will, the terrorist stance is duplicating the hostile objectivation of which he claims to be a victim without acknowledging it. Semprún's claims such as “[m]ais ça n'a aucun intérêt de comprendre les S.S., il suffit de les exterminer” (72)

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<sup>26</sup> In Lukács 1954 *Prolegomena zu einer marxistischen Aesthetik*. The quotation has been widely used by Marxist theorists in order to dismantle the false opposition between commitment and *art pour l'art*.

and “[j]e sais bien que le dialogue devient possible, avec un S.S., quand le S.S. est mort” (79) show no trace of guilt. These quotations enhance the *I*'s heroic configuration, and can only be sustained if his purity as a subject of action is taken for granted. We have seen, though, that the cost of such configuration is extremely high in *Le grand voyage*, as the hero's indivisibility – his purity, his integrity – is possible once he withdraws from action. This withdrawal, which I have called *deactivation* and names this chapter, designates contemplation as its peculiar feature and concerns both the way the *I*-object relates towards the surrounding entities and the manner in which the *I*-subject submits matter to narration. Such withdrawal *per se* confirms the estrangement within which the stance dwells and therefore negates it as an authentic attempt of praxis. Now I will analyse the third feature of reification: that which duplicates deactivation within the very representation of the self.

## II. The Dichotomies of Bourgeois Thought

Since the novel's discursive devices rearrange matter with the same disregard that the concentrationary machine used to annihilate human experience, there is scarcely anything in the novel that adequately narrates the experience in Buchenwald. In terms of Walter Benjamin's distinction between experience and information, it is only fossilized facts we retrieve from the 1963 text.<sup>27</sup>

Experience, Benjamin claims, consoles the subjective urge to find self-awareness in things. Inasmuch as experience actualizes man's essence in generic parameters and therefore can never enact a purely individual act, the emergence of experience is deeply connected with the subject's ability to communicate it to his peers. Benjamin sees in the process of storytelling not only a revitalization of social bonds, but also a specific subject-object interaction which confers both ethical and teleological regards on the object and the participating subjects:

[Storytelling] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again.<sup>28</sup>

The “sinking of the thing” as an authentic mode of apprehension differs from the cognitive devices employed in *Le grand voyage* by the *I*-subject and the *I*-object. We have seen that deactivation not only sets subjective interaction in the fabula but serves also as the structuring

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<sup>27</sup> “The Storyteller”

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* 91-92.

device for the *syuzhet*. That is, on the one hand there are episodes in which this deactivation is depicted and on the other hand the whole novel moves from volatilization towards a contemplative mode of narration. Deactivation is not just a subject matter of the 1963 novel; *it is also its constitutive device*. In this sense the text's configuration approaches Benjamin's account for the category of "information" as a kind of communication governed by the presentation of closed and perfected facts: they do not enrich the perceiver's experience since they do not present themselves as riddles to be solved by previous collective experience. Every bit of information, on the contrary, is supplied with an explanation that prevents its absorption in previous subjective experience. The novel's correlated mechanisms of contemplative deactivation produce a similar effect to the one Benjamin saw in the concept of "explanation". Everything is distant, static, closed, foreign, *isolerte*. It is not accidental that both narrator and character appear in a terrible solitude in the novel, that dialogues are scant and only serve to confirm the subject's arrogance. The reason why the text's heroic disposition selects a terrorist stance can also be understood in the impossibility for the emergence of an epic-like heroism. Whereas in the epic the main character is one with his peers, his objects and history, he must retreat in the novel if he is to conserve his ethical purity. He recoils to the depths of his soul negating a world his inadequate *ethos* doesn't recognize as his own. Since in *Le grand voyage* this retreat is duplicated at the narrative level, the *I*-object appears as an autonomous (either volatilized or contemplated) entity in spite of all the Marxism the narrator displays throughout the pages.

Lukács account of the category of second nature sheds light on what is at stake in *Le grand voyage*.

Sie bilden die Welt der Konvention: eine Welt, deren Allgewalt nur das Innerste der Seele entzogen ist; die in unübersichtlicher Mannigfaltigkeit überall gegenwärtig ist; deren strenge Gesetzlichkeit, sowohl im Werden wie im Sein, für das erkennende Subjekt notwendig evident wird, die aber bei all dieser Gesetzmässigkeit sich weder als Sinn für das zielsuchende Subjekt noch in sinnlicher Unmittelbarkeit als Stoff für das handelnde darbietet. Sie ist eine zweite Natur; wie die erste nur als der Inbegriff von erkannten, sinnesfremden Notwendigkeiten bestimmbar und deshalb in ihrer wirklichen Substanz unerfassbar und unnerkennbar.<sup>29</sup>

The world whose literary product is the bourgeois novel is, to the young Hungarian theorist, a world completely objectified by man which has however gained control over him and become opaque to any subjective attempt of sense. Experience, understood in the light of a specific subjective praxis that elevates man's self-awareness, has been lost by man's own praxis.

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<sup>29</sup> Lukács. *Theorie des Romans*, p. 60.

Thus, second nature discloses a quite different cognitive praxis, this time estranged and contemplative. Things can reveal themselves to the cognizant subject, but partly and therefore senseless.<sup>30</sup>

Kant's system canonizes the philosophical expression for this subjective loss. By basing knowledge on the subject's productivity of formal categories, Kant develops a two-world theory in which the one is characterized in terms of its total subjection to mechanistic laws and the other presents itself beyond man's praxis and cognition. Deprived of freedom, the phenomonic world emerges as such as its total submission to a mechanistic logic is achieved. On this regard, Kant clearly states that "[n]othing in the world of phenomena can be explained by the concept of freedom, the guiding thread in that sphere must always be the mechanics of nature."<sup>31</sup>

Paradoxically, this "clock-work-autonomy" of the world of the phenomena is conceptually sustained by a great amount of freedom on the side of the subject as a transcendental entity. Since for Kant sense is not a property in things in themselves but a specific mode of administrating sensual data, sense must be grounded on a contingency, the possibility of categorial formation, that Kantian philosophy is forced to place outside cognition to save the honor of thinking. The necessity that according to Kant must describe the world of the phenomena is in the last instance a categorial formation of our reason and therefore can only be sustained if we confer a great deal of freedom to our reason. Regardless how unchangeable the world of phenomena appears to subjective will, it is, ultimately, a construction of the subject. *This paradox expresses the instability of the concepts of freedom and necessity and, when applied to the subject qua subject and object of cognition, it creates an insurmountable chasm, a dualism within the self.* On the one hand, the empirical ego is dissected in static categories that resist any intervention of will. On the other hand, such dissection must admit, as a condition of possibility given its founding subjectivism, a transcendental ego governed by pure will and freedom, who cannot be an object of cognition, let alone intervention. Lukács may be referring to that very tension when he claims that only the soul resists the oppression caused by second nature. Be it one way or the other, the subject grasps the surrounding world in terms of perfected facts that refuse any kind of practical intervention and finds himself forced to deny any kind of ethical relation between his integrity and the object's. Thus, for those who fail to see the subjective component in external reality,

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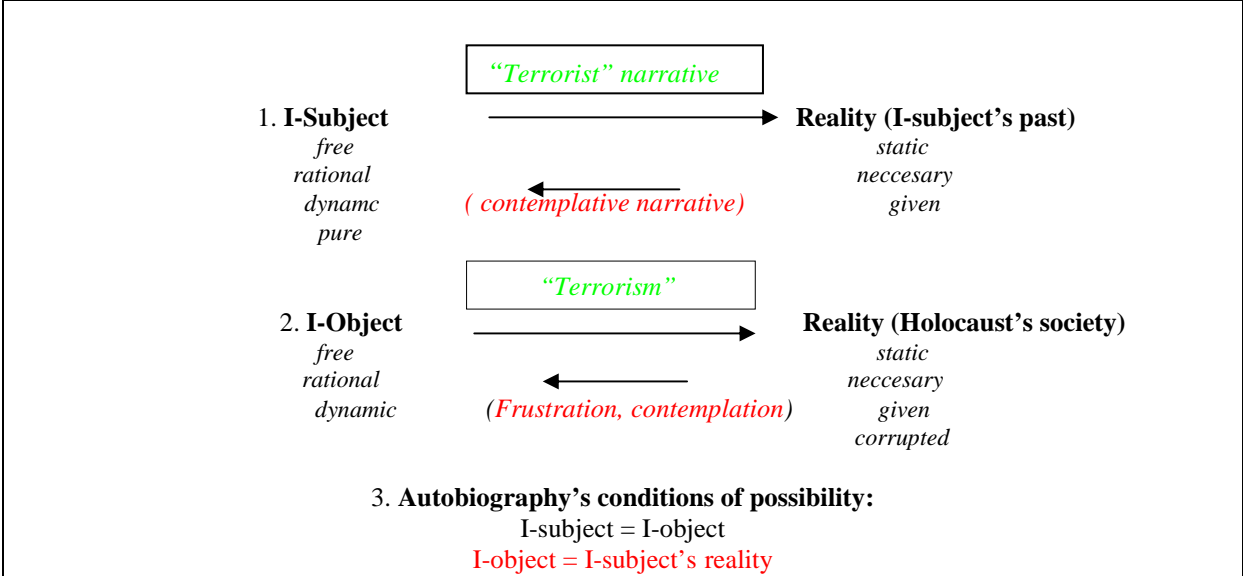
<sup>30</sup> In Benjamin's terms, the primacy of the second nature allows the overcoming of experience by information.

<sup>31</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*. [1788]

experience is overcome by information to the extent that the right knowledge of events doesn't offer specific criteria for action.

Because it is an autobiography, Semprún's work must deal with this dualism. On the one hand, narrator and character are forced to converge in the same ontological core, albeit they operate on different timelines. As Lejeune argued, autobiography is based on the assumption that narrator and character (and author) are one. On the other hand, the narrator can only illustrate himself if he manages to objectify a picture of himself. A certain amount of alienation is required. However, *Le grand voyage*'s extreme characterization of "rational" subjects *versus* "irrational" (given) objects, which lies behind the concept of terrorism and affects both the *I*-subject and the *I*-object, makes this tension unbearable. It depicts a violent clash between freedom and necessity whenever the narrator, as a cognizant subject, must represent himself as an object of cognition tied to external determination while he is *at the same time* celebrating his and his character's total freedom.

The novel's singularity, its generic anchor, makes the problem more evident as it locates, on one side, the *I*-subject on the realm of literature, a sphere where anything goes, and, on the other side, the *I*-object on the concentrationary space of Nazism, governed by rules as precise as a clockwork. His *hybris* lies in the denial of the fact that both his freedom as a narrator and his slavery as an object – of himself and of Buchenwald – are fragmentations of the same unity, and neither can emerge without taking its counterpart with it. In order to understand this argument, consider the following diagram:



The *I*-subject intervenes on content based on his freedom to do whatever he pleases. Similarly, and because they are ontologically the same I, the *I*-object puts forward a terrorist stance whenever he approaches matter. He fails, however, because his terrorist stance is based on a non-dialectical definition of immanence and transcendence, and must settle for a contemplative attitude. Conversely, the *I*-subject must depict his *I*-object, which ultimately himself, with contempt if he is to be consequent with his total freedom as narrator. In a way, he is violently categorizing, controlling a subject (the character, the *I*-object) whose prominent features pointed to a total freedom. He is duplicating his character's terrorism on his character. We have seen that the *I*-object's withdrawal from action – his contemplative stance – is deeply related to his terrorist stance because this stand did not emerge from a dialectical examination of the transcendent *in* the immanent. It could be possible, then, to say that the last section of the chapter, which brings forth a completely contemplative narrative form (third person plus fatal perspective), results from the impossibility of the *I*'s intention. Everytime he must think of himself, he is negating himself because the cognitive tools he brings forth contradict the conditions of possibility of his being. After all, both subjects are the same, and neither can live without the other. *Le grand voyage*'s last section, which turns the autobiographical genre into a third-person, distant, and cold description, should be understood as a formal correlate to the frustration the *I*-object feels each time he tries to do something. As his character, who fails to recognize his own generic essence in the object, the narrator cannot see that he is talking about himself and therefore any violence on his character will *ipso facto* lead to a violence upon his own praxis.

Because the subject fails in his narrative attempt, the episode sheds light on the unity between subject and object, form and content. *Lato sensu*, this novel, regarded as a given product, would not differ from a prototypical testimony if it wasn't for the quality of its formal devices (Proustian narrative does not constitute an ordinary device for testimonies). In this sense, it simulates the trauma that survivors undergo every time they bear testimony of the Holocaust.

### III. The Triumph of Realism

Given the novel's inability to produce experience, what should criticism do with *Le grand voyage*? One thing is clear: denying any value to the novel because of its inability to grasp experience and make it communicable would duplicate the novel's terrorist stance grounded on static concepts of immanence and transcendence. If we are to put forward a critical

perspective that claims to understand the complex relation between immanence and transcendence, a total rejection of Semprún's 1963 work would fall within Lukács's mistake of 1919. Though reified, the novel *is* a product of human praxis and involves a component of truth that emerges from the inability to confer an arbitrary form on the object. But, as we have just seen, the novel depicts contradictory stances, denies generic responsibility, and offers a terrorist stance that verges on demise. What does the novel, with its reified mechanisms of narration, have to offer us, if we are to look for the emergence of true experience? Despite its falsehood, its mistifying stances, *Le grand voyage* contains some value. But before going into the question of value, we should try to define what kind of theoretical stance can allow us to state literary value in a reified novel.

On this regard, we must bring forth a concept of literary realism that is supported on two conceptual principles. On the one hand, this concept is based on a theory of literary realism that does not mean a naive adequacy to objective reality. A contrary account would fall within a contemplative stance since it would display evaluative criteria in which all products of consciousness (literature in particular and thought in general) would be forced to reflect reality as if reality was an autonomous realm. As Raymond Williams claims,

[t]he most damaging consequence of any theory of art as reflection is that, through its persuasive physical metaphor (in which a reflection simply occurs, within the physical properties of light, when an object or movement is brought into relation with a reflective surface – the mirror and then the mind – it succeeds in suppressing the actual work on material – in a final sense, the material social process – which is the making of any art work.<sup>32</sup>

Williams uses this argument to criticize the Lukácsian realist account and thus shows a clear underestimation of the latter's theoretical complexity, but it still constitutes a sharp judgment on "Positivist" theories of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> A dynamic concept of the being, on the contrary, states that reality is not a static domain of autonomous and irrational (given) entities; it is rather a continuous becoming for which the participation of thought appears as a *sine qua non* condition. Therefore, literary realism (or literary reflection) points to the fact that literature, as a praxis of consciousness, simulates by means of analogy this becoming of the being. There are, however, two crucial elements that Williams does not take into account in his section "From Reflection to Mediation" from his 1977 *Marxism and Literature*, the chapter where this passage comes from. First, he skips the Hegelian origin of the term "reflection", which is

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<sup>32</sup> Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*, p 97 (1977).

<sup>33</sup> For instance, Zhdanov's 1934 exposition of the unfortunate socialist realism. Or, when it comes to Semprún criticism, Ferrán's refusal to accept *Le grand voyage* as a realist novel, claiming that it is a psychologist one.



at the core of the Lukácsian account of literature and reification. Second, he seems to mean that a real “isolated reflection” can take place, as if there was such thing as a non-intervening subjective approach to reality. We have seen, on the contrary, that however reified it may be, reality is the social product of human praxis. The Hegelian *isolerte Reflektion* is itself a peculiar mode of intervention on material. In other words, even the flattest concept of mirror and mind, if we use William’s own words, involves subjective labor on material. J. M. Bernstein, who has honored Lukács with a very sensible analysis of his two great earlier works (*The Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness*), contends on this respect that “truth cannot be a correspondence between thought and reality because the world thought is to mirror is changing and being changed through, in part, the efficacy of thought.”<sup>34</sup>

The second theoretical implication for conferring aesthetic value – in the sense that this value confirms a realist account – on reified praxis in *Le grand voyage* points, on the other hand, to a dialectical concept of immanence and transcendence. Such a concept can be perfectly deduced from the inner tension is at the root of art autonomy, but still needs some attention.

We have seen that the text’s terrorist stance is basically grounded on a degenerated reactualization of the Tower of Babel’s metaphor that regards Earth and Heaven as two qualitatively different realms. At the same time, it requires a heroic conception of the soul that equates it to Heaven so that the assault can have some possibility of victory.<sup>35</sup> But such heroic disposition also necessitates ethics’ retreat to inner subjectivity as the external world is not recognized by the subject as of his own. Reality emerges for the cognizant subject as a Newtonian system where everything can be grasped in terms of causes and effects. Inasmuch as the *I* has a negative relation to the given, he feels the urge to undermine and volatilize it. As Adorno puts it, “nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the omnipotent subject has itself to thank”.<sup>36</sup> But such volatilization is doomed to fail since it results from a fragmentation, and the greater the subject thinks of himself, the higher he builds his Tower of Babel, the more powerful his objective counterpart becomes.

The mere praxis of narration in general and the autobiographical novel in particular put forward a peculiar mode of subjective labor that contrasts the terrorist theoretical stance by forcing the narrating subject to depict himself and his characters out of past events. Enabled by art’s detachment from society, the novel’s subjective configuration assumes the

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<sup>34</sup> Bernstein *The Philosophy of the Novel. Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form* p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> “And the Lord said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.’” Genesis 11: 6.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. See note in the introduction.

past as its own, it dereifies turning it into present (as it *represents* past events). The novel's materials are, by definition, nonaesthetic elements – language, images, devices – that merge from a concrete portion of historically reified praxis. Contrary to what Plato believed, forms of art do not dwell in aethereal realms of Beauty. They have, on the contrary, both an autonomous phenomenology and a heteronomous ontology. By turning what has happened into aesthetic form, the depiction of *what the case should be* results exclusively from *what the case is (was)*.<sup>37</sup> Lukács's statement of youth, in which he argues that the right knowledge of society can never be regarded as a criterion of action, is false since the only sort of knowledge that doesn't trigger concrete action, that is, that doesn't involve the subject's integrity in the unveiling of the object, is a deactivated one. As deactivated knowledge neglects the real subject-object interaction, it can not be considered as right. Conversely, it would be impossible to think of a criterion of action that doesn't come from past generic praxis, unless we are to believe that ethical values dwell in ethereal domains of ahistorical idealities.

