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Exploring the Canon: Jorge Semprún and the Legacy of Primo Levi

The (im)possibilities for closure in the wake of the traumatic event have been a favoured trope of the academy for many years now (amongst others: Caruth, 1995 & 1996; Laub & Felman, 1991; LaCapra, 2001). Numerous theories have been advanced whilst notions of “working-through” and “acting-out” have become common parlance. Central to these is the idea that acts of testimony and of bearing witness are essential for the survivor attempting to assimilate their experience. This transference onto the printed page permits the witness to acknowledge or indeed register the trauma for the first time and attempt to move beyond that event by regaining and imposing his own subjectivity.

What this paper seeks to explore, via a comparison of Buchenwald *revenant* Jorge Semprún and Auschwitz-Birkenau deportee Primo Levi, is the influence that the writings of the latter would have on the former, and in particular the repeated mimicry of one particular motif concerning the confusion between reality and dreams, past and present, death and life in the immediate days, weeks and months following the liberation or rather, *pace* Georges Didi-Hubermann (2008), the “opening of the camps”. Whilst these sensations were common to many of those who survived the camps, it is for Semprún’s precise mimicry of the words with which Levi chooses to conclude *The Truce* (1963: 379-80) and the extent to which it recurs throughout Semprún’s oeuvre, that it warrants further consideration.

Of course the relation between Semprún and his “soulmate” (Brodzki 2007: 181) is, upon first inspection, neither concealed nor cryptic. In his novel *L’Ecriture ou la vie* (1994), Semprún devotes an entire chapter to the memory of his discovery that Levi had committed suicide. As is typical of Semprún, this particular chapter refrains from narrating one scene. Rather, it begins with Semprún’s memory of a Saturday in April (coincidentally, if we are to believe Semprún, the anniversary of the arrival of American troops at Buchenwald) when he was in the midst of writing *Netchaïev est de retour* (1987). The reader then follows Semprún’s weaving memory of the writing of that novel and the unwilling shadow of the camps which once again rises to find a place in his *récit* as he feels his life torn between a surface happiness and a profound anguish – ‘a space shared brutally between two lands. Two universes, two lives. And, on the spot, I wouldn’t have known how to say which one was real and which a dream’ (303).ⁱ From this shared space, unannounced and unacknowledged the reader is introduced to the first snippet of Primo Levi’s text, *The Truce*; the line moreover which will eventually lead us to the heart of our discussion: *È un sogno entro un altro sogno, vario nei particolari, unico nella sostanza...* Although this line is offered to the reader in

quotation marks, Semprún refuses any acknowledgement that these words are those of Levi. Instead Semprún prefers to disguise the words which follow as his own, one sentence amidst a much larger discourse on that dreamlike sensation, indeed anguish, of living and dying, life and death after Buchenwald.

A dream within another dream, which varies in its detail but of which the form remains the same. A dream which can awaken you anywhere: in the calm of the green countryside, around a table with friends. Why not with a woman, I may add? Sometimes with a lover at the very moment of love. Anywhere, in short, and with anyone; but suddenly a diffuse and deep torment, the anguished certitude of the end of the world, or of its unreality in any case (304).

Such unacknowledged direct, indirect and allusive citations persist throughout the remainder of the chapter (304; 305; 313). Interlinking them all is the overlapping of Semprún's voice with that of Levi; the blurring of his feelings and those of Levi. One final demonstration of this intertextual distortion serves to conclude this chapter of *L'Écriture ou la vie* and to allow us to begin our analysis of the significance of this assumption of language and experience which persists throughout much of Semprún's earlier corpus. And it is with this final, much shorter example that Semprún remains most faithful to the original Italian text:

Nulla era vero all'infirio del lager. Il resto era breve vacanza, o inganno dei sensi, sogno...

Nothing was true outside the camp, that's all. The rest was only a brief pause, an illusion of the senses, an uncertain dream: voilà (Semprún: 323; Levi: 379)

With these final lines the chapter, *Le Jour de la mort de Primo Levi* comes to a close. However, given as we shall see the predominance of this motif throughout Semprún's earlier work, it is a chapter which raises numerous questions for both our understanding of Semprún and contemporary attempts to situate Semprún within post-war French culture and society and that which we may loosely term 'concentrationary literature'.