*Le grand voyage* gives a sharp expression to Lukács's mistake in 1919 because it reveals the inner contradiction between the dualism *what the case may be / what the case ought to be*. On the one hand, its autobiographical status must, out of generic necessity, allow the identity between narrator and character; between, let us say, the transcendental and empirical *Is*. The aesthetic depiction of the past, as we have seen, enacts at the same time the foundations for both the identity and difference needed so that the novel can work *qua* autobiography. However, on the other hand, the terrorist configuration, which emerges from a general contemplative disposition, tends to the subjective desertion of a reality that is, *qua* reality, an objective configuration of the self, that is, his own character. By equating the transcendental-empirical ego dualism to the *what the case ought to be – what the case may be*, the self ends up destroying itself in the 1963 novel.

Semprún's first autobiographical novel puts forward the impossibility of experience by depicting an extreme situation in which the subjective configurations that ground modern experience collide with each other. Therefore, *Le grand voyage* constitutes a sharp expression of real subjective modes of perception rather than what it assumes as its goal: to give account of the *I*'s experience in Buchenwald. As I have explained, the novel's success is achieved at the cost of its failure, and *vice versa*.

J. M. Bernstein, putting forward his analysis of Lukács's *Theorie des Romans*, concludes that

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<sup>37</sup> Martin Jay's *Marxism and Totality* (1984) gives a short account of the relationship between past and art. Else, see Marcuse's *Contrarrevolution and Revolt* (1972).

the form of the novel [as a genre] is Kantian, and that the novel suffers antinomies analogous with the antinomies to which Kant's philosophy is subject. But the novel is not a theory; the practices of the novel give phenomenal expression to those theoretical antinomies. And those antinomies, we know, are the antinomies of bourgeois thought.<sup>38</sup>

It goes beyond the goals of my thesis to give sufficient reason to support this statement in its general value. However, it is now clear that these antinomies play a part in the 1963 text, that contemplation as the hegemonic mode of subjective apprehension lies behind both the novel's structuring principles and man's current reified interaction with his peers and his objects.

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<sup>38</sup> *Op. cit.* 89.

## Chapter Three: The Open Self

### a. Introductory Remarks

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the category of deactivation gives conceptual expression to a process in which a concrete subjective stance molds surrounding entities with an arbitrary will that triggers, in its resulting frustration, the subject's withdrawal from praxial intervention. The subject deactivates himself *qua* generic agent and regards his objectifications as entities of complete otherness. Far from recognizing himself in his objects, what would mean a requisite for praxial intervention, he is forced to confer ontological primacy on the world of objects and settle himself for what epistemological discourses normally denominate "objective" descriptions. I argued in chapter two that Kantism gives canonical expression to this process within the realm of thought by placing the principle of necessity at the core of the subjective approach to the world of phenomena. History, Psychology, Sociology, and Economics are to describe a world whose inner mechanisms function like a clockwork. For the modern cognizant subject society has become a Newtonian apple, a Voltaic frog.

The previous chapter has not only tried to demonstrate that Semprún's 1963 autobiographical novel is organized, *in toto*, by the category of deactivation. More precisely, the chapter has argued that *Le grand voyage* duplicates the generic process of the becoming of this category through a particular case.<sup>1</sup> Granted by literature peculiarity and the concrete historical materials the novel deals with, this "reflection" is so gratefully achieved in Semprún's first autobiography that it shatters into pieces its testimonial intention by showing the contradictions that lie behind testimony as a genre. It is precisely a stance of arbitrary will, which I called *terrorism*, that contains the conditions for an epic-like narration and triggers its failure. As if Semprún's "terrorist" contention *I do as I like because this is my story* backfired into *one is never totally free to do as one pleases*.<sup>2</sup> The pronominal change from an authoritative *I* to a inert *one* in these two phrases preannounces the radical shift in the closing chapter, where autobiographical devices are cancelled out together with the *I* himself.<sup>3</sup> By volatilizing materials in accordance to an end he believes to be transcendental and therefore

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<sup>1</sup> As I have already pointed out, this organic relation between the general and the particular defines literature for both Aristotelian and Lukácsian poetics.

<sup>2</sup> These phrases appear in *Le grand voyage*.

<sup>3</sup> This "preannouncement" is certainly not a premonition of the course of plot. The phrases are actually clear examples of what Freud named *Nachträglichkeit* (the French-Lacanian correlate is *Après-coup*, the English equivalence for both terms is *deferred action*). *Nachträglichkeit* describes a process by means of which a certain past event acquires significance *a posteriori* and establishes a hermeneutical relationship with the present state of affairs.

beyond the legality of experience, the I's praxis of narration ends up submitted to objective determination in the fashion of a puppet show. And that is, as we have seen in the introduction, the problem of testimony. Towards the end of *Quel bon dimanche!*, Semprún's second Buchenwald autobiography and object of analysis of the current chapter, the narrator accounts for the hubris that pervaded *Le grand voyage*.

Tout mon récit dans *Le Grand Voyage* s'articulait silencieusement... à une vision communiste du monde. Toute la vérité de mon témoignage avait pour référence implicite, mais contraignante, l'horizon d'une société désaliénée: une société sans classes où les camps eussent été inconcevables. Toute la vérité de mon témoignage baignait dans les huiles saintes de cette bonne conscience latente. Mais l'horizon du communisme... était celui du Goulag. Du coup, tout la vérité de mon livre devenait mensongère.(385)<sup>4</sup>

If encompassing experience to one's own arbitrary project does not seem to be the answer to an organic narration of the past, let alone when it involves traumatic events, one may wonder if the opposite would prove more satisfactory. Given the impossibility of narration in a material that resists totalitarian forms, we could be tempted to claim that a subjective stance characterized by an intentional withdrawal from the rigid categorization that is at stake in *Le grand voyage* could eventually allow the emergence of shapeless, teleologically meaningless, but yet "true", tales. This is the idea that lies behind Semprún's plan in *Quel bon dimanche!*

The present chapter is divided into two sections. The first one examines Semprún's second Holocaust novel to give account of its prominent features and display a textual constellation that sheds light on those elements that distinguish *Quel bon dimanche!* from *Le grand voyage*. The second section deals with the theoretical implications for such a constellation and intends to give sufficient support to the following hypothesis: although Semprún's new text presents itself from a diametrically opposite perspective in relation to *Le grand voyage*, it still dwells within a reified concept of praxis.

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<sup>4</sup> *Quel bon dimanche!* The number in parentheses point to the page number of the Galimard edition.

## b. The Polyphonic Imagination

Il n'y a plus de critère de réalité, tout est possible.  
Semprún, *Quel bon dimanche!*

### I. Centrifugal Rhizomes *versus* Centripetal Circles

Jorge Semprún's second autobiographical novel on Buchenwald was published in 1980, seventeen years after *Le grand voyage*. As Monika Neuhofer points out, the gap between the two texts by no means meant a decrease in the author's literary productivity. On the contrary, the years that followed the publication of his first Buchenwald novel were filled by a variety of script projects and novels. Semprún's emergence as a public person after being expelled from the Spanish Communist Party for "deviant thinking" gave him both the time and popularity he could not have during his clandestine period. As relevant as his fruitful literary production was Semprún's reading of Solschenizyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, translated into French when *Le grand voyage* had already been sent to print, and Schalamov's *Stories from Kolima*, which began to be available to the Western public in the mid sixties.<sup>5</sup> The impact of these authors on Semprún's new autobiography is evident in at least two defining features of the book. First and foremost, these authors contributed to Semprún's understanding of the Soviet totalitarian system by offering a depiction of the *Gulag* camps that was, in principle, formally equal to Semprún's own conception of the *KZ* structure. This kind of comparison triggered in *Quel bon dimanche!* a radical shift in the narrator's perspective in relation to *Le grand voyage*. As I have mentioned, the 1963 text conceived of the German concentrationary structure as a concrete phase in Capitalist development. Thus, the narrator subscribed Brecht's *dictum* "Nazism is the continuation of Capitalism by other means" and consequently carried into effect a Communist praxis that *per se* would destroy both the concentrationary system and the bourgeois mode of production. Seventeen years later his opinion is diametrically different.<sup>6</sup>

[L]a société concentrationnaire nazie n'était pas, comme tu l'avais longtemps pensé, l'expression concentrée... des rapports sociaux capitalistes. ... ils étaient un mirror assez fidèle de la société stalinienne. (375-376)

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account of Semprún's readings between these novels see Neuhofer, *op. cit.* pp. 139-45.

<sup>6</sup> Brecht's phrase is from *Mutter Courage* [1939].

Given that *Le grand voyage* was *totally* structured upon a Communist world vision, this reconsideration will play a crucial role in the conformation of Semprún's new autobiographical novel. The second element that the narrator seems to have borrowed from Solschenizyn's text is the temporal structure. *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denissovitch* offers a temporal structure that serves as a ruling principle for *Quel bon dimanche!*'s fabula. Solschenizyn's novella is set in a Soviet labor camp and describes a single day of an ordinary prisoner. As we can infer from its title, *Quel bon dimanche!* encompasses all phenomena within the narration of one particular Sunday in Buchenwald from the moment the SS officers called the roll in the early and freezing winter morning to the evening supper when Semprún and other privileged inmates ate a dog.

At first sight, this strategy of narration seems similar to the one employed in 1963. *Le grand voyage* also intends to give account of the complexity of human relationships in the Holocaust by depicting a concrete and particular episode. The five-day journey across France and Germany contains from its very beginning to the last page all the other episodes. But while *Le grand voyage* contains its episodes in such a manner that they can all fall "organically" within the narrator's teleological project and mold them according to the same ethical, epistemological, and ontological continuum, *Quel bon dimanche!* displays a false Aristotelian unity behind which a complete phenomenical chaos is veiled. In spite of what it presents at first sight, the novel neither situates its plot within the limits of a single day, nor lingers on the same place, nor builds up one hero. Whereas *Le grand voyage* unifies diverse phenomena so that each and every intervention on reality can be decoded by the same sign – thus perverting the immanent laws of the phenomena and obtaining the opposite results –, the 1980 text gives free rein to manifold phenomenical emergences which have nothing in common with each other. Unlike its 1963 predecessor, which triggered objective primacy *in spite of* its intentional plan, this heterogeneity *is intended* here. The self is open *a priori*, it no longer strives for a homogeneous constitution of totality. The immediate conclusion for this feature points to the fact that *Quel bon dimanche!* operates with a diametrically different enunciative *ethos*. But before I submit this *ethos* to speculation, it will be convenient to account for the concrete dimensions of this phenomenical diversity.

A fair amount of features conforms this “chaotic” disposition.<sup>7</sup> The most evident one has to do with the number of pages. The 1980 text outnumbers *Le grand voyage* by 300 pages, but its “projected” bond motifs are five times shorter. It takes *Quel bon dimanche!* 500 pages to depict one day in Buchenwald, while *Le grand voyage* covers four sunsets in 230. In terms of the conceptual pair free-bound motif, the longer the time of the discourse is, the weaker the logical bonds between the free and bound motifs becomes because the temporal parameters of the syuzhet work to the detriment of the fabula.<sup>8</sup> While it is possible to claim that every digression in *Le grand voyage* is directly related by means of either metaphorical condensation or metonymical displacement to relevant bound motifs of the fabula, the same claim would be ridiculous in the 1980 text since it is a chain of loose ends. Narrative cores depicting Goethe’s fictitious promenades through Buchenwald in the early 1940’s, sensual escapades with French lovers to the Marne, unpleasant discussions with Merleau Ponty in post-war Paris, New York prostitutes, and even theoretical expositions set to undermine the ontological value of class struggle mingle in what the novel presents as its relevant plot: a Sunday in KZ Buchenwald from dawn to dusk.

The proliferation of narrative cores sustains an epistemological stance opposed to the one of 1963. The enunciation’s new perspective conceives of totality as an entity, if an entity at all, that escapes subjective conceptualization. The enunciation responds to this inviability not by cancelling the praxis of narration, but by carrying into effect a prolific explosion of formal productivity. *Le grand voyage*’s perfect geometry depicts a circle that contains empiry within its trace and brings forth sense as an anchoring mechanism to ontology. Conversely, *Quel bon dimanche!* draws a de-centered, rhizome-like figure that incorporates contradiction as an insurmountable feature and thus abandons, in its enunciative configuration, any ontological ambition. This new perspective does not abandon the praxis of narration. Rather, it explodes a productivity of discourses that opposes quantitative narration to an event it insinuates but does not cover. Whether this cognitive limitation has to be regarded in the light of the Lacanian void in the Symbolic or simply as a Kantian-like category of finitude lacks relevance. For *Quel bon dimanche!*, the productivity of forms fails to grasp the real because it operates in a different realm, and the gap between both spheres – the real and the product of

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<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid any sort of misunderstanding, I will insist that this thesis works with a strong concept of “simulation”. Depicted chaos is not real chaos, it is just a simulation, a *mise en scene*. From this follows that this thesis does not agree with those theorists that claim to see in Semprún’s Holocaust literature the immediacy of a psychoanalytical therapy. Should the reader be interested in those accounts, see Ofelia Ferrán (*op. cit.*) and Felman and Laub (*op. cit.*).

<sup>8</sup> The contrary holds. The more condensed the time of the discourse, the clearer the logical bonds between fabula motifs.



forms – constitutes the condition of possibility for this sort of subjective intervention. The wheels of narration are set into motion because the production of forms is not anchored in the real. Irrecoverable alienation is the foundation of the praxis of narration in 1980. In the words of the narrator, *[i]l n’y a plus de critère de réalité, tout est possible* (171).

We will resume this theoretical issue in the second section of this chapter. It is now pertinent to point that *Quel bon dimanche!*'s extensive and chaotic structure is not intended to cover an event that was forgotten in 1963. On the contrary, it is intended to show that such an attempt would be impossible. In one of the several opportunities where *Quel bon dimanche!*'s narrator reflects upon his own praxis of storytelling, he wonders which episodes of his life in KZ Buchenwald would be necessary to include in his Holocaust novel:

[J]’avais eu l’impression que je pourrais raconter. Mieux que lui, en tout cas. Aujourd’hui aussi, à Nantua, en écoutant Fernand Barizon, j’ai eu la même impression. Je n’oublierais pas Juliette, en tout cas, ni Zarah Leander. Mais il ne faut pas se faire d’illusions: jamais on ne pourrait tout dire. Une vie n’y suffirait pas. Tous les récits possibles ne seront jamais que les fragments épars d’un récit infini, littéralement interminable. (98)

It could be argued that the dissemination of the category of totality into a “récit infini, littéralement interminable” derives from Semprún’s rejection of Communism. Whether this cause-effect relationship be true or not, the case is that both attitudes – the narrator’s political shift and the dissemination of totality – are corresponding correlates. Furthermore, given that both Communist theory – at least Semprún’s – and the notion of totality in narration require a concrete concept of subject, any substantial change in either will be mirrored by a corresponding re-definition of the category of narrator.

## II. *Gottes Dämmerung*

The rejection of totality constitutes the first prominent element in *Quel bon dimanche!* The second prominent feature lies behind the subjective configuration of the narrator. Unlike the previous novel, *Quel bon dimanche!* undertakes an explicit critique of the conditions of possibility for narration in general and displays a series of literary devices that not only eliminate but also ridicule the terrorist configuration in 1963. Bitter sarcasm is all the remembering Semprún has for himself *qua* narrator:

Quoi qu'il en soit, je ne vais pas me laisser faire, bien sûr, puisque je suis le rusé Dieu le Père de tous ces fils et tous ces ils.<sup>9</sup> La Première Personne par antonomase, donc, même lorsqu'elle s'occulte dans le figure hégélienne de l'Un se divisant en Trois, pour la plus grande joie du lecteur sensible aux ruses narratives, quelle que soit par ailleurs son opinion sur la délicate question de la dialectique. (96)

The narrator's configuration is here submitted to critique and aesthetic disarticulation. In *Le grand voyage* this configuration was named *I*-subject and constitutes itself a grim and dense group of devices thanks to which experience is encompassed regardless of its immanent legality. The new narrator is different from the 1963 one in at least two aspects. First, Semprún undertakes in *Quel bon dimanche!* a shattering critique of Marxist totalitarianism in its Stalinist political expression and in its Hegelian philosophical account as he sees in the latter the theoretical correlate to the former. Imposing one's reason onto others', he adds, involves an act of violence that is formally equivalent to the nature of the crimes perpetrated by Nazism and Stalinism. Thus, as the passage quoted above reveals, the prototypical irrefutability of the narrator has to be dismantled since its univocal sense does not unveil general essence, but imposes instead a generality that fails to assert the diversity of the sensible. This epistemological stance shows a quasi-empiricist turn in Semprún.

Empirism states that reality is conformed by individuals and therefore the concepts of the general and the universal are nothing but subjective and "abstract" constructs that have nothing to do with the real essence of things. Marcuse explains why this philosophical outlook corresponds to a Capitalist mode of praxial intervention in *Reason and Revolution* (we shall return to this political issue later on this chapter). This empiricist turn becomes evident in *Quel bon dimanche!* when the narrator refuses to depict the young Russian inmates in KZ Buchenwald as if they were the Subjects of History, and refers to them as simple individuals:

Mais il aurait fallu abandonner les sermons de la Dialectique et tomber dans le vilain défaut de l'empirisme rationaliste et critique. *Horrible dictu!* Il aurait fallu considérer ces jeunes Russes simplement comme ce qu'ils étaient, des êtres humains, forcément mystérieux, mais accessibles à une communication, et non comme les porteurs génériques des nouveaux rapports de production et des nouvelles valeurs du socialisme. (102)

Second, the *I*-subject's ethical oneness is put into question as his very person is submitted to historical determination. Far from emerging as a pure and homogeneous *I*, free from sin and History, the 1980 *memorator* mercilessly examines his actions and relates them to Stalinist

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<sup>9</sup> The condensation of meaning in this sentence is worth noting. Phonological similarity between *fils* and *ils* causes semantic focalization on *fils*, which means both *strings* and *son, offspring*.

terror. This time his past is subjected to inquiry: a prehistory of the soul is found and guilt blossoms like flowers in spring. Concrete episodes of Stalinist condescendence are taken into consideration. He confesses he has refused to help comrades and friends that were being unjustly prosecuted by Stalinist officers, thus revealing his complicity and participation in Soviet terror. Admitting the blood in his hands, he loses the authority he had gained in *Le grand voyage*.

[J]e me souvenais de mes silences sécurisants d'autrefois et de ma surdité serve et volontaire aux cris de certains suppliciés qui avaient été mes camarades.

Il n'y avait plus de mémoire innocente, plus pour nous. (169-70)

The narrator's responsibility for previous crimes affects his ethical status in such a way that he finds himself no longer in position to assert that his previous Marxist perspective is either true or eligible for praxis. *Quel bon dimanche!* brings up long passages of Marx's *18th Brumaire*, especially those regarding the density of History. While consciously obliterated from *Le grand voyage*, Marx's nightmare on the brain of the living emerges here as a crucial conceptual core that gives theoretical support for the inviability of both praxis and truth. As if the grounding principle that supports revolutionary praxis – and narration – in 1963, namely that examination of reality does not constitute guiding criteria for action, drastically changed signs in *Quel bon dimanche!* and claimed that no praxis is possible since everything in reality is corrupt. Marx's work criticizes those theories of historical agency that regard History as the playground of heroes. He argues, contrary to these perspectives, that the subject has a historical determination that emerges from the same ground he allegedly stands against and therefore the possibility of action is limited.<sup>10</sup> *Le grand voyage's I* denies this thesis and suffers the consequences. The hero's fall appears in 1963 as an objective demand given the extreme conditions of narration. But in *Quel bon dimanche!* this thesis is accepted to such an extent that the hero's disarticulation is not carried out at the cost of the *I's* heroic hubris. On the contrary, it is deliberately sought by the narrator himself. The *I* undergoes trial and is condemned.

This ethical reconsideration of the *I*-subject is articulated with an aesthetic correlate in the novel. Whereas in 1963 the narrator has a hegemonic status and his digressions are either scant diversions *pour la galerie* or, as it is the case of the closing chapter, an ominous result of the violence that very hegemony implies, the *I* subject is here “dispersed” in various

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<sup>10</sup>“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” Marx, *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

phenomenical expressions. In addition to the ashamed *I*, the narration appears at times in the voice of a severe *you*, ordering his object to remember, and sometimes as *he* or *Gérard*. In accordance to what I am arguing, Neuhofer remarks that this diversity points out that the split between subject and object can not be overcome by Semprún's discursive praxis, and therefore the ontological principle for testimony in particular and autobiography in general – *Ego sum qui sum* – is consciously abandoned in 1980. In the words of Neuhofer, “sein früheres Ich erscheint ihm bisweilen so fremd, dass er meint, das Gedächtnis eines Toten zu bewohnen.”

- Le camp, dit Barizon. Tu t'en souviens vraiment comme d'une chose qui te serait vraiment arrivée ? Tu n'as pas l'impression, parfois, que t'as rêvé tout ça?  
Je le regarde.  
- Même pas, dit Gérard. J'ai l'impression que c'est un rêve, oui, mais je ne suis même pas sûr de l'avoir rêvé, moi. C'est peut-être quelqu'un d'autre.  
Je ne dis pas tout que je pense. Je ne dis pas que c'est quelqu'un d'autre pourrait être quelqu'un qui serait mort. [...] Peut-être est-ce vrai, en effet. Peut-être ne suis-je que le rêve qu'aurait fait, à Buchenwald, un jeune mort de vingt ans, qu'on appelait Gérard et qui est parti en fumée sur la colline de l'Ettersberg.(97)

While *Le grand voyage's I* insisted on distancing himself from the role of the survivor contending that such role would anchor him in a past from which it could not be possible to display any praxial intervention, the 1980 *I* abandons this attempt because he considers his past too dense to be left aside. Consequently, and because he still lingers in the same non-dialectical conception of immanence and transcendence, he withdraws from praxis and totality and places himself in death.

A narrator that fails even to assure his ontological oneness to the character of his story will never be able to retrieve ethical guidance from his experiences. As the passage above shows, Semprún decides to rip apart the narrative stability to an extent that would drive an old-fashioned structuralist insane because the levels of action and narration are tangled up and there is no definite number of either characters or narrators.

As a matter of fact, a change in the narrative pronoun usually entails a change in the narrative perspective. Pronominal change in *Le grand voyage* had a few occurrences and meant in every case a simple mask, but in 1980 the process gains different dimensions. When the first person narration shifts to third, the perspective of the story tends to change and the reader is never sure about who is actually speaking.

L'Espagnol a dû monter à l'*Arbeit*, sans se presser, peinard. Bien au chaud, pour passer l'appel. Un planqué, en somme.  
Ce n'est pas si simple, pourtant. Il faut réfléchir.  
« Il faut réfléchir, Fernand. », se dit-il à mi-voix. (81)

*L' Espagnol* is Semprún, and *Fernand* is Fernand Barizon, the main character's friend. He was also detained in Buchenwald for being a Communist. Like the conversation held with the boy from Semur in *Le grand voyage*, Semprún's dialogues with Fernand offer a realm of confidence and trust that enables the production of memory. In this way, *Quel bon dimanche!* includes as a motif of the fabula the moment of its origin: a fraternal conversation between Fernand and the narrator (who this time is not Gérard but wears two or three other *noms de guerre*) that takes place years after the liberation.

*Le grand voyage* also displays conversation as a crucial element for the development of the plot: the dialogue between Gérard and his friend from Semur constitutes a concrete mechanism of liaison that makes the plot progress. Semprún's conversations with Fernand play a similar role in 1980: their dialogues shape the proliferation of narrative cores giving the novel an air of homogeneity. However, while in 1963 Semprún's *I*-subject has hegemonic control over narration imposing his perspective onto the boy from Semur's, *Quel bon dimanche!* disintegrates any eventual attempt for monolithic perspective by means of a polyphonic volatilization. Fernand Barizon impersonates a typical French worker whose relation with the French Communist Party is moved by passionate drives, not by "rational" behavior.<sup>11</sup> Barizon is detained in France for terrorist activity and sent to KZ Buchenwald, where the clandestine Communist organization does not give him an administrative job like Semprún's, but sends him to work as what he really is: an industrial worker. Facing lethal peril from dawn to dusk, Semprún's friend boycotts German weapon production following orders of the French Communist Party in Buchenwald. When he regains freedom, he is set to work as a *chauffeur* for the Party's hierarchy. Twenty years after Buchenwald's liberation he drives Semprún, a Party high official, from France to Switzerland. They decide to stop for a meal and thus begin the conversation that is presented as the origin of *Quel bon dimanche!*

Barizon is granted a voice at the level of narration, something that implies, *ipso facto*, a concrete *Weltanschauung*, a perspective that insofar as it lies behind a proletarian concept of History is contrary to the one displayed by a Semprún who, in spite of all his well intended Marxism, still lingers on concrete bourgeois parameters, as we shall see in the second section of this chapter. The prominent characteristic for this juxtaposition of voices points to the fact that perspectives are not subject to any kind of hierarchy. While in *Le grand voyage* the boy

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<sup>11</sup> Semprún's bourgeois sensibility still remains untouched in *Quel bon dimanche!* In both this and his previous novel the narrator puts forward idealist parameters – such as the Schillerean pair *Form- Stofftrieb* – to distinguish his illustrated behavior from the simple, naturally good intentions of his proletarian comrades. This false stance is somehow reverted in *L'écriture ou la vie*.

from Semur – whose lack of proper name reinforces his inscription in the proletariat – is intellectually contained (given sense) by an omniscient bourgeois narrator, Fernand Barizon is given sufficient autonomy in *Quel bon dimanche!* to perform his perspective not merely regardless, but also to the detriment of Semprún's, as the passage quoted above shows.

Whereas the emergence of Barizon at the level of narration undermines the ideological unity of the work, the parodial reproduction of Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* in which the narrator takes up Eckermann's voice and recreates Goethe's solemn promenade through Buchewald's forest constitutes the greatest example for this polyphonic device in aesthetic terms because it undermines the univocity of the genres.<sup>12</sup> Goethe appears very often in *Quel bon dimanche!* and from three different perspectives. At times, the narrator includes a complete quotation from Eckermann's *Gesprächen*; at times, paraphrases of Leon Blum's *Nouvelles conversations de Goethe avec Eckermann*. Sometimes, the narrator speculates on Goethe's opinions on KZ Buchenwald had he lived enough to see the camp. The fragments revisit the traditional method for parodial *poiesis*: a subjective subversion of a genre's organic relation between content and form. They depict a peculiar subjectivity whose inner configuration proves itself *ad initio* inadequate for the objective configuration upon which it is projected to intervene. Goethe's humanism and Blum's innocent democratic perspective are opposed to the ominous density of the KZ so that their perspectives reveal their inadequacy *per se*. Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* is parodial not only because Moreau displays a stance that proves ridiculous before the cynical Parisian world, but also, and specially, because the narrator mocks him. However, the parodial effect that Goethe's inclusion has in *Quel bon dimanche!* differs from the bourgeois disillusionment novel because it doesn't depict heroic fall. Goethe's promenade through a birdless Buchenwald – no bird tolerates the odor that emanates from the camp's crematory – takes the form of a big sarcasm.<sup>13</sup> As Theodore Ziolkowski points out,

...ist nicht die ideologiekritische Tatsache, daß im Treffpunkt Buchenwald Goethe mit dem KZ konfrontiert wird, sondern die literaturwissenschaftliche Tatsache, daß in Semprún's Bericht zugleich drei deutlich erkennbare Topoi und Gattungen zusammenkommen, auf deren Erwartungen und Inversionen die Wirkung des Berichts

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<sup>12</sup> Eckermann's book, from 1836, recreates the conversations with Goethe during he worked as his secretary.

<sup>13</sup>I define *sarcasm* as a particular sort of quotation by means of which the actual enunciator mocks the enunciator that is historically responsible for the utterance. The dimensions of this "mockery" are concrete: by showing the utterance's inadequacy to reflect reality, the actual enunciator is not sustaining the opposite, but merely stating that the value of true of that utterance is ridiculous. That is the reason why ironi and sarcasm resist contraargumentation: they do not state any logical proposition, they just mark inadequacy.

zum großen Teil beruht: Goethe im KZ, Goethes Konfrontierung mit der Gegenwart und die Eckermanniade.<sup>14</sup>

The narrator never takes sides, for it would require subscribing to a particular course of action, and that, as he understands it, is far too difficult when ontology is beyond human intervention. And since the narrative main frame is placed on a Sunday, he had better relax and not take things too seriously.

### III. Totalitarianism and Totalitarian Reason

So far I have described *Quel bon dimanche!*'s conceptions of totality and narrator. Let us now turn our attention to the third aspect of this chaotic multiplicity: the refusal of reason as a legitimate means for authentic knowledge and praxis. As I have mentioned above, Semprún's 1980 epistemological turn is founded on the general rejection of totalizing theories. Given that he has always been a proponent of Hegelian Marxism, it is not strange that he now devotes ink to the undermining of dialectical sciences. Semprún's critique of Dialectics is twofold. In first place, and echoing Karl Popper's argument against dialectical methods, the narrator repeatedly accuses Dialectics of being "*l'art et la manière de toujours retomber sur ses pattes*" (155). According to this perspective, the dialectical method would offer the grounds for a macabre defense of whatever subjective will is at stake. Since the method can be used to support a specific proposition *and* its contrary, anything can be sustained, defended, or accused in the name of Marxism. This arrogance would enable Dialectics to even deny the object's right to exist in spite of the subject. By encompassing the world of phenomena to an intelligibility that grants being and nothingness to its own accord, the dialectical method would be able to defend any kind of atrocity in the name of whatever being or nothingness comes to the mind of the dialectician. The critique of Dialectics is present throughout *Quel bon dimanche!* in the form of theoretical especulations. But it also appears in a conversation between Semprún's character and a detained Jehovah-Witness. The dialogues between them stand out from the rest of the conversations in the novel since they constitute the only case of imposition. While poliphony is represented through a juxtaposition of different voices that do not strive for the cancelation of their differences, the case of Gérard, a Hegelian Communist, and the Jehovah-Witness depicts a unique case of interaction where intervention is achieved because Gérard changes his mind in the end. Paradoxically, the only case of change of perspective is the one that dismantles reason as a means of intervention.

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<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 134.

- En somme, lui dis-je, pour tout événement naturel ou historique il existe une citation appropriée de la Bible!
- Il hausse les épaules.
- Ça vous étonne? dit Jéhovah. Pourtant, vous devez savoir ce que c'est: il vous arrive exactement la même chose.
- Je le regarde, interloqué.
- Vous, les marxistes, dit Jéhovah. (355)<sup>15</sup>

Closely related to this, Dialectics would also neglect the individuality of the phenomena by inscribing every entity within a description of generality. This is the second critique against the method and, as we have seen, is consequently expressed in the narrator's shift towards empirism. The case of the Russian prisoners is enlightening in this matter. Party directives ordered to regard that dirty bunch of Russian robbers as particular impersonations of a prodigal class that would redeem the entire world. They concealed, by means of a dialectical method, what these people really were: poor dirty peasants. In this sense Dialectical violence upon individual legalities equals to concentrationary logic in *Quel bon dimanche!*, be it German KZ or Russian Gulag.

Alors, comme s'il fallait souligner cette conclusion optimiste de la philosophie de la praxis, la voix du *Rapportführer* éclate dans le haut-parleur, commandant le garde-à-vous qui marque la fin de l'appel : *Das Ganze, Stand!* C'est un mot hégélien, *das Ganze*, le Tout, la Totalité. Peut-être est-ce la voix de l'Esprit Absolu que se fait entendre dans le circuit des haut-parleurs du camp. La voix du Tout qui nous parle à nous tous, qui nous totalise dans la rigidité cadavérique du garde-à-vous, dans la fixité totalitaire du regard perdu dans le ciel pâle de décembre où flotte la fumée du crématoire. Garde-à-vous, la Totalité! Crie l'Esprit Absolu sur la place d'appel. (329)

Although this ideological turn does not directly imply sympathy for bourgeois politics, against which Semprún still displays a critical Marxian outlook, it is evident that the main accusation against theories of totality lies on the fact that they violate particular integrities in the name of an idealizing generality. As such, he argues, Marxism and Nazism do not differ that much because they submit the subject to the same violent categorization. The bitter inclusion of Goethe among the characters of the novel, as well as the devastating, though not so sensible critique of the Marxist concepts of History and Prehistory reveal that the narrator has become quite suspicious of the liberating powers of Rational Humanism.

He leaves totalizing deductions aside and commits himself to a "humanization" of his characters. While in *Le grand voyage* every character tended to embody a concrete typification (*Typisierung*) of categories – *the terrorist, the enemy, the patriot, the communist, the Nazi*, etc. – the 1980 text carries into effect an aesthetic deconstruction of categories.

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<sup>15</sup> Semprún's character Gérard also claims that "[l]a merde aussi, c'est dialectique" (226).



Characters are depicted as mere individuals, with fears, personal interests, and sexual drives. In the sense that these descriptions are rooted on a completely instable discourse that manages to blur any existing limit in the fabula, we find ourselves before a juxtaposition where philosophers, writers, and inmates are put together and equally treated. Thus, Marx, Goethe, Eckermann, Blom, Lenin, Fernand Barizon, and the narrator himself are presented with a domesticity that would undermine any monolithic depiction of heroism. And even though theory loses the non-rational sources from which it retrieves its authority (*argumenta ad auctoritatem, baculum, and hominem*), it is not granted sensitive foundations: *Quel bon dimanche!* achieves a rather carnivalesque narrative where everything goes (*tout est possible*) as long as nothing is changed – and no one, we will concede, is hurt. Because this concept of “humanization” lies behind a shallow definition of reason we could ask ourselves whether this novel can sustain a realist account of the matter it works with. I will try to give an answer to this question in the following section. Now is the time for descriptive accounts rather than speculative ones.

Given this state of affairs, it is not accidental that the certainty of reality, a topic exhaustively treated in 1963, find theoretical support in a very different way in 1980. This issue acquires an additional relevance in the novel as subjective authority is severely undermined. As we have seen in the second chapter of this thesis, *Le grand voyage* grounds the certainty of reality on a specific recognition of the unity of subject and object. The specific kind of recognition provokes terrorist praxis and frustrating contemplation. Thus, a peculiar subjective stance grants a sense of reality that offers the subject some kind of ethical confirmation, though reified and deactivated. Yet contradictory in its ontology, this relationship coherently articulates the whole subject-object question in *Le grand voyage* and expresses an *I*'s authority that is never brought into discussion.

In *Quel bon dimanche!* the narrative cores that take up the issue on the sense of reality appear at the beginning of the novel and in its middle. The two episodes narrate the same motif; inmate number 44.904 – Semprún's “PIN” in the concentrationary bureaucracy – is struck by the presence of a tree as he walks from one of the camp's outer facilities to its inner precinct, along the avenue of stoned eagles that the Nazis had built to guard Buchenwald. He is driven off the road and forced by the tree's primacy to admire its beauty.

Il ne se souvenait d'aucun autre arbre. Il n'y avait aucune nostalgie dans sa curiosité. Pas de souvenir enfantin, pour une fois, surgi dans un remous du sang. Il n'essayait pas de retrouver quelque chose d'inaccessible, une impression d'autre-fois. (...) Juste la beauté d'un arbre, dont le nom même, supposé, vraisemblable, n'avait aucune

importance. [...] L'arbre était là, à portée de la main. L'arbre était réel, on pouvait le toucher. (12)

The encounter with the tree takes place beyond time. It lasts, the narrator says, a fragment of second, but his character gets the feeling of eternity. Unlike the valley of the Mosel, whose superiority is unveiled by a subjective will of reaffirmation, the tree emerges in a complete disinterestedness. It offers a promise of happiness despite the subject's praxis. Eventually the contemplating Semprún is shaken out of his self-absorption by a young S.S. officer who holds his gun against the Spanish. In spite of the insurmountable chasm that is created between the Communist prisoner and the armed alienated Nazi, the tree offers them a common ground by insinuating the possibility of agreement and conciliation.

L'espace d'une seconde, il se surprenait à imaginer que le sous-officier aurait poir l'arbre les mêmes yeux que lui. Le regard du sous-officier avait faibli, envahi peut-être par tant de beauté. (...) Une possibilité confuse, peut-être même trouble, semblait surgir.  
Ils étaient là, l'un à côté de l'autre, ils auraient pu parler ensemble de cette beauté neigeuse. (14)

This feeling of conciliation distinctly differs from *Le grand voyage's* claim *the only good S.S. is a dead one*. However, it only takes place as the *I* sets himself aside and gives way to the primacy (*Vorrang*) of Nature. It is then interesting that the 1980 text begins exactly where its predecessor ends, in the stone-eagled avenue that leads to the inner precinct's door. Where *Le grand voyage* gives in every narrative device that has supported its projected program of autobiographical edification, *Quel bon dimanche!* emerges with a completely different project, where subjective withdrawal, far from being the consequence of reason's hubris, arises as the promising answer to de-reification.