Semprún's first novel *Le Grand Voyage* skirts, via its muddled chronology, the edges of the memory of Buchenwald via the interminable journey there. Interspersing and imploding on that (non-)memory are both childhood recollections and anticipations of events yet to come. Notably absent however is the dreamlike confusion between survival and death which comes

to pervade Semprún's later corpus. Indeed it is only four years after the publication of Levi's *The Truce* that this motif will be first adopted by Semprún in his second novel, *Evanouissement*:

Perhaps this had only been a dream, and not the old anxiety of memory? In any case it didn't matter, since he was not at all certain of having awoken, of having left the lifeless stupefaction of the night (1967: 104-105).

Akin to *Le Grand Voyage*, *L'Evanouissement* also skirts the edges of the traumatic past from a point of relative safety. In both works it is via the alter-egos to whom Semprún loans his memory, that Semprún himself avoids the autobiographical 'I' in the reliving of the memory of deportation. As María Angélica and Semilla Durán (2005: 92) note: "the subject has not yet assumed his own name, he is not yet ready to face the task of reliving the grief of this period of his life without the help and the screen of fiction or of a disguise."

However, seventeen years after the publication of *Le Grand voyage*, Semprún in *Quel beau dimanche!*, will assume, under his own name, the memories of Buchenwald. For the first time the word 'roman' or 'novel' will not feature on the cover, and more interestingly, it is in this work that dream motif becomes near omnipresent:

Once again the insidious questioning arose. Had I dreamed my life at Buchenwald? Or, on the contrary, had my life only been a dream since my return from Buchenwald? Had I quite simply died fifteen years ago, and all this [...] was this only the dream of a grey premonitory smoke on the hill of Ettersberg? (1980: 67)

At this point, and to spare the reader, it cannot be over emphasised how often this extensive confusion between the dream of life and the reality of death surfaces both in *Quel beau dimanche!* and throughout Semprún's other works.ⁱⁱ Given moreover that it has been borrowed Primo Levi, it is an example of concentrationary intertextuality which raises numerous questions, not only regarding our understanding of Semprún, but also with regard to notions of 'working through' and 'acting out'?ⁱⁱⁱ

To open discussion, it is with the lack of an explicit translation of Levi's words that we shall begin our interrogation; a lack which is particularly puzzling given Semprún's insistence elsewhere that it is the responsibility of the author to never 'confound' his reader (2001: 99). Indeed in *L'Evanouissement*, *L'écriture ou la vie*, and *Le mort qu'il faut*, Semprún asserts his

authorial authority to translate Wittgenstein (1967: 66), the conversation between Semprún and Lieutenant Rosenfeld (1994: 108), and the conversation between Nikolai, the *Stubendienst* of Block 56, and a Jehova's Witness (2001: 139): all for 'the convenience of the reader' (1994: 237). How then is this specific lack of translation to be understood?

Throughout his writing the struggle for survival and the suturing and restoration of identity was, as has been well documented, one of the chief projects of Semprún. In part this struggle was eased by Semprún's incessant playing, both in the reality of his fiction and in the fiction of his reality as a clandestine Communist operative in Franco's Spain, with the possibilities of (his) identity and the adoption or assumption of other personas and alter-egos.^{iv} The mimicry of Primo Levi and the adoption of his voice for the articulation of a life that has become but a dream in *Quel beau dimanche!* and Semprún's other works thus figure, in part, as a textual game via which subjective identity and identification may remain hidden.

Such elusive and allusive elements of Semprún's work, often figure as a challenge to the reader: Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize comment, in relation to *La Montagne blanche*, on Semprún's 'self-conscious artifice [which plays] on the knowledge, responses and interpretative skills of the reader' (2000: 71). The reader, they note, is asked to solve the riddle via 'deferred or partial revelation' so as to grasp the significance of the incomprehensible from the dangling threads of information which are offered so coyly for inspection:

Through such games with the interpretative competence and cultural knowledge of the reader, the text makes hints, gives clues, but holds back from full, unambiguous disclosure (71).

Semprún's refusal to translate the Italian words of Levi, a refusal moreover which goes against all other demands to ensure the comprehension of the reader, is one such clue; a thread which challenges the reader to trace the dream motif back through previous works, and determine for himself its implications. And yet whilst this may at least partly answer the question of why Semprún does not translate the citations of Levi, it still does not explain their inclusion at all or indeed the dominance of this idea in his preceding works.

And it is at this point that questions surrounding the importance of the canon, mimesis, imitatio, and repetition within testimony truly come to the fore. The phenomenon of mimesis may be traced back to the earliest days of antiquity. More often than not, it is translated from the Greek as 'imitation', and taken to mean a word describing the relation between art, reality

and the representation thereof. And yet as Matthew Potolsky points out, the implications of this word are infinitely broader; as well as describing artwork, mimesis can describe actions such as the imitation of another person, or any number of other “originals”: nature, truth, beauty and ideas are all subject to imitation. Perhaps more interestingly for our purpose here, mimesis can also be used to describe ‘the relationship between a master and a disciple’ (2006: 1). From these, a meagre selection of the possible definitions and interpretations offered by Potolsky, it is possible to note that mimesis is furthermore a historical phenomenon, with the imitation of any role-model providing a link between past and present; this linking *imitatio*, combined with the ability to create something new out of old traditions is a key to literary success, and a powerful means of asserting or indeed creating cultural stability whilst ensuring the unity of the past with(in) the present.

Therefore through his imitation of Primo Levi (and it should be noted his references to over 600 other cultural figures throughout his *oeuvre*), it could be argued that Semprún is trying to recreate a unifying cultural norm, which, until the First World War at least, extended across Europe.^v As Davis and Fallaize go on to note: ‘what lies behind this is the nostalgic fantasy of a unified European culture common to all, a shared sense of humanity and values’ (2000: 79). Thus whilst Auschwitz, following Adorno, may have marked the end of literary tradition and convention, Semprún, in his appropriation of Levi, attempts to move beyond Auschwitz in the re-creation or re-establishment of cultural and literary tradition, in a genre of writing which is exclusively and explicitly located in the very rupture marked by the existence of the camps. Though orientated towards the future, it is through the sharing of the past, the (re)communication and the (re)appearance of testimony, that Freud’s question at the end of *Totem and Taboo* may be, partially at least, answered.^{vi} Accordingly it is not only the imagined rupturing of culture which is subverted via such transmission. By imitating the style, prose and motif of Levi, Semprún explicitly in the eponymous chapter, and implicitly in the remainder of his works, retransmits key parts of Levi’s thought. And it is via the eponymous chapter that Semprún not only reveals the final clue in relation to the mimicry present in previous works but, via his re-awakening of those ‘dead’ words, confirms Levi’s message. The necessity of such a re-awakening is articulated in *La Montagne blanche*, where-in the principal protagonist Juan Larrea asks ‘when we are all dead, who will still believe us?’ (1986: 42). This fear of the death of memory persists throughout Semprún’s work. It is a fear moreover which may be read in both a literal and metaphorical sense whence ever since the end of the war, the denial of the Holocaust and its associated crimes became increasingly wide-spread in France if not in Europe, before culminating in Robert

Faurisson's publication, 'The Problem of the Gas Chambers or the Rumour of Auschwitz' in *Le Monde*; a publication which lent academic credibility to historical revisionism as a rigorous school of thought.^{vii} Accordingly, in the creation of a new literary tradition - which in Semprún's case at least we may loosely term as testimony – Semprún fights for the preservation of memory espoused by Levi: 'to fight against amnesia is to fight against power [...] for amnesia, whether voluntary or not, can be poisonous to the operation of society' (Semprún in Cortanze 2004: 273). To this end, just as Semprún draws on Levi, so Vidal Naquet, in his work denouncing Holocaust denial, draws on the collaboration of Semprún and Alan Resnais in *La Guerre est finie*. There-in he asserts the absolute necessity of memory: "my generation, now fifty years old, is more or less the last for whom Hitler's crime still remains a memory. That one must fight against the disappearance – or, worse yet, the debasement – of memory seems to me obvious" (1992: 57). The reasons motivating the fight against debasement are clear; the fight against the disappearance of memory however perhaps warrants further consideration, given the collective and symbolic consequences of the passing of the individual survivor:

Each death depletes the world of a variant of that shared experience and makes the world a much lonelier place for those who remain. The gap between survivors and others inevitably widens when no common reference point exists (Brodzki, 182).