To sum up, the analysis of *Quel bon dimanche!* has drawn attention to three related features. In the first place, the narrative structure shows an account of juxtaposed polyphonic entities that subvert the concept of totality and replace it with a never-ending productivity of genres, perspectives, episodes, characters, and narrators. This chaotic representation finds a corresponding correlate in the cancellation of the narrator as a God-like subject that rearranges phenomena to his own accord. The dissemination of the narrator is the second feature. The third and last feature has to do with the concept of reason and the critique of Dialectics. The new concept of reason is correlate to both the sort of narrator and the polyphonic structure of narration present in the novel. Since reason cannot give account of truth, it follows that the narration's *ethos* must either be sustained without any certainty of reality or its emergence simulated in an "experience" where reason does not play any role at

all. This latter case is *Quel bon dimanche!*'s. Narration puts forward a concrete setting of the primacy of Nature through which the certainty of reality is warranted, albeit fragmented and for a few seconds. From this perspective, one can say that the novel simulates two levels of narration. On the one hand, a fruitful productivity of forms generated by the subject. On the other, one minimal motif where the subject is exposed to the true anchor of reality by nature's primacy. Now there is nothing left but to turn back to these analyses and submit a critical approach to their conditions of possibility.

### c. Circus

*Im Kampf zwischen dir und  
der Welt sekundiere der Welt.*  
Kafka, Aphorismen

#### I. Immanence – Transcendence

The disarticulation of the *I* directly affects the parameters with which experience, and with it, testimonial discourse, assures its condition of being. Unlike *Le grand voyage*, where subjective authority and projected compactness enabled the, though deviated, possibility of a teleological message, this new attempt leaves this sort of ambition outside its scope. Experience, in its full Benjaminian sense, is considered lost.

A-t-on vraiment vécu quelque chose dont on n'arrive pas à faire le récit, à reconstruire significativement la vérité même minimale – en la rendant ainsi communicable? Vivre vraiment, n'est-ce pas transformer en conscience – c'est-à-dire en vécu mémorisé, en même temps susceptible de devenir projet – une expérience personnelle? Mais peut-on prendre en charge quelque expérience que ce soit sans en maîtriser plus ou moins le langage? (62)

This feeling of estrangement is not just a literary construct. It appears to be a defining element in traumatic survivals. Laub and Felman write on this respect that

[i]t is as though this process of witnessing is of an event [the Holocaust] that happened on another level, and was not part of the mainstream of the conscious life of a little boy. Rather, these memories are like discrete islands of precocious thinking and feel almost like the remembrances of another child, removed, yet connected to me in a complex way.<sup>16</sup>

The impossibility to pour into syntax the lived past (the *vécu*) immediately affects the property of truth of that past as if truth and communication were two aspects of the same event. This relation between the ontology of a thing and its subjective apprehension within a social project – that is, its communication – lies behind Benjamin's concepts of experience and history and the ideas of praxis and truth in Dialectical Marxism, as we have seen in the introduction of this thesis. Given the narrator's formation in Marxist philosophy, it is not strange that he poses such a question. We now know, however, that the answer to it in *Quel bon dimanche!* is negative in all its possible aspects. It is negative first and foremost because the narrator leaves the certainty of reality outside the scope of his *Is*. But also because there is

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<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 76.

no room in the novel for the emergence of authentic dialogue. Although *Quel bon dimanche!*'s five hundred pages are full of dialogical interaction between characters, simulated narrators, and genres, they all stand articulated in the manner of a static, transversal disposition that resists changes, absorption, cancellation, and superation. With the exception of totalitarian perspectives, which are fiercely rejected by the narrator, everyone is given the right to express his version of reality. Naturally, the condition of possibility for such a permission is that no version is more adequate than any other because truth is left outside the discussion. Given that Semprún believes that only totalitarian perspectives such as Stalinism, Hegelianism, and Nazism take up the issue of truth, he must kick them out of his simulated circus. As we have seen, the argument for this expulsion is strong and honorable. These perspectives violate, according to the narrator, the integrity of individuals.<sup>17</sup>

What are the conditions of being for this polyphonic circus? I have argued that at a static level of description *Quel bon dimanche!* operates on two different, yet interrelated, orders of simulated interaction that ground episodes upon two types of narration. On the one hand, an unspeakable event that arises in the form of a forced contemplation of natural beauty. The phenomenical emergence of the unspeakable causes the subject to submit his being to a completely passive contemplation in which his ego is virtually dissolved before the primacy of the Other. These "experiences", understood as in the German *Erlebniss*, are characterized by their univocity, clearness, unidirectionality, and truth.<sup>18</sup> They are thus confronted by the second order of subjective interaction in the novel, namely the polyphonic and carnivalesque stance which I have described above. It is precisely this resistance of the *Erlebniss* to being susceptible to praxial intellection and manipulation that triggers the chaotic productivity of forms, voices, genres, episodes, and perspectives in the novel, together with its spiral-like structure. The narrator, as well as all the other devices that compose the work's level of intentionality, is aware of the fact that these two domains derive from the fragmentation of an archaic totality, but cannot handle this process of fragmentation aesthetically and thus he must settle for a static representation of the fragmentation itself.

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<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Jack Sinnigen contends that Semprún's critique against totalitarianism puts forward totalitarian manners and wonders, therefore, whether the critique itself misses authority because it fails to refute totalitarianism with a non-totalitarian perspective. Although Sinnigen anchors his claim on his analysis of Semprun's *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez*, his words suit the problem of *Quel bon dimanche!*: "... estas partes del libro deforman el relato porque reproducen el discurso estaliniano que la totalidad del texto quiere denunciar... las acusaciones estalinistas no se basan en hechos, sino en asociaciones..." *op. cit.* pp. 52-3

<sup>18</sup> I remind the reader of these pages that while *Erfahrung* is epistemological and therefore tends to cover cognitive apprehension of the phenomena, *Erlebniss* is ontological and tends, at least among Romantic theorists, to describe cases where the subject is thrown before objective primacy.

In the second chapter of this thesis I tried to see why the autobiographical form is abandoned at the end of *Le grand voyage*. One of the analysis' main contentions was that this withdrawal expresses the *I*'s mistake in regarding immanence and transcendence as two completely autonomous realms. Complete obliteration of immanence was required for a praxis of transcendence, which was at the same time granted by an irrational, contradictory and senseless affirmation on the hero's ethical purity. The metaphoric category that shed light on the *I*'s intended terrorist praxis was the Tower of Babel, although the biblical episode was never mentioned in *Le grand voyage*. However, this metaphor does appear in *Quel bon dimanche!* It does so in such a way that enables the understanding of the difference between the two novels when it comes to their theories of praxis: "*La confusion des langues est l'une des premières expériences de l'exil. La nuit sans sommeil de l'exil est une nuit babélique.*" (105)

Marx's phrase *die schlafflosse Nacht des Exils*, written in the late 1840s to describe the itinerary he was caused to follow due to political hostility in Germany, serves here as a leitmotif for Semprún's own exile account.<sup>19</sup> The *I* narrates that he was 13 when the Spanish Civil War broke out. The Fascist rebels invaded his summer house in the Vasque country, forcing him to flee along with some relatives to France and Switzerland. In exile, Semprún bore witness to a contention of meaning whose result would have a determining effect over his fortune and his fellow exiles'. The ground for this contention was language: what was at stake was nothing less than the signifier that would name those Loyalist Spaniards in exile. "Loyalists", "Reds", "Republicans", "Rebels", and "Atheists" emerged as possible semantic citadels that were either conquered or imposed: they defined by means of their particular historical density the ethical typification of the groups they ended up subscribing. But no one imposed itself over the others thanks to immanent attributes. The Babelic night is such because the unity of sense has been lost for good and, in the fashion of liberal ideology, every significant alternative is as good as any other. In Semprún, this acquires a even more personal feature because his dispersion as a subject is historically connected to the Fascist rebellion against the Second Spanish Republic, a real political attempt of a classless society. The loss of a fatherland (*Patria*) that would have granted him both spiritual and linguistic sense determinations *qua* subject pushes him to a chaotic commerce of signifiers where sense is not a thing *apriori*, but must be retrieved through a senseless – in the sense of a purely formal –

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<sup>19</sup> The phrase is actually from Heine's 1844 *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*. "Wie sehnt ich mich oft nach der Süßigkeit / Des vaterländischen Pfühles, /Wenn ich auf harten Matratzen lag, /In der schlaflosen Nacht des Exiles!" (1844: Seventh poem). In *Quel bon dimanche!*, the phrase appears often.

freedom. Not only from a theoretical stand, but also from a concrete understanding of his personal development, Semprún articulates *Quel bon dimanche!* upon the same Babelic metaphor he uses in *Le grand voyage*. This time, however, he chooses the opposite alternative: once the irrevocable fall has taken place, and sense granted by true referentiality has been lost, subjects should accept difference as a defining property of historicity and use that which has been left to them, namely formal productivity, to soften sharp edges and make coexistence peaceful.

Thus, whereas in *Le grand voyage* the subjective stance failed in its attempt to reach transcendence due to a misconception of reality and a consequent unacceptable praxis, the subjective configuration in *Quel bon dimanche!* still believes in a dual concept of immanence and transcendence but, this time, it has chosen to decline any attempt of assault on Heaven and seclude itself in the productivity of forms whose ambition is not the anchoring of meaning but the easing of polyphony. For *Quel bon dimanche!*, this easing seems to be the ethical aspect of its aesthetics. The novel frames its plot on a Sunday because Sundays are passive and celebratory days, rather than active and laborious. Probably, if it had been placed on a week day, it would have been more difficult to represent a pacific interaction given that production, be it in a concentrationary camp or in a “normal” factory, is the arena from where struggle emerges. The phrase that heads this sections, Kafka’s aphorism “*Im Kampf zwischen dir und der Welt sekundiere der Welt*”, is at the very end of Semprún’s novel and refers to a situation where virtue doesn’t call for despotic manipulation of means, but a mere recognition of one’s limitations. Such a state of affairs grounds this chapter’s main hypothesis: *Quel bon dimanche!* presents itself as an alternative attempt that diametrically opposes its 1963 counterpart.

As *Le grand voyage*’s project does not turn out according to its intentions, the aesthetic exercise of polyphony in *Quel bon dimanche!* does not keep the narrator from a certain amount of anguish either. However, the phenomenical expression of this bitter substratum is far too small compared to *Le grand voyage*’s magnificent fall. Nevertheless, it is present both in the – simulated – emergence of the primacy of nature, which the character “experiences” as the only index of reality and referentiality, and the theoretical recognition of the dialectical relationship between truth and communication, as we have seen above. The first reminds the character that the real exists, and thus his productivity of forms cannot disregard it. “*Quel bon dimanche!*” is what Gérard says one stormy morning in winter when he heads to his office in Buchenwald’s administrative center. Fernand Barizon hears Gérard

and cannot believe what his friend is saying because, as Barizon says, the truth is that “[i]l neige toujours, c’est un dimanche de merde” (51).

The second is a speculative recognition that immanence and transcendence are two dialectical entities that derive from the same unity. When the narrator poses the rhetorical question of whether lived past is true insofar as it can be poured into syntax (see quotation above), he is contending that lived past is lived past as long as it can simultaneously serve as guideline for a project. Inasmuch as this apprehension of the past can only be carried out by the cognizant subject in the present, he is forced to recognize the past’s demand to be turned into future. In ethical terms, it is recognizing reification’s demand to be dereified. The praxis of experience must take the Babelic dispersion and unite it again.

Now that I have explained why the theoretical stance that bases *Quel bon dimanche!* derives from the same static concepts that ground *Le grand voyage* and does not achieve a rounded representation, we should turn our attention to two other questions. First, if terrorism is the political expression for the theoretical stance in 1963, which one is it in 1980? Second, is it still possible, as it is the case of *Le grand voyage*, to judge this novel realist?

## II. Social Democracy – Terrorism

The political correlate for *Quel bon dimanche!*’s polyphonic circus should express a concept of – political – praxis that derives from a parallel conception of the immanent and the transcendent. In its abstract form, terrorism derives from the idea that – some – subjects are qualitatively different from a corrupted world and qualitatively identical to an ethereal ideality. It follows from this not only that praxis is viable given the purity of the subject, but also that the only right praxis demands a total obliteration of the world, given its corruption. The foremost feature of the transcendent lies in its oneness; for the terrorist, praxis is a ladder to assault Heaven and bring it down to Earth so that the gap between appearance and essence, form and content, the *s* and the *S* be finally bridged. Conversely, the immanent is pure otherness. Totalization arises as a requisite for the triumph of terrorism inasmuch as it implies a destruction of the heterogeneous and an imposition of the homogenous. For the real terrorist – and since this stance is contradictory the only “real” terrorist we will ever be able to think of is Moses – imposing the homogenous does not mean the simple overcoming of a given regime over others because the homogenous is not immanent, but *das noch nicht Seiende*. It does not take Moses and his *groupe d’élite* thirty years to arrive in Israel. It is dying what takes them so long. Because although the inner precinct of their souls is pure and thus enables



praxis, they are tainted with murder and slavery. They are also part of the heterogeneous: their consequent ethics demands their own death.

*Quel bon dimanche!* puts forward a praxis, on the other hand, that is based on the irreparable aspect of the heterogeneous. That is, a praxis based on the belief that the question of the difference is not an ethical question but a given. I have gone even further than this and argued that the question on the multiplicity of perspectives is taken within the scope of ethics in *Quel bon dimanche!* because it is what enables the praxis of narration. Since it enables the narrator, who celebrates himself, chaos should be celebrated. But I admit that this is speculation. The polyphonic production of forms that take place in the novel under the emergence of different genres and different narrators is a correlate, a corresponding attitude to the phenomenical chaos it depicts. Whether the one derives from the other or *vice versa*, we do not know. Echoing the principle of the dialectics of being and consciousness, a Marxist stance would *in the last instance* stress the priority of materials and contend that a certain type of narrator corresponds to a certain type of material. The category of second nature and its subjective expression, deactivation, give account, however, of the double directionality of this correspondence and the complexity that this *last instance* encloses.

It is clear, nevertheless, that the political expression that celebrates heterogeneity and regards it as the condition of historicity is Social democracy. Unlike terrorism, the social democrat does not strive for totalization, but regards praxis as a means for preventing confrontation between different class perspectives. Believing that the existence of different conceptions is grounded on an irreparable loss, the loss of unity of sense, Social democracy arises as a formal strategy to soften struggle and minimize violence. It is formal because the devices it brings forth derive in the last instant from a formalist conception of praxis that allows any sort of speculation on content as long as such speculations are not totalitarian. That is, as long as they do not jeopardize the social democrat condition of being. *Quel bon dimanche!*'s metonymical displacements assure by means of formal mechanisms the coexistence of qualitatively different entities. A signifier is moved from one signifying chain to the other so that it covers both a proposition and its opposite in a way that both are equally treated. This attitude is reinforced by the narrator's neutrality and denial to impose one perspective onto others.

There are, however, several elements that undermine the Social democrat stance in the novel. We have seen above that the emergence of the primacy of nature works against the *I*'s *ethos*, signaling him that there is a realm of unity and truth in spite of his polyphonic productivity. We have also seen that the narrator is aware of the "poverty" of his stance when

it comes to the value of experience. I have not mentioned yet that *Quel bon dimanche!* is full of theoretical speculations and diatribes against European social democracies.

Sans doute, si Barizon avait eu l'occasion de connaître les réflexions que Léon Blum a notées à propos de l'égalité selon Platon, y trouverait-il à redire. D'abord, il faut toujours trouver à redire dans les réflexions d'un social-démocrate : c'est un vieux principe dont Barizon ne se départira pas aisément. (301)

Blum's interest for Plato's concept of equality is systematically refuted in *Quel bon dimanche!* by the remembering Semprún arguing that such concept is based on a conception of subject that stresses on private individuals rather than generic essence. The critique is, as anyone could see, Marxist and does not suit the socialdemocrat stance, nor does it suit the "humanization" to which the narrator submits his characters.

### III. Realism – Naturalism

The social democrat stance does not arise in *Quel bon dimanche!* without serious obstacles. Nor does the theoretical foundation upon which the stance bases its condition of being, the static concepts of immanence and transcendence. We could then argue that the 1980 novel depicts the falsehood of the ethics it brings forth in the same way that *Le grand voyage* represents the contradiction of terrorism through a concrete case. In that case, we could contend that *Quel bon dimanche!* also constitutes a work of realism in spite of its deactivated stance. The following lines will explain why *this is not the case*.

At the beginning of chapter two I distinguished between free and bound motifs. The reason why I took up a conceptual pair that would sound rather old-fashioned in the mind of any well read critic lied on the fact that the pair turned out to be crucial to one of the chapter's main contentions, namely that the fall of the hero, which at the same time reveals the failure of terrorism and the deactivated stance that pervades underneath any volatilizing subjective praxis, *is a constitutive part of the fabula*. By being articulated by bond motifs, the dissolution of the *I* becomes a relevant part of the story, thus showing how terrorism is sentenced to fail. It is a problem of necessity which lies behind the terrorist stand.

On the contrary, the problems that polyphony faces throughout *Quel bon dimanche!* do not derive from the development of its fabula. They are rather contingent emergences that do not mean much to the totality of the novel. And the truth is that, as I have argued at the beginning of this chapter, *Quel bon dimanche!* carries into practice a dissolutive effect when it comes to the distinction between free and bound motifs. Because it presents itself as a chain

of loose ends, because it refuses to “tipify” characters and thus settles itself for a “humanization” of them, any motif tends to be as good as any other. Unlike *Le grand voyage*, the 1980 text does not show development, no perspective is changed, no hero falls, no villain dies. It just presents reality as a natural and static chaos.

I argued in chapter two that *Le grand voyage* is a good example on how literature’s autonomy enables the rationalization of reality. This is another way of saying that it collects material from a non-aesthetic substratum and fictionalizes it by showing how the concrete case of a terrorist is doomed to fail. This rationalization shows terrorism’s potentialities by rearranging *what the case is* into *what the case should be*. The realism of narration lies on the fact that it displays a activated attitude towards materials and expands its potentialities.

But narration in *Quel bon dimanche!* abandons any kind of categorization. It does not organize data nor recognize social types in its characters. By disintegrating the category of the subject, the novel not only places itself in a diametrically different position to the one in 1963, but also abandons any sort of realism and thus becomes deactivated in all possible senses. In this way *Quel bon dimanche!* can be inscribed within a naturalism *à la* Zola. It is more descriptive than narrative. Whereas its ethical turn is far more acceptable than the terrorist stance in 1963 because it enables the emergence of innocent voices that otherwise would have been silenced, the depiction of reality – and of the praxis of narration – it brings forth is highly deactivated because it fails to reflect, aesthetically, that truth is a process of subjective action, not the withdrawal it proposes.