However it is not only to consolidate and preserve Levi's memory that Semprún exhibits such a recurrent reliance on the Jewish writer. Nor can it be said that he seeks exclusively to deify the latter. Perhaps most importantly for Semprún, Levi's writing provides a starting point for the articulation of a narrative which is unthinkable, unbelievable, inarticulable and yet, simultaneously, inexhaustible (Wiesel & Semprún 1995: 18). It is a starting point for the narration of a dream-like experience where-in:

Nothing is fictitious, but the status of the "reality" to which these narratives bear "witness" is unimaginable, because it goes beyond any previously known experience. Everything is real, but "out of this world," foreign to customary discourse about the world, foreign most of all to conventions useful to the literature of witness (François Dominique in Dobbels (ed.) 2003: 169-170).

Prototypical of Holocaust narratives, in Semprún's case such sentiments stem from the isolation and shattering of identity enacted upon his sense of identity by deportation and internment, the murder of friends, comrades and teachers in Buchenwald, the loss of his young mother in 1932, and his later expulsion from the Spanish Communist Party (Herrmann 2010: 203). Thus an appropriation of Levi allows Semprún to counter those losses and begin reconstructing his identity via literary testimony by appropriating the discourse of, amongst others, an established quasi-canonical Holocaust writer.

And yet, this explanation risks grossly oversimplifying Semprún's writing and thought, since between the two authors there exists one fundamental difference: Semprún was deported for his role in the French Resistance. Levi was deported for being Jewish. This difference, according to Elie Wiesel, was at least in the first instance, of enormous benefit to Semprún:

You knew why you were there, you fought, you resisted. Me, I was a 'musulman' as we said at the time, I was an object. I didn't know what was going on (1995: 12).

For the deportee, to be able to give reason to his incarceration was to be able to gain a slight psychological advantage in the fight to come to terms with and respond to life and death in a concentration camp. This psychological advantage is perhaps most evident in *Le Grand voyage* where-in it is possible to find a great resemblance between large tracts of the text and the freedom in resistance espoused by Sartre. To this end Semprún writes:

I have been free to go where I needed to go and I needed to go in this train, because I needed to do the things that lead me to this train. I was free to get in this train, completely free, and I truly profited from this liberty. I am here freely, because I could have not been here (26).

The historical essence common to us all who have been arrested in this year '43 is freedom [...] I am imprisoned because I am a free man (53-4).^{viii}

By contrast, the Jewish deportee is left without recourse to any such reasoning; Levi recalls one of his first encounters with a member of the SS and the empty words spoken to him by that guard: "hier ist kein Warum" (1947: 35). There is no why here.

As advantageous as it may however have been for Semprún to be able to analyse and give meaning to his internment in Buchenwald whilst still interned, in the years following the opening of the camps, it is precisely for his non-Jewishness that he feels so isolated as he

attempts to come to terms with that experience. This alienation manifests itself as one of the more polemical comments in *Le Grand voyage*; following a chance encounter with a Slavic Jewess, herself a former deportee, who accuses Semprún of not knowing the extent of Jewish suffering in the camps, he makes the following, rather glib, remark: “It’s true, I’ve never been Jewish. Sometimes I regret it” (114). Despite being interned in Buchenwald for nearly two years, Semprún here expresses an anguish which stems from an inability to speak authentically about the camp when to do so would be to impose his own voice on an experience which was not, in its most extreme and violent form, *his* experience. And yet for the survivor there remains, regardless of genetic lineage, the desperate, stifling need to articulate that experience; a desperate need to be acknowledged and to be heard.^{ix} Thus Semprún’s appropriations of Levi may also be read as a claim for authenticity; by aligning himself alongside Levi, Semprún endows his own voice with legitimacy and realigns his identity with that of an established Jewish voice.

This alignment of his concentrationary experience of Buchenwald with the Jewish experience of Judaeocide is born out with two further examples from *Le Grand voyage*. One is the first and only graphic description of the ‘useless violence’ (Levi 1947) inherent to the camps; this lengthy passage concerns the treatment and deaths of around fifteen Jewish children who, following the Soviet advances in the east, were ‘evacuated’ from Auschwitz, before arriving at Buchenwald after untold days of travelling, the sole survivors of their transport (195-197). Although Semprún witnesses, lives, recounts and re-recounts the deaths of so many others – Maurice Halbwachs, Maspero, ‘the young German soldier who was singing La Paloma’ to name but a few – nowhere else in his writing does the violence come close to matching the brutality, confusion and terror of the deaths of these children, notwithstanding traditional connotations of innocence which, inevitably, the reader may bring to bear. Thus this passage articulates the sense that the Jewish experience – Jewish murder – exceeds in its meaninglessness the experience of all other deaths in the camps. As Brodzki (2007: 160) writes:

However much he and his comrades had suffered at the hands of the Nazis, a causal explanation for their situation and pride associated with it existed [...] whereas in this transport of Jews [...] the narrator witnessed the purest expression of genocidal brutality.