## Chapter Four: Praxis

### a. Introductory Remarks

The course of the analysis has so far demonstrated why literary praxis does not necessarily achieve a realist reflection of the object it explicitly sets out to unveil. Rather, the two novels examined in the previous chapters account for a totality that differs from the core they have intended, *qua* expressions of a subjectivity, to narrate. As the reader of these pages shall remember, *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!* display subjective attitudes of narration that are formally equal to reified mechanisms of cognition in other spheres of human praxis. The consequent objective configuration that is produced by this reified praxis does not seize the true dimensions of the object intended for intervention. This happens because both the object intended for depiction and the praxis of that depiction share the same perverted properties of oppression and death. In other words, and using the terminology defined in the introduction of this work, both novels are structured upon a deactivated stance that fails to grasp the essence of the Holocaust: an event that expresses in the highest degree the reified aspect of second nature, and thus includes in its ontology the very subjective stands both novels display to seize it. We have seen, both abstractly in the introduction and concretely in the two analyses offered so far, that deactivation as the hegemonic stance for subjective intervention in Capitalism displays two opposite, albeit corresponding, attitudes. On the one hand, reified praxis tends to volatilize surrounding objects in the name of a hypertrophied concept of freedom that neglects the historical responsibility the subject has in the constitution of reality. Because both subject and object derive from the same concrete, collective praxis, such refusal leads, as in the case of *Le grand voyage*'s hero, not only towards a complete ignorance of the subject's immanent structure, but also towards his eventual destruction given the organic bonds between the reality he intends to volatilize and his internal subjective constitution. The typical expression for this stance within the frame of revolutionary will was named terrorism and resulted in a vicious duplication of violence: the terrorist exerted the same kind of oppression he was a victim of. *Le grand voyage* depicts this subjective attitude to such an extreme that it accurately shows the contradictory ground upon which this concept of freedom is based. Its quantitative growth led to a qualitative change: total submission.

On the other hand, deactivation simultaneously develops a contemplative stance that, far from volatilizing reality so that it can encompass the subject's plan, calls for a complete

withdrawal from praxis and intervention and sets the subject to accept, and even celebrate, reality as a plural and heterogeneous domain of phenomenical emergence that is, *per definitionem*, opaque to the totalizing intervention of reason. Philosophical empirism constitutes the theoretical canonization for this stance. As we have already seen, the Humean contention that points to the unreality of the general and the universal leaves the totalizing aspect of human reason outside the scope of genuine intervention and is left with shallow concepts of sense and morality. This stance was called in chapter three “Socialdemocracy”. To understand the difference between these two stances, the metaphor of the Tower of Babel offers an enlightening example. While the terrorist stance believes that human historicity was suspended at the moment of the fall, and therefore its task is to negate the fall and resume the assault on Heaven, the empiricist perspective, which in the realm of politics is expressed by social democracy, understands the fall as the beginning of historicity. The carnivalesque, polyphonic juxtaposition in *Quel bon dimanche!* presents itself not only as an ethical response to the excesses perpetrated in *Le grand voyage*, but also as a model of coexistence where the hope for good intentions must bridge the gap that the inviability of dialogue has opened.<sup>1</sup>

We should remember that these stances are correlate expressions of the belief that immanence and transcendence are two definite, separate entities. While *Le grand voyage* tended towards an obliteration of immanence so as to arrest a so-called transcendental end – Communism as the negation of the Holocaust – *Quel bon dimanche!* conceived of transcendence as a realm, *if a realm at all*, outside the scope of possible intervention. I have given sufficient support to contend that this configuration is false, and that a dialectical concept of both terms regarding transcendence as a moment inscribed in immanence and *vice versa* is not only possible, but also necessary for the recovery of experience.

Inasmuch as the two novels display such configurations, they constitute false opposites. In this sense, each of them possesses an equivalent value because they disclose the same reified stance. However, as noted in chapter two, *Le grand voyage* manages to “put into perspective” its ethical configuration, so that it does not affect the totality of the narration. The autobiographical mechanism of narration, which expressed in the highest degree the terrorist type, is abandoned in the last section of the novel. Because this formal withdrawal is presented in such a way that it anchors its causes in the same terrorist excess, the novel manages to put into perspective the reified stance and thus acquire a sharp realist

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogue, therefore, is defined as a means of praxis in which two opposite perspectives interact so that a *tertium datur* can appear. It constitutes a way to build meaning after the Babelic fall, but taking advantage of the differences that this fall has enabled.

reflection. *Le grand voyage* is realist, in other words, because it depicts the fall of the terrorist stance as a consequence of its own excesses. It does not offer a solution to the problem it sets out to solve, but rather shows that one of the many possible solutions is false. *Quel bon dimanche!*, on the contrary, presents polyphonic diversity not as a concrete, subjective perspective, but as reality's essence. It presents a post-Babelic configuration of reality outside its concrete historical determinations, thus depicting it as if it was the very essence of mankind. In Marxist theory of literature, this would be a clear example of Naturalism. In this sense, then, the two previously examined novels do not uphold the same value, since the one achieves a realist reflection that the other misses.

The analysis that follows examines Semprún's third autobiographical novel on the Holocaust, his 1994 book *L'écriture ou la vie*, in the light of the tension described above. It gives account of the strategic attitude the *I* displays in order to grasp the same event its precedent configurations have accounted for. From this follows a detailed account of the categories of immanence and transcendence. Not only because they have played a substantial role in the author's previous books, but also, and especially, because they merge here as categories – masked by the paradigm of *Patria* – that deserve explicit consideration.

Two sections conform this final chapter. The first of them, *Conciliation*, gives a short account of the plot and puts forward a structural description of those elements that are considered crucial in the novel: hegemonic mechanisms of the syuzhet, conformation of the *I*-subject, description of the *I*-object. The section examines the literary mechanisms Semprún's autobiographical novel employs to counteract the grounding subjective chasm through which autobiography as a genre is defined. We shall remember that this chasm, which configures the subject both as subject of knowledge and object of perception, blows open the historicity of mankind. Alienation, as noted in the introduction, is a necessary condition for the emergence of man. However, the specific historical course that this objectivation has taken in market society has proven to be highly oppressive for the self attainment of the subject. The *Conciliation* section tries to analyze to which extent Semprún achieves a non-violent coexistence between he as present and subject and he as object and past. The second section, *Consolation*, analyses the ethical implications of these narrative mechanisms. Just like *Le grand voyage*, *L'écriture ou la vie* manages to put into perspective its hegemonic mechanisms of narration. The book's last part is, in fact, an attempt to fictionalize reality using the same ethical principles that were at stake in the constitution of the syuzhet. As such, it presents a sort of subjective interaction that heals past wounds.

The general hypothesis of this chapter is that *L'écriture ou la vie* locates itself in a *tertium datur* in relation to the two previous novels. Certainly, this does not mean that it assumes a neutral position between the alternatives of terrorist violence and social democratic conformism. Considering that these alternatives are expressions of the same deactivated stance that corresponds to second nature, an *aurea mediocritas* would linger on the same reified configurations. Actually, *L'écriture ou la vie* simulates a sort of praxis that understands the present as a dialectical stand between past and future, and regards the subject as an active agent in the becoming of reality only when the category of subject is treated in its collective aspect. In short, Semprún's 1994 novel recreates on paper non-reified, de-reifying reason.

## b. Conciliation

Death is the sanction of everything  
that the storyteller can tell.  
Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*.

So stelle ich mir die Liebe vor,  
Ich bin nicht mehr allein.  
Zarah Leander, *Hochzeitnacht in Paradies*

### I. Fraternity - Experience

*L'écriture ou la vie* was written between 1992 and 1994, right after the author's spell as Minister of Culture in Felipe González's Social-democrat government. Just like in *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!*, the conditions and circumstances of production of this novel are included – or fictionalized, at least – as relevant motifs within its narrative. The narrator states that the birth of his novel dates back to April 1987, month of the death of Primo Levi, when he was working on a different book. Emulating the autonomous emergence of a remembrance, the birth of the book took place unexpectedly and it involved the unconscious writing of its first episode. As an objective demand in spite of the subject's plan, *L'écriture ou la vie* emerged amid the production of another book, Semprún's *Netchaïev est de retour*, a third-person narrative that scarcely had anything to do with the author's own concentrationary experience. Realizing that the episode he had just put on paper could not be articulated within the novel's organicity, the author left the new lines aside.

Subrepticement, au détour d'une page de fiction que n'avait pas semblé tout d'abord exiger ma présence, j'apparaissais dans le récit romanesque, avec l'ombre dévastée de cette mémoire pour tout bagage.

J'envahissais le récit, même. [...]

Je mis ces pages de côté. Je m'expulsai du récit. Je repris l'ordre qui était prévu, l'articulation narrative dont j'avais précédemment établi la progression. Je revins à la troisième personne de l'universel : au « il » du dieu des romans et des mythologies. (238-9)<sup>2</sup>

Memory exerted an ominous power over the author's mind. Throughout *L'écriture ou la vie*, the narrator stresses his conscious decision to forget as the only way left to him to live on. He thus echoes his narrative *persona* in 1963, who claimed that the praxis of writing was only possible once Buchenwald's presence was lost in oblivion. He did not return to the lines he had written in 1987 until 1992, after a very curious dream. In the middle of the night, and

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<sup>2</sup> Semprún, Jorge. *L'écriture ou la vie*. Paris: Gallimard, 2002. In this and the following quotations, the number in parentheses is the number of page of this edition.



after having turned down an invitation from a German television channel to carry out an interview in Buchenwald, Semprún dreamed once again with the camp at night. The nocturnal apparition of the *KZ*, he avows, constituted a recurrent, ominous topic that inhabited his restless nights. The image of the crematory, and the bitter, glacial voice of the *Obersturmführer* ordering to stop the cremation so that the camp's facilities would not be easy targets for the Allied aviation, assaulted over and over again Semprún's tormented mind. But this time, in this particular night of 1992, the expected signifying chain *Krematorium ausmachen!*, index of a death that out of insistence had become a realm of safety and security, was replaced, displaced by the soft, melodious voice of Zarah Leander, a German singer that the German authorities in the camp used to play through Buchenwald's speaker system on Sundays. Sunday afternoons were, in fact, the only moment in the week when some rest and joy was granted to the prisoners, the days from when Semprún keeps his most authentic memories of love and fraternity. In Semprún's dream Zarah Leander sings *so stelle ich mir die Liebe vor / ich bin nicht mehr allein*, and Semprún sets himself to rewrite, once more, his stay at *KZ Buchenwald*.

Thus, *L'écriture ou la vie* presents itself as an attempt to rewrite past within favorable circumstances. In this sense, it approaches *Le grand voyage*, which placed its emergence under the condition of oblivion. But unlike the 1963 text, these circumstances are not a result of a conscious will – which expressed at the same time a corresponding attitude to the book's general terrorist stance –; they derive from a given state of affairs that though taking place in the subjective realm, cannot be inferred from the subject's projected will. These favorable circumstances emerge unconsciously and point to fraternity as the leading concept that can, and will, thread the discourse of the past. Zarah Leander appears in his dream and tells him that memory is no longer uncanny, that he can now turn back to Buchenwald because he is no longer alone. Let us see two episodes where the concept of fraternity is at stake in *L'écriture ou la vie*.

J'avais la petite fille dans mes bras et elle me regardait d'un œil attentif, plein de confiance. Les vers de Baudelaire avaient été pour Halbwachs une sorte de prière des agonisants. (...) Mais j'avais Cécilia dans les bras, je lui récitais Baudelaire et le souvenir s'estompait. Il se transformait, plutôt. La puanteur, l'injustice, l'horreur de la mort ancienne s'effaçaient, il restait la compassion, un sentiment augu, bouleversant, de fraternité. [...] Je tenais dans mes bras Cécilia Landman, ma radieuse petite quarteronne juive, dans le cœur de laquelle batait du sang de Czernowitz, ville natale de Paul Celan, et les souvenirs atroces semblaient s'apaiser. (286)

Fifty years after his imprisonment in Buchenwald, Semprún recites Baudelaire's *Le voyage* to a little girl, dearest to him, he is holding in his arms. She calms down and her eyes are filled

with joy. Semprún, as we read from these lines, reciprocally feels calm, hope, and joy. What is not explicit in the passage, and must therefore be stated here, is that by singing *Le voyage* to this little girl, expression of life, he recreates a moment of the experience of death. Semprún used to sing *Le voyage* to an agonizing Maurice Habwachs, Sorbonne professor and worldwide known theorist whose dysentery exerted on him a terrible humiliation amid the pestilence of the camp's barracks.<sup>3</sup>

Meaning is reverted: the elegy turns into a "lullaby". Past is dignified through communication, turned into counsel for the one who listens, and joy for the one who declares it. Dialogue and fraternity are the leading threads with which the narrator saves the honor of the past and turns it into experience. These two episodes fictionalize the book's conditions of production. Although they are included towards its end, they constitute the starting point for the narrative, since they display the significant elements that will conform its totality. For this, they also constitute the present analysis starting point.

## II. Syushet – Fabula

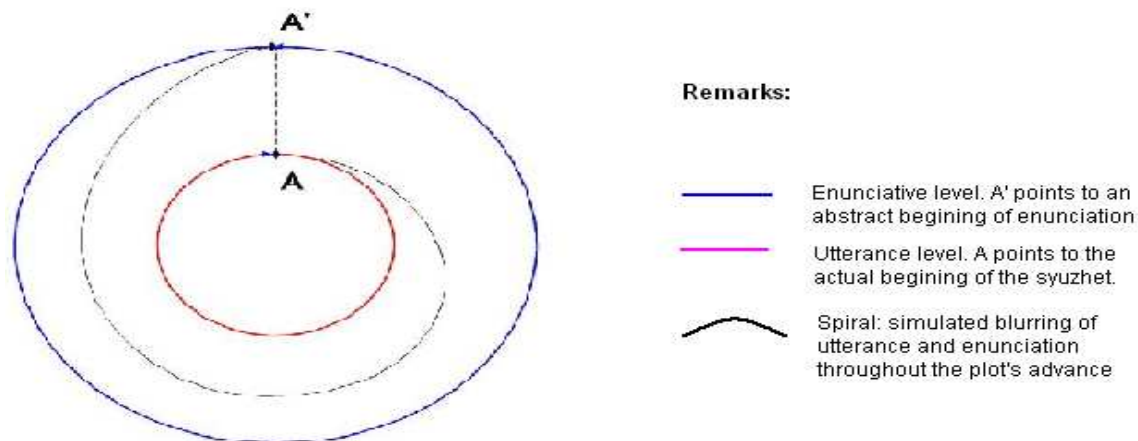
*L'écriture ou la vie* is divided into three parts. The first recounts Semprún's days of freedom after Buchenwald's liberation on the 11th of April, 1945. It narrates a fair number of episodes concerning the administration of the camp by Allied forces and the character's relationship with some of the officers, specially a German-American lieutenant with whom Semprún discusses philosophical and historical issues, and a French officer from whom the character retrieves an up-to-date account of the cultural life in post-war France. In addition, interspersed among these narrative cores there emerge remembrances that concern the character's youth in France; his studies in philosophy and his clandestine terrorist activities. The second part deals with Semprún's life right after his imprisonment, either during his return to Paris in May, 1945, or his holidays in Switzerland in the winter of 1947. The two chapters that conform this second part, which stresses the character's recovery of sexual life after months of forced abstinence, are articulated with theoretical speculations on the praxis of writing, the conformation of memory, and the will to forget. The third and last part of *L'écriture ou la vie* covers a much wider period of time. It recounts moments of the character's life from the early 60's, which for Semprún meant not only being expelled from the Spanish Communist Party

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Halbwachs (1877 – 1945) was a French theorist that died in Buchenwald at the time of Semprún's detention. He was especially concerned with the notion of collective memory.

but also the publication of his first book, *Le grand voyage*, and his return to Buchenwald in 1992, which implied the decision to write a new autobiographical novel, this one.

In this sense, this last part recounts Semprún's life as a writer, and its peculiar position in the totality of the novel exerts a concrete effect on its temporality. Though in meandering ways, the plot advances towards the moment of its own production, which is at times even fictionalized. By fictionalizing enunciation and thus turning it into a legitimate part of the utterance, Semprún achieves a circular structure in the plot that manages to connect both ends of *L'écriture ou la vie*. Partly based on the nature of the generic materials that are the basis of autobiography, the narrative progresses to the production of its own tale, which has to be fictionalized and therefore points simultaneously to the beginning of the plot, as it is the immediate product of such production. The novel's circular structure can be understood in the following diagram:



Given that its implications are remarkably complex and its ethical consequences play a significant role in the book's total value, I will turn back to this mechanism of circularity later in this chapter. One should keep in mind, though, that *L'écriture ou la vie* does not encompass the emergence of its narrative cores within a temporal frame, or a macro-episode, such as *Quel bon dimanche!* or *Le grand voyage*.<sup>4</sup>

The way the narrative cores are interconnected, though, resembles at first sight the *modus operandi* of *Quel bon dimanche!* and *Le grand voyage*. The novel consists of a number of cores that are interconnected by the displacement of a signifier that “enables” the emergence of the following core by retrieving autonomy and primacy (*Vorrang*) from the

<sup>4</sup> This feature has allowed Monika Neuhofer to contend that *L'écriture ou la vie* possesses a much more autobiographical configuration than its precedent novels, since its narrative articulation does not depend on fictional structures. Besides the fact that such a contention is not necessarily right, Neuhofer wisely adds that Semprún's 1994 book is much more observant of autobiographical rules also because the triple identity of character-narrator-author never verges on demise, as the two previous novels.

precedent one. Once a peculiar, unexpected signifier retrieves semantic condensation and becomes autonomous, it triggers the emergence of a new narrative core that seems to alter the narrator's plan. Once the new core is told, the signifier loses strength and the course of narration is recovered by the narrator's will. As the reader will note, this procedure is used in the two previous novels and points more to a concrete characteristic of the author's prose – Proustian traces in it have been thoroughly singled out by previous criticism – rather than to a peculiar feature of the novel in question. The best way to illustrate this main narrative device is Freud's case of the *fort-da* game, described in his 1932 work *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*.<sup>5</sup>

There is, though, a new element at the level of the *syuzhet* in *L'écriture ou la vie* that builds the novel's peculiarity in relation to the precedent novels. In prototypical cases, a text distinguishes between two logics. On the one hand, it displays an endorophoric system that gives cohesion to the level of its utterance. On the other hand, it exhibits exophoric indexes that point to elements that are outside the realm of the utterance, thus giving us information on the parameters of its enunciation. But *L'écriture ou la vie* manages to blur these two instances in a very peculiar way. The first part of the novel, which by means of plurality of episodes constitutes the most narrative section, articulates narrative units with a strong deictic, exophoric gesture. That is, the narrator simulates an *in situ* staging of the events he narrates, as if not merely both *Is* shared the same space- and time- parameters, but also, and most importantly, as if the reader was a witness in real time. The first scene of the novel, which narrates the character's encounter with three Allied officers the day Buchenwald was liberated, also serves as a narrative frame within which a series of speculations and remembrances emerge. Semprún, excited by the course of the events that have taken place during the day, is struck by the horrified look in the officers' eyes. He soon realizes that this horrifying look is a result of the horror the officers experience in his own eyes. The speculations and episodes that this narrative frame triggers – in itself extremely short: it lasts some minutes and involves a rather laconic commerce of words – are either simulated, consciously triggered passages, or simulated unconsciously triggered passages in which the narrator wonders about the meaning of the different looks available in his concentrationary experience. Looks of fraternity, of horror, of hatred, of interested love. The narrator uses for these passages either *passé simple* or

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<sup>5</sup> As explained in chapter two, the *fort-da* game is used by Ofelia Ferrán to illuminate *Le grand voyage*'s general ethical stand towards the autonomous emergence of memory, though the theorist does not say anything about the peculiar mode of the praxis of writing in this regard. The *fort-da* principle refers to a game that simulates a loss and retaking of control, letting an object go its way and then retrieving it. See Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

*plus que parfait*, both tenses that stress their endophoric value inasmuch as they do not refer to the moment of enunciation (unlike, for instance, *passé composé*). He stops suddenly.

Je ne vais pas raconter nos vies, je n'en ai pas le temps. Pas celui, du moins, d'entrer dans le détail, qui est le sel du récit. Car les trois officiers en uniforme britannique sont là, plantés devant moi, l'œil exorbité.(18)

Passages of the kind are numerous in the first part; they cease in the second and appear randomly in the third. As the reader of this work will learn, there are reasons to sustain a true, though vague, relationship between the appearance of exophoric reference and the quality of themes that each part deals with. One way or another, the foremost effect that these mechanisms of exoforic simulation exert on the totality of the narration points to a blurring of the limits of the levels of enunciation and utterance. Whether this occurs thanks to a fictionalization of enunciation or an actualization of the utterance is actually unimportant. Both phenomena take place in the novel: at times narration must obey the mandates of the narrated, sometimes the process is the opposite: narration “freezes” characters in action so as to comment on something it considers pertinent. Towards the end of the novel, this “blurring” device reappears after having ceased in the second part. Semprún recounts a dinner in 1964, when he received the Formentor prize for his recently published *Le grand voyage*. In the same manner as the encounter with Allied officers in the first chapter, this dinner serves as the trigger to tell of other meetings and official dinners. Among them, Semprún recalls an encounter with *La Pasionaria*, Spanish Communist leader Dolores Ibárruri, hero of the Second Republic and responsible for the worldwide known motto *¡No pasarán!* At the time when Semprún, a young leader among the reformist wing of the Spanish Communist Party, met *La Pasionaria*, she had become a conservative old woman, at the service of Moscow's interests. But the narrator does not delve in his critique of her.

Mais je ne vais pas faire attendre plus longtemps Carlos Barral.  
Il est debout près de ma table, depuis un temps indéfini, l'exemplaire espagnol de mon roman à la main. Un sourire sur les lèvres, figé. Je vais redonner vie, couleurs, mouvement à Carlos Barral. (281)

Thus, the dimensions of the question that this mechanism of narration pose have to do with the conflict between form and content, between narration and materials. Inasmuch as the plot advances towards the moment of its enunciation, thus minimizing the gap between utterance and enunciation, this formal device displays a corresponding attitude because it draws in a synchronic parameter both utterance and enunciation to the same level. What is at stake here is (the simulation of) a process that draws both *I* subject and *I* object to the same level – without

equating them – and also, and most importantly, calls for the configuration of a specific *you* within the limits of narration. Drawing both narrator and character to a same level of enunciation implies a reactualization of the past that demands, *ipso facto*, the presence of a *you*, at least a receptive one. Someone who sees and listens. The exophoric structure upon which narration is configured automatically triggers, and requires, the presence of someone to support it, to absorb its meaning. *L'écriture ou la vie*, unlike its predecessors, takes up the concept of the *other* as a formal feature, undermining the solipsism of private knowledge and private experience that pervades the previous novels. It seems to have taken Semprún nearly fifty years and several attempts to understand that collectivization, as a means of making experience communicable and thus making it experience *per se*, is not an abstract concept that must be included as a motif in the fabula – as it was indeed in *Le grand voyage* –, but also a constitutive formal device of narrative intervention.

### III. Dialogue and Alienation

I have so far showed the novel's circular structure, explaining that its plot progresses towards the origin of its enunciation. In a parallel way, it manages to blur the limit between utterance and enunciation by means of devices that simulate a *mise en scene*. Because this simulation enables the emergence of a *you*, the deictic structure through which enunciation is fictionalized in *L'écriture ou la vie* finds semantic reinforcement in the ubiquitous inclusion of dialogues. We have seen, though, that dialogues do appear and play crucial roles in both *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!*. In the former, a conversation between Gérard, the narrator's objective counterpart, and the boy from Semur articulates the emergence of narrative cores and thus constitutes the dynamic principle upon which the plot progresses. There are also conversations held with an SS soldier and two girls. These dialogues, however, far from enriching the character's point of view, confirm his terrorist stance – either by celebrating it or showing its failure. In fact, we have seen to what extent the conversation held with the boy from Semur constitutes a device to sustain the autobiographical discourse, rather than contribute to an authentic subjective interaction in which old ideas are left aside and new perspectives can be taken into account. In this sense, Semprún's 1963 book depicts a monologue, and, as it was explained in chapter two, the shift from a first to a third person narration is not altogether surprising.

In *Quel bon dimanche!*, the proliferation of voices also fails to contribute to any sort of progress in subjective perspectives. The emergence of different, and even contrary,

*Weltanschauungen* in Semprún's 1980 carnivalesque text is grounded upon a narrative structure which juxtaposes perspectives but never confronts them. This juxtaposition of voices matches the book's general stance, which calls for withdrawal from meaningful praxis. All along the novel, there are three important dialogues. Semprún takes part in two of them. The third one is held between Goethe and Eckermann, a conversation in which Eckermann's unconditional condescension towards his friend exhibits nothing but servility.

Semprún's conversation with Fernand Barizon, which takes place in the early sixties in a Swiss restaurant as the two friends, undercover for clandestine activities, decide to leave the ridiculous masquerade aside and talk about their detention in Buchenwald, stretches out throughout the novel and thus serves as a mechanism for the inclusion of narrative and descriptive cores. This conversation resembles the dialogue held by Moreau and Deslauriers at the end of Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale*. Nothing at all happens. The third and most controversial dialogue, the one between Semprún and a *Bibelforscher* detained in Buchenwald, is perhaps the only authentic interaction between two different perspectives in *Quel bon dimanche!* This Jehovah's Witness discusses religion and Dialectical Materialism with the young Semprún, still convinced of the promises of Totalitarian Marxism. Semprún's friend manages to persuade him that dialectics volatilizes the nature of the object because anything can be held in its name. Thus, this dialogue constitutes a fictionalization of the book's general stance, that cancels the power of reason and gives free rein to the proliferation of individual voices.

Subjective interaction in *L'écriture ou la vie* takes mainly the form of dialogues and it always involves two subjects who, although sharing a common horizon of sense, do not necessarily agree on the topic of their conversations. Semprún's character impersonates one of the parties of the dialogue, the most passive one, as he tends to hold an authentic receptive position rather than adopt a lecturing stance like the ones he had in *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!* (although in the latter this stance is relieved by parodial features).

The common horizon of sense in the constitution of dialogues points to fraternal love. The receptive stance that Semprún adopts is based on the conviction that the other party will not harm him but, on the contrary, will contain him morally and physically. However, the character's passive stand changes into an active one whenever his turn to give love and counsel comes. In the area of Buchenwald reserved to invalids and newly arrived prisoners, Maurice Halbwachs dies of dysentery. Semprún pays visits to him every Sunday, in a barrack governed by pestilence. The old, agonizing man, unable to speak, smiles at the young student that is holding his hand and talking about poetry, politics, and philosophy. Dialogue, in this

sense, reactualizes human bonds and gives hope to oppressed souls implying, as a *sine qua non* condition, *an accurate understanding of the other as a relevant criterion for intervention*. In other words, Semprún seems to have found in dialogical praxis another solution to the problem posed by his previous terrorist stance. The reader will remember that this stance was theoretically coined in chapter two, after Lukács' definition of Communist terrorism in 1919. According to his definition based on the conviction that immanence and transcendence constitute two discrete realms, understanding of reality "does not constitute in itself a criterion of correctness" in revolutionary praxis. Dialogical intervention, on the contrary, requires a correct examination of the other and an authentic commitment to him *in the present*.

Towards the end of the novel Semprún recalls being awarded the international Formentor prize for his *Le grand voyage*. As I have remarked, the episode of the award serves as a frame that contains and triggers theoretical speculations and other narrative cores. For instance, Semprún remembers the final phrase of one of Kafka's letters to Milena.

Es fällt mir ein, das ich mich an Ihr Gesicht eigentlich in keiner bestimmten Einzelheit erinnern kann... Nur wie Sie dann zwischen den Kaffeestauchen weggingen, Ihre Gestalt, Ihr Kleid, das sehe ich noch... (262)

The narrator is not impressed by the fact that Kafka has managed to build an obsessive, sick love out of a fleeting moment. That the Check writer anchors his feelings, his neurosis, and his desperate praxis in a silhouette rather than in a real, flesh and blood person with whom he had an actual encounter plays no crucial role for Semprún. After all, Kafka's psychopathological complex could explain his obsession. What really shocks him, is that this sort of deviated love is taken by criticism as pure love *per definitionem*.

Une longue cohorte de scolastes trasis ont accepté de prendre pour amour comptant cet exercice ou exorcisme littéraire, donnant en exemple sublime cette passion désincarnée, follement narcissique, brutalement indifférente à l'autre : au regard, au visage, au plaisir, à la vie même de l'autre... (276)

The ethical integrity of the *other* must be taken into account if we expect him or her to listen to us. Not only to believe our testimony of the horror, but also to understand and sympathize, to console our suffering. The numerous reflections on the possibility of testimony throughout the 1994 text understand verosimilitude as a legitimate aspect of truth, inasmuch as it asserts that the value of testimony lies in its communicability rather than in its readiness to historical verification. As we shall see in the second section of this chapter, adapting testimony to the listener's *ethos* does not imply a disregard of the object's statute. In *L'écriture ou la vie*,



testimony failure is regarded as the listener's inability to understand what he is being offered and, therefore, his refusal to morally and physically contain the bearer of testimony.

It is not strange, then, that another feature concomitant to the praxis of conversation points to the sharing of experience. Experience in *L'écriture ou la vie* is a collective event, not merely in the sense that its parties are social products, as in *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!*, but, and especially, in the sense that experience must be lived together with someone else in order to draw from it a sense of reality. Its phenomenical emergence must be experienced through shared perception. There are several elements supporting this concept of shared perception, which is batlanty at odds with the configuration present in *Le grand voyage*, in which the hero's "epic" development is granted at his complete solitude. Because it requires the presence of an *other*, the exoforic principle that was pointed at the beginning of this section is one of them. There is, besides, the narrator's belief that much of the oppressive aspect involved in the autonomous emergence of the past had to do with the fact that he conceived such emergences as his own individual problem.

In the winter of 1947, when Semprún stayed at his family's villa in Ascona, Switzerland, to recover from the torture of past memories, he decided to watch a German movie in the town's cinema. The movie itself, he tells us, failed to catch his attention. He could not focus, he just sat there and perceived, absent mindedly, the series of figures, shadows and lights on the screen. Just before the show, after the weather report, a short documentary on the recent discovery of German concentration camps had been broadcast.

...ces images de mon intimité me devenaient étrangères, en s'objectivant sur l'écran. Elles échappaient ainsi aux procédures de mémorisation et de censure qui m'étaient personnelles. Elles cessaient d'être mon bien et mon tourment : richesses mortifères de ma vie. Elles n'étaient plus, ou n'étaient enfin, que la réalité radicale, extériorisée, du Mal : son reflet glacial et néanmoins brûlant. (209-10)

Exteriorizing the past does not only releases the burden of a reifying experience, it also confers on it a concrete sense of reality: *je voyais confirmé leur réalité : je n'avais pas rêvé Buchenwald*. In this respect Georges Didi-Huberman has given accurate account of the inner tensions dwelling within the logic of an image. Examining a series of four snapshots taken by a resistant movement in Auschwitz during an exercise of mass annihilation, the French theorist singles out the ontological value of the image – and the praxis of taking the picture – as an authentic means to get to know the past.<sup>6</sup> As such, he claims, the image contains a double

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<sup>6</sup> Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Imágenes pese a todo*. The polemic on which this book is based dwells on the following two premises and their consequent question on the conclusion. Since a. the reality of the Holocaust is its totality, and b. none of what is visible can be adapted to totality, are pictorial products of the Holocaust a

regime. On the one hand, it triggers the fetish of reality, pretending a referentiality, an immediacy it obviously do not possess. Didi-Huberman calls the delusion of the image *the veil-image*. And yet, an image crystallizes a concrete process of human praxis, and as such it unveils the latter's communicative, collective *telos* in its particular form. (In this case, he analyses a series of photos that depict naked women being forced to the gates of a gas chamber). This realist aspect of the image bears the name, in the author's terminology, of *scrap-image*, thus referring to the fact that an image always contains a minimal part of its conditions of production, of its twofold rationality, both as an index of the object it depicts and as an attempt concerning its communication, its collectivization.

As Didi-Huberman points out, Semprún's tale of the cinema episode anchors him in the interstice between the image as a veil of reality and the image as an index of reality. Its regime of falsehood and authenticity not only confers both anguish and relief, but also demands from him an ethical stance *vis à vis* his past, now that it has ceased to linger exclusively on the realm of his privacy and has become, by a process of social praxis, a collective legacy.

La naturaleza ficticia de la imagen fílmica –la pantalla, la escala, el blanco y negro, la ausencia de sonido directo– se transforma en dimensión de realidad en el mismo momento en que lo que el superviviente puede revelar escapa a su propia subjetividad para convertirse, en una sala de cine, en el “bien” y el “tormento” comunes. Sólo con mirar esas imágenes (...), Semprún entraba de verdad en su obra de transmisión. La pura intimidad, muda o sin representar, “absoluta”, no hubiese transmitido nada a nadie.<sup>7</sup>

This process of exteriorization finds a correlate fictionalization in one of the conversations that Semprún holds with Lieutenant Rosenberg, a Jewish German exile who emigrated to the United States in the early thirties, on the eve of the Nazi persecution of Jewish people. Rosenberg, a young officer six years older than Semprún, is an authority in Buchenwald's new administration and becomes friends with the latter some days after the liberation of the camp. Semprún soon finds out that Walter Rosenberg is well read in German philosophy and interested in Heidegger's relationship with the Nazi regime. A day in April, the young lieutenant invites Semprún for a city tour in Weimar, with a long stop at Goethe's house. The visit to the house of the great German writer, disputed by Nazis and Communists,

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denial of its nature, and therefore a fetishist, negationist praxis or, on the contrary, legitimate, though fleeting and fragile, glimpses of its core? Didi-Huberman sides with the latter alternative.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.* 133.

offers a great example of the implications of this sharing of experience.<sup>8</sup> The first part of the tour takes place with the presence of the house caretaker, an old Nazi that is constantly barking at Semprún's back about the greatness of Hitler and Goethe. Rosenberg sees how uncomfortable the presence of this man is for Semprún: he seizes the man and locks him up in a wardrobe. The visit continues in peace, with Walter as a guide, pointing at Goethe's properties and sharing his knowledge with the relieved Semprún. Walter Rosenberg shows Semprún the city in whose neighboring woods he was detained for more than a year. Weimar constitutes for Semprún his own oppressive, ominous past, but by leaving things to Walter, the city inverts its sharp elements and becomes livable.

The tour Walter offers to Semprún should also be regarded as a correlate, in the domain of the fabula, to the deictic, exoforic structure that sustains it. It constitutes a narrative episode in which the recovery of the past is done with the help of another: it depicts a promenade with a high deictic value – Rosenfeld *shows* Semprún around – and in a way that the integrity of the other is regarded as crucial. Should this reading of the episode be accepted, then it follows that both form and content interact harmonically in *L'écriture ou la vie*, as the narrator manages to recreate his memories in the fashion of a *promenade* through his own life. Now that Semprún has found a legitimate means of narration and an authentic configuration of the other, the question remaining, for him and for us readers, points to the factuality of the message. What should Semprún communicate in his simulated dialogue?

#### IV. Death / Life

En suma, no poseo para expresar mi vida, más que mi muerte.  
César Vallejo

Survivors, *memorator* Semprún states, are permeated by death: they emerge from it. Death articulates their ontology as salary defines the working class generic essence. Far from being an abstract metaphysical speculation, this statement is based upon a concrete interaction: survivors are permeated, *crossed through*, by the crematory's smoke: the most adequate sign to describe death's presence in KZ Buchenwald everyday life. The crematory smoke, dust, steam, and smell of burnt flesh, constitutes death's material aspect. It constitutes the only available air the survivors can breathe if they are to survive. It is not strange then, that smoke has become a persistent symbol of concentrationary death in much of the literature on the

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<sup>8</sup> Goethe's work was an active arena for political confrontation during the thirties in Germany. As Miguel Veeda explains, it was equally appropriated by Fascists, Social-democrats and Marxists. See Veeda's "Goethe: el falsificado por el fascismo y el auténtico. La presencia de Goethe en los escritos de Lukács del período berlinés." in his *La sugestión de lo concreto. Estudios sobre teoría literaria marxista*.

Holocaust, as if it could describe the density of an event with which it possess a handful of semantic relations.<sup>9</sup> To begin with, it establishes an organic relation: smoke has a corporeal nature: it is light and nauseous ash, part of the bodies of the dead. The second implication is artificial, imposed: it points to the survivors' horror of being exposed to breathing it, of being forced to inhale it as a condition for their lives. Thus, the smoke of the crematory locates the survivor in an interstice between the normalization of genocide, as it achieves the status of the *quotidian*, and the necessity of death, as it provides the life for the ones whose lives have been spared. But its double regime is not reduced only to this pair: the crematory smoke also operates as both an index of death as much as a veil to it. Not only does it emerge as its concrete trace, but also as the result of its attempted obliteration.

Thus its semantic instability, its dangerous grounds. As an event that defines the category of the survivor inasmuch as it creates a general, collective, and fraternal stance towards it, death can eventually provide a project of life, based on the love that survivors professed for each other.

– Et puis, de cette expérience du Mal, l'essentiel est qu'ell aura été vécue comme expérience de la mort... Je dis bien « expérience »... (...) Et pourtant, nous aurons vécu l'expérience de la mort comme une expérience collective, fraternelle de surcroît, fondant notre être-ensemble... Comme un *Mit-sein-zum-Tode*... (99-100)

However, as it involves an event that is, *per definitionem*, the negation of all events, death emerges as the extreme ground for a dialectical definition of the category of the survivor, especially whenever such definition has to take into account the communicability of experience.<sup>10</sup> Death, as Semprún writes, poses a twofold obstacle. First, death is an event *in extremis*. Except for Ulisses – and his copycat Aeneas – no one ever returned from Persephone's arms. Second, given that death is defined as an organic event that affects the subject in his individuality, it keeps the living outside the scope of its experience. No one lives someone else's death. This double problem, Semprún explains, is expressed in Wittgenstein's phrase *Der Tod ist kein Ereignis des Lebens. Der Tod erlebt man nicht*, which has allegedly obsessed Semprún for decades. But *L'écriture ou la vie* displays categories of speculative thought and praxial intervention that manage to unmask the phrase's mistake. Only death taken as a private act cannot be accounted for experience. Taken in its collective aspect, the communication of death as a meaningful act can emerge. The survivor borrows his generic

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<sup>9</sup> Think of Celan, Levi, Wajcman, etc.

<sup>10</sup> The working class finds its generic essence in salary, which is the market expression of the plus-value extortion to which the class is submitted and through which the class is defined *qua* class. But salary, even though it encloses violence, does not cancel life.

essence from the experience of death. Both acts, experience and death, do not belong exclusively to him. He experiences others' death together with others. Because of this simple and at first sight superficial fact, the ontology of the survivor is collective. His praxis is bound to others: without them, he is nothing.

Dialogue, tolerance, and love emerge from a perverted administration of death based on irrational parameters. The experience of the camp can be reverted, appropriated, and used for rational ends without fully rejecting it. The event of the Holocaust is the concrete historical form in which the generic essence of these men is expressed: from it they have managed to develop, thanks to a rational effort, a common ground for existence and hope. Since the event is the source of their knowledge – understood in its full sense: ethical knowledge – the camp cannot be silenced. Lenin said that we can only convince ourselves of a certain truth after having lived that truth through our own particular experience.<sup>11</sup> Condemning the Holocaust to silence, attempting a complete obliteration of it would mean a cruel violence on the survivor because his truth *is* his experience. When compared to Semprún's two other novels, this is the book's main theoretical discovery. A truth that already was available in Dialectical Marxism but Semprún gave neither theoretical account of it nor narrative shape to it.

Semprún's declamation of Baudelaire's poem to his dear little girl should be understood in this sense. He has borrowed that song from a context of death, dysentery, pestilence and atrocities. But he managed to intervene on this product so that it could serve as a project for life rather than an elegy to the dead. His experience of the dead has served the interests of life. This relationship results from a conscious project and a concrete praxis that rearranges the ethical configuration of the past, but it could have never been possible had this past lacked of any positive feature.

This hypothesis is as ambitious as it is crucial to the present work. It contends that the Holocaust already contains a path towards overcoming its horrors, leading to dialectic means to overcome it. A Proudhonian-like reading of the Holocaust would single out good and bad properties, keeping the former and rejecting the latter. Monika Neuhofer carries out this sort of reading in Semprún, especially in her analysis of *Le grand voyage*, as we have seen in the second chapter of this work. She claims that there are several semantic sources in his novels that act independently. In a parallel way, as already commented, Goethe was submitted to a similar scrutiny by both Social-democrats and Fascists in the thirties. Both groups singled out the same features, but took sides with different semantic constellations, leaving conclusions to

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<sup>11</sup> In Lukács, *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (1958).

a mere question of preference.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, a dialectical understanding of the Holocaust exhibits both immanence and transcendence as two different moments of the same core, and shows to which extent Semprún's ethical project of a real, democratic, and socialist society cannot be sufficiently explained without pointing to the perverted realm from which it emerged. Ofelia Ferrán, who spends a large amount of lines speculating on the implications that Semprún's lack of *Patria* – he is neither French nor Spanish – may have on his prose, disregards the author's own words in this respect:

...la vérité de cet événement ancien, originaire, où flotterait l'odeur étrange sur la colline de l'Ettersberg, patrie étrangère où je reviens toujours. (16)

KZ Buchenwald is Semprún's homeland inasmuch as he is determined *qua* survivor by its experience and has managed to make a life project out of his past. To contend the opposite, to support either a Socialdemocratic stance proposing coexistence of qualitatively different elements or a terrorist perspective that obliterates everything leaning on the fact that life is contaminated would have two terrible consequences. On the one hand, it would make praxis unviable. For reasons that we have explained in chapters two and three, it would display a deactivated stance towards the becoming of reality. On the second hand, it would lead to a complete misunderstanding of the survivor and to a cruel disrespect of his moral integrity, because it would imply believing either that he is schizophrenic – like Social-democrats tend to do – or that he is not worthy at all – like terrorists normally do.<sup>13</sup>

*L'écriture ou la vie* achieves a dialectical configuration of immanence and transcendence by a double mechanism of narrative intervention on Buchenwald. On the one hand, it activates positive elements of a reified and reifying experience without denying their ominous origin. On the other hand, it totally reverts Buchenwald and converts it into a place for dialogue and understanding. The last chapter of the novel depicts the character's return to Buchenwald in the company of two grandsons. This trip fills him with relief and joy.

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<sup>12</sup> Vedda, *op. cit.* A Proudhonian-like reading of Semprún would single out different semantic threads without understanding them as interdefining. As Vedda explains, this kind of reading was present in the Social-democrat attempt to politically appropriate Goethe.

<sup>13</sup> One still should wonder whether Buchenwald's case constitutes a prototypical expression of the Holocaust. There are, as we have seen, several features that would prove that wrong. Semprún is well aware of them, and criticism has not ceased to remind us that Buchenwald was principally a detention and productive facility for political prisoners. Life in KZ Buchenwald was much more bearable than in Auschwitz because prisoners knew why they were there. To some extent, their detention and probable death were listed among the rules of engagement they had accepted when they initiated Antifascist activities. This is not the place to deepen on this issue, but the reader of this work should remember that were Buchenwald's case accepted as a vital expression of the Holocaust, Adorno's account of the impossibility of writing after Auschwitz would lose its poignancy. One might claim that his stance not merely obliterates the survivor who has managed to escape the deadliest machinery ever imagined, but is also based on a non-dialectical conception of reality, despite all his alledged Marxism.

## b. Consolation

Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns:  
And till my ghastly tale is told  
This heart within me burns.  
Coleridge. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

### I. Counsel

Walter Benjamin's sixth thesis on the philosophy of History asserts that

[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical Materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of tradition and its receivers. (...) Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

For Benjamin, the historical articulation of past events encloses a sort of activity that goes beyond a fact asking to be "objectively" described. The praxis of history should first of all point, for the German philosopher, to the subjects that surround, and shape, that given event. It should call for a rational rearrangement of the past so that it serves ethical ends to both past generations and generations to come. By appointing a redemptive agenda to history, Benjamin is certainly subscribing the general Marxist statement on historicism as an active arena in class struggle. This claim, as the reader should by now understand, does not constitute any declaration of will or thoughtful proposal. It rather contends that History is nothing in itself but a process of becoming. And this process of becoming, as explicitly accounted in Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* or in Lukács' *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* is carried into effect by the dialectics of class struggle. Outside the scope of this dialectics, any historicist attempt becomes not merely untrue, but also serves a given state of class domination.

It would be pointless to state, at this advanced stage, that such articulation does not constitute a capricious manipulation of truth. We have seen that Dialectical Marxism understands truth as a subject-object relation by means of which a specific subjective praxis is put forward to fulfill the object's potentialities. In Michelangelo's terms –the same as Marx's – the truth of a stone is its becoming into its potential as a sculpture by means of authentic human praxis.<sup>14</sup> The truth of a stone is its rationalization. A thoughtless volatilization of reality

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<sup>14</sup> In his *Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx gave a generical definition of labor that places it in the realm of aesthetics: "Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is

is based, on the contrary, on a stance that neglects the object's organic relation with the subject and proposes a deactivated perspective on either the former or the latter. I insist, these are the cases of *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!*

Specific concepts of experience and artistic praxis can be deduced from Benjamin's idea. When it comes to the former, we should once and for all understand that experience is in itself a human praxis that collects events in terms of collective property; as such, it involves collective determinations and ethics. A rationality able to operate on the past, however deactivated the past is, so that it could ethically emerge in the present as a vital project for the future will not only achieve de-reification, but also redeem the dead. If the tradition of dead generations weights like a nightmare on the brain of the living, authentic experience could turn pain into joy and make the dead become vital companions. In order to succeed, this rationality must be convinced – in the Leninist concept of conviction – that while it is true that every monument of culture is at the same time a monument of barbarism, as Benjamin's seventh thesis points out, the contrary also holds. The perverted machinery of the Holocaust produced both reified and reifying entities. But at the same time, and as a necessary consequence, it produced the path towards its own destruction: Semprún's category of fraternal love based on the collective appropriation of death, his Heideggerean-like phrase *Mit-sein-zum-Tode*.

Finding a rational core makes Semprún past communicable. It reinserts him in a community of men and makes his past, his essence, eligible for counsel. This is why dialogue is so important for him and for *L'écriture ou la vie*: it becomes an adequate arena where past, present and future converge to serve the interests of both the recipient *and* the receiver of experience. In the last chapter of the book, Semprún returns to Weimar and the remains of KZ Buchenwald together with his two grandsons. In the evening, he takes a walk around the city center with the two boys and feels the presence of the American lieutenant that almost fifty years earlier had invited him for a stroll in Weimar. In *Le grand voyage* Semprún strove to present himself as a person in spite of his concentrationary experience because he believed that adopting the stand of a survivor would imply a fetishist view. In *Quel bon dimanche!*, he simulated the disappearance of the index of truth and life, thus locating his narrative voice in the death. He was the voice of a dead prisoner. This diametrically different perspective, as we have seen, caused a fetish. However, in *L'écriture ou la vie* he has achieved a human configuration *qua* survivor because he has managed to seize hold of his past in Buchenwald and make it valuable for the future.

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capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence, man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty.”



His return to Weimar, his expropriation of his past is not a recognition of Weimar *in the way it was*. As he already knows, reality needs invention to become *verosimile*, and literature offers a realm of praxis where invention is not only possible – in testimonial discourses, it would be regarded as lying –, but also expected. In a life governed by closed facts and fetichized events, literature offers cognitive tools to operate on reality so that it becomes experience. In other words, so that it becomes true. Semprún’s level of invention – of “lying” – is manifold, as we have seen. It stretches from a deliberated will to undermine the traditional conception of chronology to a simulated blurring of the limits between enunciation and utterance. He even relocates characters that have, in the verifiable aspect of reality, never been where he claims to have seen them. According to documents, Maurice Halbwachs, for instance, did not die in Semprún’s arms. But his object is not nullified: the *I* retrieves the essential core of his experience and expands it so that it can *convince*. Because his experience can only be fulfilled if it is retrieved by others and included among their ethical baggage. In order to do that, the experienced core has to be recreated in terms of the other’s horizon of understanding. It has to be shown as if it had been lived through their own experience. This is why Semprún decides not to recite the last stanza of Baudelaire’s poem to the little girl that weeps on his lap. The poem is chosen because it plays a dense role in Semprún’s experience. He recited it while he held the hand of an agonizing Halbwachs. In this sense, the poem carries the experience of love and death. But he avoids the last stanza because rather than sing an elegy, he has to bring calm to his beloved child. By doing this, the character does justice to Halbwachs, gives counsel to a crying child and adopts a meaningful social role. His stay in Buchenwald no longer means for him the source of an opaque torture: it has now began to emerge, thanks to a conscious and exhaustive praxis, as a domain where authentic praxis is possible.

## II. The Triumph of Realism

In chapters two and three I have examined Semprún’s 1963 and 1980 texts from a realist perspective. By defining realism as a praxis of authentic intervention rather than static reflection – which would be the case of a naturalist stance in art –, I gave sufficient arguments to support the idea that *Le grand voyage* could be regarded as a traditional example of Realism because it took a specific subjective stance, which I call *terrorism*, to its limits. Although the book itself failed to offer a possible solution to the treatment of reification in experience, it nevertheless achieved two related goals thanks to its sharp Realism. On the one hand, by

developing the terrorist stance to its limits, it showed how such stance is interwoven with its opposite. Thoughtless intervention on reality resulted in total submission to reality. I have tried to persuade the reader that this pair of false opposites stands very deeply in the structure of bourgeois thought and finds its theoretical canonization in the works of Kant. Freedom is rooted on necessity as much as the later is based on the former. *Le grand voyage*'s, thus, consisted in showing, through a concrete and particular case, that the terrorist stance is doomed to fail. On the other hand, but deeply connected to what I have just said, the 1963 text managed to show that this stance did not constitute the essence of the world, but was rather a subjective perspective among others. Because the stance failed in its very dialectic confrontation with the object, the novel accurately reflected the dialectics of essence and appearance, leaving space for an eventual, although unnamed, proper solution.

Different was the case of *Quel bon dimanche!*, which depicted a naturalist conception of reality insofar as the multiplicity it displayed was not put into perspective. This plurality of juxtaposed voices was not conceived as a way to dialectically approach essence. Praxis, as I have tried to demonstrate in chapter three, is outside the scope of the book, which settled for a carnivalesque coexistence claiming that any other option would have meant a violent oppression on the integrity of the others. In other words, *Quel bon dimanche!* describes a given state of affairs, neglects its historicity and generalizes it in such a way that it becomes a fetish. In the terms of a mature Lukács, the difference between this novel and the 1963 one would lie on the fact that the latter would be an expression of *Critical Realism*, while the former would, in the best of cases, consist of an avant-garde-like *Naturalism*.<sup>15</sup>

*L'écriture ou la vie* shares with *Le grand voyage* a parallel configuration because it puts into perspective the theoretical stance it proposes. At the end of the novel, when the return to Weimar is narrated, the depiction of the camp is carried into effect with the same mechanisms of subjective intervention that the novel has proposed not only in theoretical parameters, but also as the defining form for the syuzhet and the selective criteria for motifs in the fabula. In this sense, the last chapter serves in 1994 as the ground where the narrator validates his previous apparatus. Insofar as its subject matter – Buchenwald – is the subject matter *per definitionem*, *L'écriture ou la vie* resembles *Le grand voyage* in the sense that the

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<sup>15</sup> Lukács did read *Le grand voyage* and had a concrete opinion on it. In an interview held in Budapest in 1966, five years before his death, he says to Hans Heinz Holz: “Wenn Sie, sagen wir, *Die grosse Reise* von Semprun nehmen, so ist das rein ein innerer Monolog und meiner Ansicht nach eines des wichtigsten Produkte des sozialistischen Realismus...” It is interesting that according to Lukács' own definition of socialist and critical realisms, Semprún's *Le grand voyage* would never be regarded as a product of Socialist Realism, simply because, as I have explained in chapter two, the solution it displays is a product of false consciousness. A very clear discussion on the differences between Realism and Naturalism, and Critical and Socialist Realisms can be read in Lukács's *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus*.

whole novel can be seen as the preparation for the return, for the aesthetic representation of the camp.

However, whereas the last section of the 1963 text unmasked the reifying mechanisms of narration that the novel had put forward throughout its first section, and thus it served both as an index of failure and as an index of realism, *L'écriture ou la vie*'s final chapter achieves a representation of the camp in the terms it has proposed throughout. We have already seen that this return is carried out with the company of Semprún's grandsons, and that it is shown as a shared experience where Semprún puts himself in the position of an experienced man able to give counsel. The deictic component of this *tour*, I have pointed out, works as a correlate in content for the deictic simulation that is present in the *syuzhet*. The *I* object shows his past to his grandsons in the same way that his narrator has shown his readers the narrated material by means of a simulated blurring of the opposite pair enunciation–utterance. The return also enables a redemptive praxis on the past insofar as it permits the ghostly appearance of Rosenfeld in Weimar almost fifty years after having helped Semprún in Goethe's house.

But most importantly, the narrator tells us in this last chapter about a curious discovery. In 1992 in Buchenwald, right before he – allegedly – begins to write *L'écriture ou la vie*, Semprún discovered that his administrative file in KZ Buchenwald contained a lie. The night of his arrival at the concentration camp, he sat before a German prisoner that worked for the camp's administration. When asked about his profession, the young and arrogant Semprún answered that he was a philosophy student. The bureaucrat looked at him and commented that that was no profession, *kein Beruf*. He tried to explain to the young man he had in front of him that in Buchenwald, if he wanted to have the slightest chance to survive, he was better off as a manual worker. Semprún replied that philosophy student was not a profession but a vocation, *eine Berufung*. The episode, the reader shall remember, was included in *Le grand voyage* and constituted an example of the character's "superiority", of his ability to control, albeit linguistically, the ominous context he was forced into by displaying a *jeu de paroles*. What he didn't know by then and realized now, is that the old German prisoner, a member of the Communist party, did not pay attention at the boy's stupidity and wrote a different profession on Semprún's file.

Je tenais ma fiche à la main, un demi-siècle plus tard, je temblais. Ils s'étaient tous rapprochés de moi, les Merseburger, Thomas et Mathieu Landman, Ils regardaient, sidérés par la chute imprévue de mon histoire, ce mot absurde et magique, *Stukkateur*, qui m'avait peut-être sauvé la vie. Je me souvenais du regard d'au-delà de la mort du communiste allemand essayant d'expliquer pourquoi il valait mieux être travailleur

qualifié à Buchenwald. Ma fiche est passée de main en main, tout le monde s'exclamait. (309)

By stating that Semprún was a plasterer, the bureaucrat helped him avoid Buchenwald's first selection mechanisms: those which would have sent him to monstrous labor facilities in the outskirts of the camp. As Semprún knew in 1992, had he been appointed to those areas, his possibilities of survival would have been slim.

Thus, in the same fashion as *Le grand voyage*, the last chapter reverts the subjective stance displayed throughout the book so that Semprún – who has so far exerted an agentive attitude – becomes the target of it. Instead of being an agent of counsel, he becomes the recipient of it. By means of his experience, the old Communist prisoner resists the reifying mechanisms of the camp – which have included him in a bureaucratized administration of death – and communicates a rational way to survival. This rational way is a conscious intervention on Semprún's statute: it implies changing his determination. He does not describe Semprún “the way he was”, but writes instead something that will help him be. Yet, such a change does not nullify the young man. On the contrary, it facilitates his survival. Unlike *Le grand voyage*'s final staging, where by becoming the target of the very same cognitive stance he has displayed throughout the novel the character's ethical integrity melts into thin air, Semprún's 1994 novel manages to develop a praxis of the representation of the past that can sustain him morally.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### a. Emma Zunz

A very young Lukács once explained the difference between the novel and the short story claiming that while the former undertook an *extensive* reproduction of reality, the latter produced an *intensive* aesthetic recreation.<sup>1</sup> Short stories isolate a given fragment of the senseless productivity of forms and shape it as if it was a meaningful totality. By doing this, they can eventually achieve a concrete typification of subjective stances that otherwise would have been too blurred to discriminate in the carnivalesque totality of the novel. Although he submitted it to various examinations and changes, Lukács maintained this idea after his “conversion” to Marxism and, as I have previously mentioned, Thomas Mann was one of the Hungarian philosopher’s favorites whenever it came to the illustration of this phenomenon.

Jorge Luis Borges shared with Mann at least two important features. Not only did the Argentinean writer master the art of short stories in a way that has given him a place in literature’s Parnassus; but also, like Mann’s works, many of Borges’s tales achieve an objective primacy (*Vorrang des Objektes*) that “correct” the author’s own irrational political views. An excellent example of this curious process in which the offspring’s perspectives overcome the parent’s narrow-mindedness is the 1949 short story “Emma Zunz”, included in Borges’s best seller *El Aleph*. “Emma Zunz” is the story of a revenge, a case of restitution of balance and justice like many other Borgean stories. Emma Zunz is the daughter of a middle-class cashier who was falsely accused of embezzlement and had to flee the country. One day, she finds out that her exiled father has committed suicide out of sadness and decides to avenge his memory and honor by killing the man that gave him away, the greedy owner of the factory where Emma works. Her revenge goes as planned. On a Saturday evening, she loses her virginity with a Swedish sailor and then arranges a meeting with her employer, alleging she has information of a strike. She shoots him down with a revolver of his property, calls the police, and claims that she has been raped by the man she right after killed, she says, in self-defense. The narrator tells us these events with hesitation, believing that “[t]o relate with certain reality the events of that evening would be difficult and perhaps not right”.<sup>2</sup> Difficult and unfair because, as he says at the end of the story,

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<sup>1</sup> Lukács’s definition is available in *Theorie des Romans* (1916), but can also be traced in his neo-Kantian work *Die Seele und die Formen* (1911).

<sup>2</sup> The English version is in the book *The Aleph and Other Stories*.

[a]s it was, [Emma's account to the police] was unbelievable, but it prevailed upon everyone because it was substantially true. Emma Zunz's tone was real, her decency was real, her hate was real. And the outrage which she had suffered was also real: only the circumstances, the time, and one or two names were false.

If we speculated on the various possibilities of justice restitution, we would conclude that "Emma Zunz" is placed in a problematic relation with two paradigms of justice: state bureaucratization of fairness by an instrumentalized categorization of crimes and punishments on the one hand and individual restitution of honor by one's own means on the other. In literature, these two paradigms are respectively offered by *El poema de Mio Cid* and *Don Quixote*. In the Spanish epic poem, Rodrigo's daughters are raped but he is dissuaded from killing the perpetrators and accepts instead an ordinary trial. In the novel, Don Quixote sets out to serve justice by his own hand. Maybe because the one is too early in history to submit his honor to a formal categorization of punishments and the other is too late to travel on a horseback to mend a world that already is a lost case, neither of the characters attains a feeling of comfort. Emma Zunz's case is different. As if she was Walter Benjamin's perfect historian, she takes her father's humiliation and makes it her own by inducing a traumatic loss of virginity. As the narrator tells us, the sexual act has not only served a strategic end – to make the police believe that her boss has really raped her –, but most importantly, played a crucial role in the daughter's conviction. She was convinced of her father's humiliation because she "recreated" it in her own terms. Conversely, she convinces the police not only because, as the narrator points out, the humiliation is real, but also because she manages to encompass her story with her addressee's horizon of understanding. In other words, Emma Zunz masters past, present, and future in such a way that ethics and truth converge towards consolation: her epicity lies in the fact that the gap between freedom and necessity, that expresses in a theoretical level the foundation of market society, is overcome by her actions. Far from Rodrigo's contemplative stance, Emma Zunz seizes the present and makes herself responsible for justice. But also far from Don Quixote's arbitrary violence, she examines reality thoroughly and conceives of it as an authentic criterion for action.

I have chosen "Emma Zunz"'s case because it represents a concrete, and condensed case of what I have tried to unmask in the course the previous three chapters. This core, as it was mentioned in the introduction, consists of two different, but interconnected, ideas. First, the thesis to which these lines serve as a conclusion can be regarded as a – minimal – "sociological" speculation of the forms of subjectivity in Capitalism. By subscribing the perspective that places the Holocaust within Capitalist development, the analysis gives account of the category of deactivation in three autobiographical novels written by Jorge Semprún. Georg Lukács understood this category as the grounding core of all subjective

expressions in Capitalism: it constitutes the subjective aspect of the process of reification, in which the subject fails to recognize the historicity of reality and approaches it as if it was an autonomous realm of mechanistic relationships where no subjective intervention is possible. According to the Hungarian philosopher and his followers, subjective deactivation finds correlate expressions in the structure of commodities, in the autonomization of bourgeois sciences, and in the theoretical canonization of bourgeois thought: Kant's antinomies. A typical description of deactivated stances would point to two opposite attitudes. On the one hand, contemplation: reality is regarded as an autonomous sphere that cannot be intervened. On the other hand, volatilization: reality is regarded as an autonomous sphere that can only be intervened by its total negation. Both stances are reified and derive from a deactivated concept of subject insofar as he finds himself detached from a reality he, *qua* generic being, is responsible for. The fact that the one needs the other to sustain itself shows the unstable grounds upon which these false opposites are based.

## **b. Jorge Semprún**

When it comes to Semprún's novels, the concept of deactivation is present *at all levels of narrative production* in the first two novels: *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!* In the 1963 text, there is a clear demarcation between an enunciative *I*, which I named the *I*-subject, and an uttered *I*, which bore the name of the *I*-object (Semprún as narrator and Semprún as a character). The character assumes a violent attitude towards his environment based on an epistemological stand that creates a chasm between him and reality. Because he believes himself radically different from the surrounding entities, pure and free from sin, he allows himself to throw the first stone. His arrogance, however, makes his integrity verge on demise: reality is too opaque to be penetrated and little intervention is achieved. The young and terrorist Semprún retrieves frustration whenever he sets himself for action. Similarly, the enunciative *I* adopts the same stance towards his *I*-object. The *I* is divided into two different entities that however obtain their conditions of being from the assumption that they still refer to the same unity. This narrative attitude is extremely interesting in the sense that it exhibits one of the biggest bourgeois epistemological problems. If I ground the possibilities of thinking on the complete autonomization of reality, and thus adopt towards it either a contemplative or volatilizing stance, then I am forced to do exactly the same with the concept of me as a subject. As argued in chapter two, here lies the problem of deactivation in Kantian epistemology. Partly due to its autobiographical nature, *Le grand voyage* illustrates the clash of this stance because it has to deal with two subjects, one of whom is at the same time the

object of the other and both of them are ultimately the same. The novel develops this antinomy to senselessness. By grounding the possibilities of thinking on the exteriorization of reality, as Semprún's double subject does, man endows his thinking with a great deal of freedom, because the cognizant tools he brings forth to categorize phenomena are not reality's, but his own. In other words: he can only sustain freedom with necessity and he can only give account of necessity by claiming freedom. The *I*-subject in *Le grand voyage* treats his counterpart with the same contempt his counterpart treats his own surrounding reality with. And all this happens because the *I*-subject *subscribes* his counterpart's stance. The book's closing section adopts a contemplative stance: action withdraws from both the character, who is taken like cattle towards KZ Buchenwald gates, and the narrator, who changes the first person to the third and, *qua* a ridiculous Pontio, leaves his character to "destiny".

Although in a different way, *Quel bon dimanche!* also addresses the question of reification in its narrative levels. Partly intended to be a rewriting of the previous novel, the 1980 text criticizes the previous violence and arrogance by presenting narrative creation in a way that gives up totalizing attempts and gives room to a plural emergence of different perspectives. By a clear aesthetic juxtaposition of *Weltanschauungen*, the novel presents a post-Babelic world where conciliation is not possible, and since the original sign, unity is lost forever, the best we can strive for is patience and tolerance. The aesthetic correlate of the loss of unity constitutes in *Quel bon dimanche!* a restless proliferation of episodes, genres, and dialogues that are created to bridge a gap the subject *a priori* knows he will never be able to fully bridge. This productivity of signifying chains was understood in chapter three in the light of the transcendental subject's production of categories. In the domain of its ethics, despite its wishful thinking and respectable intentions, *Quel bon dimanche!* also adopts a deactivated stance insofar as it denies the historical aspect of this dispersion, it naturalizes it, and does not show an authentic praxis on reality. Everything is permitted in Semprún's 1980 novel because nothing can carry into effect a real assault on Heaven.

The "sociological" speculation on bourgeois society that this thesis brings forth is based on the two descriptions that were just presented. The concepts of experience, testimony and aesthetic praxis, concepts that were defined in the introduction as crucial for the present work, are anchored on the idea of deactivation and their dimensions derive from it. In the reified world of second nature, experience is converted into testimony – and testimony cannot give account of a highly reified event such as the Holocaust. The work of Benjamin has been very important for the understanding of this process, which is, as I have argued, enabled by the deactivation of the subjective roots that facilitate the praxis of experience. These roots are



collectivity, communication, fraternity, and authentic praxis. I hope to have made clear that *Le grand voyage* and *Quel bon dimanche!* accurately illustrate this deactivation. In both cases fraternity, communication, and collectivity are cancelled by a strong concept of solitude, either by the fake heroic configuration of 1963 or the carnivalesque disposition of 1980. This results into either a testimonial discourse whose inner contradictions are unveiled – as it is the case of *Le grand voyage* – or into a negation of the testimonial discourse and its replacement by a conformist nothingness, like what happens in *Quel bon dimanche!*

Semprún knows, however, that even though experience has given way to testimony, it may still occur within the limits of literature. Throughout this work, we have seen that the Marxist concept of art confers on aesthetic praxis a sort of intervention that resists reification and eventually overcomes it. Because it serves no market end, authentic art facilitates a sort of freedom that can turn the subject's attention to the object's inner properties and potentialities. A dereifying stance in art would make the inner relations between subject and object arise showing the path towards truth. The reader should remember that this work subscribes this thesis and conceives of truth as a process of unveiling potentialities rather than a contemplative verification of static entities, like Positivism intends.

Therefore, the second hypothesis of the present thesis can be expressed in the following terms. As a legitimate case of aesthetic praxis, literature can achieve a realist description of reality in a way that no other sphere of cognitive praxis can. A realist description of reality means a simulated recreation where the problematic relationship between subject and object is not merely taken into account, but, most importantly, is considered a crucial element in the becoming of reality. Already from this definition we may understand why reified cognition, that regards reality as an isolated realm of static entities, will never achieve this sort of realist reflection. In Dialectical Marxism, this feature of literature is understood as a rationalization of concrete segments of reality. Works of literature see reality as a concrete historical phase in its becoming that is dialectically opposed to what it can be: its potentialities. In dialectical terms, literature opposes existents (isolated segments) to their notions (potential unity). *At least* three possible cases follow from this contention.

First, a literary work can neglect the dynamic aspect of reality and depict a concrete phase as if it was a matter of “human nature”. However accurate this work may be in its detailed exposition, it lacks realism because it fails to give account of the dynamic process of becoming. This tendency has been called “Naturalism”: Zola, Kafka, the *avant-garde*, and most, if not all, of the Soviet “Socialist Realism” were accused of such a misconception by different scholars. The analysis in chapter three should be understood within these general lines of thought. *Quel bon dimanche!* abandons any kind of totalizing concep of reality and

regards autonomy as a defining feature of a certain “human nature”. The naturalist depiction is achieved because the novel undermines the concept of reason and makes an empiricist turn. It reorganizes the conceptual pair immanence / transcendence that governed *Le grand voyage* and chases Heaven out of its scope. For *Quel bon dimanche!*, nothing is true except the senseless productivity of forms to which we humans are sentenced, and the best we can hope for is to turn a never-ending confrontation into a happy Carnival.

Second, a work of literature can rationalize a concrete segment of reification by opposing it to its notion. In this sense, literary praxis recreates a concrete type of reified subjectivity and expands its potentialities until its inner contradictions come to the surface. This realist alternative was insinuated by Aristotle and described by Lukács in his definition of *Critical Realism*.<sup>3</sup> By adopting a specific subjective type, a work can expand its grounding features until the stand that lies behind that type verges on demise. In addition to illustrating the false roots that anchor a specific deactivated stance, this kind of realism also reflects that reality is something different from the perspective it proposed. By showing the dialectics of essence and appearance, a work of this kind does not offer a concrete solution to the problem it poses, but denies the authenticity of a concrete perspective and therefore calls for a true solution. *Le grand voyage* is an excellent case of Critical Realism: the terrorist perspective it brings forth is abandoned at the end of the novel due to its inability to give account of the inner ethical and ontological unity between object (character) and subject (narrator).

The third and last alternative of literary praxis does not oppose a concrete existent to its notion, but simulates a state of affairs where the existent is identical to its notion and therefore has fulfilled its potentialities. It shows concrete rational men in action, aware of their role in history and in full command of their strengths. These works do not depict the tension between *what it is* and *what it should be* like the alternative described above. Rather, they simulate a segment of reality where deactivation is overcome and a conciliation of previously isolated parts is achieved through human praxis. *L'écriture ou la vie* is an excellent expression of dereifying praxis in the specific question of experience. As we have seen in chapter four, dereification is achieved through a conscious activation of the subject, that not only does justice on past wrongs, but also sets ethical guidelines for the future. In terms of literary features, the emergence of experience is granted in Semprún's 1994 autobiographical novel by a series of characteristics that pervade each and every aspect of the narrative structure. Form and content, syuzhet and fabula are structured upon a dialogue-like configuration: the latter is sustained by numerous episodes in which two different

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned before, a clear exposition of this concept is in Lukács's book *Wider den Missverständenen Realismus*.

perspectives struggle for the overcoming of differences and finally achieve it. Similarly, the *syuzhet* simulates a blurring of both enunciative and utterance levels that enables the – simulated – emergence of an *other*, thus making the novel in itself a dialogue between the narrator and the reader. However, it is the concrete nature of the concept of dialogue what plays a crucial role in the emergence of authentic experience. Rather than a juxtaposition of perspectives, the conversations in the novel exhibit authentic respect for the other's horizon of understanding: messages are shaped according to a double principle. On the one hand, they carry a commitment to truth towards the past: they are uttered to redeem humiliated comrades that are no longer able to speak for themselves. On the other hand, they are shaped according to the recipient's horizon of understanding. Because they will only redeem the dead if they are accepted by younger generations through the experience of these younger generations, it follows that verosimilitude is a defining feature of truth, and truth has now ceased to be a private domain and arisen as a collective one. Consequently, this concept of the past, that reminds us of Benjamin's theses of history, simultaneously demands an active, dynamic stance towards past events and a dialectical reconfiguration of the pair immanence-transcendence. Through serious praxis, reified past will serve the redemption of mankind. Just like Emma Zunz, Jorge Semprún masters past and future in such a way that neither of them is nullified.

### **c. Criticism - End**

A final remark on the concept of criticism is pertinent. Throughout this work I have contended that the value of a literary work lies in its ability to reflect reality. Rather than to a static reflection of isolated entities, the concept of reflection that sustains literature's realism points to a simulation of praxis. Because reality stands before the subject as a concatenation of isolated and closed existents, a perfect second nature, an eventual reflection of reality "the way it is" will never be true. On the contrary, a realist reflection negates reality as it is in its apparent stasis, examines its potentialities, and expands it. In this sense, Marxism subscribes the Hegelian principle according to which reality only comes true once its complete rationalization is achieved. Realist literature rationalizes a concrete segment of reality by putting on the balance its prominent features, expanding their conditions of possibilities, and eventually exhibiting inner contradictions. By doing this, the praxis of literature rearranges phenomena striving to find a final totality. Be such totality found or not, this praxis is in itself authentic and serves de-reification because it activates reason and conceives of it as a real means of praxial intervention. However, as I pointed out in the opening lines of this work,

literature redemptive powers are weak: the price of its freedom is its complete autonomization.

This work cannot be understood without the concept of reason that it defends. The analyses that constitute its one hundred pages try to display a correlate rational praxis to the one that is found in two of Semprún's novels. As it was argued in the introduction, criticism should "complete" a literary work by a thorough examination of its potentialities, by stressing features that define its ontology and can clearly express its *telos*. *In this sense, literary criticism duplicates literature's play by rearranging textual phenomena in such a way that it becomes rational*. This concept of criticism can be found in Jena Romanticism and, as it was defined in the introduction, it was conceptualized by Walter Benjamin in his doctoral thesis. It does not fetishize literature's autonomy, nor does it share the point of view of those who claim to see in every telephone guide the next *Don Quixote*. Yet it displays a sort of literary understanding that places itself in a *tertium datur* between autonomy and heteronomy and bridges the gap between literature and reality without cancelling the former's autonomous value.

Therefore, the ethics that lies behind this sort of criticism demands an examination of possibilities in literature *vis à vis* an actual intervention on reality. Criticism completes literary reason and sustains that if an activated stance can be simulated on paper, this happens because the realization of reason as identical to its notion has been achieved in at least one sphere of human praxis. Lukács and Marcuse contended that literature's completeness was already a proof that a rationalization of reality could be eventually possible because it meant that we could already express totality.<sup>4</sup> They explained that to expand activation over the limits of literature cannot result, as the Romantics believed, in a poetization of reality. Rather, it would require a reconfiguration of reason. We should take *L'écriture ou la vie's* advice and structure reason in accordance to the reality we want to change. Reason understood as literary reason, or as reason of criticism will have to be abandoned because it has achieved its final phase: the simulation of a total life. This does not call for a Fascist celebration of irrationality, the end of literary reason does not mean the end of critical thought. It calls, on the contrary, for a rational change of reality. Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is based on this belief, and this work will have served its intended end if it helps to reconfigure reason so as to change reality.

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<sup>4</sup> *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* and *Reason and Revolution*.

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