There is also contained within this passage a deliberate ploy to mitigate the accusations of figures such as Claude Lanzmann who criticise the fictionalisation of deportation and incarceration on the grounds that literary artifice risks either romanticising the unbearable silence and brutality of the *univers concentrationnaire*, or facilitating the aesthetic privilege of the work of art which may itself allow the extraction of pleasure from that same work. This passage of *Le Grand voyage* whilst extremely stylised, and in which the place and artistic capabilities of the author are clear, resists both these accusations; the sentences which to some degree clearly resemble Proust in their length, structure, and asyndetic coordination in no way conjure up a joyful act of memory through which lost time is magically regained. Similarly the repetition of ‘les enfants’ which occurs in these few pages no fewer than twenty-six times, the repeated references to both ‘la grande avenue’ and the impassive eagles of Hitler, the simile comparing the massacre to an old silent film seen at the cinema, all offer little aesthetic pleasure to the reader. Rather, they revive and emphasise a pain which it is almost too awful to confront, and yet it is a pain which must be confronted and which must be revived when ‘after these long years of voluntary amnesia, not only can I recount this story, but I must recount it’ (1963: 193). Once again, we approach with this sentence the sense of responsibility felt by Semprún (and so many others) for the death of the other, and the absolute need to tell of that death (*se rendre compte*) (1963: 78; 1967: 49) by whatever means, stylistic or otherwise, are necessary. Such are the demands of a situation when:

I start to doubt the possibility of telling the story. Not that what we lived through is ineffable. It was unliveable, which is something else altogether [...] something which does not concern the form of a possible narrative but its substance. Not its articulation, but its density [...] Only a masterly narrative will prove capable of conveying some of the truth of such testimony. But can one understand everything? Imagine everything? (1994: 26)

This narration of death is followed by one of the most perplexing anomalies within Semprún’s work. Shortly after the liberation, standing in the approach to the camp which prompted this particular memory, Semprún turns and walks toward the gate: “I show my pass to the American sentry and I look at the inscription, in big letters of forged iron, which sits above the gate. Arbeit macht frei.” (1963: 197) Three simple words. Work sets you free. Three words which since the fall of Nazism have come to be and will forever be associated with that regime. And yet they have no legitimate place in Semprún’s testimony: for as he

himself writes elsewhere, the forged iron words etched into the grill of the entrance gate to Buchenwald read ‘Jedem das Seine’ – to each his own, or, to each his due (1994: 373; 1980: 152-153; 330).

By thus merging his experience and that of the Jews, Semprún, as we have already argued with regard to his appropriation of Levi, searches for an acknowledgement of the incomprehensible, unimaginable reality of his experience by merging his experience with what remains perhaps the most iconic symbol of the Holocaust. Simultaneously, he acknowledges that his experience will never equal the senselessness of the most extreme violence of the extermination camps. To draw this distinction between survivors of the camps and survivors of the Holocaust, is not to essentialize or hierarchize the victims of suffering. Rather, as Brodzki notes, it is “to reinforce a political and historical distinction which has great bearing on Semprún’s interpretation of himself as a survivor” (161). Thus, to witness that suffering and to align himself not only with it but also with its silent, silenced voices, is perhaps a small step towards gaining the recognition, the audience, or indeed the authenticity to articulate his experience. Simultaneously the lack of translation of Levi’s text, to which we have previously alluded, resists any overly facile comparison. And it is at this point that our argument comes full circle, as we return to the question of translation.

The translation of experience and its transmission are central to the thought of so many survivors. The burden of potentially failing to make people understand and consequently failing one’s obligation to the dead is huge. By falling back on the words of another, Semprún in the first instance finds a point of departure for his own attempted articulation, and in the second attempts to guarantee that his testimony is not only (re)confirmed and (re)transmitted on behalf of Levi, but also understood as his own personal and subjective textual disclosure; as Semprún will never know the suffering of the Jews, so too a direct translation of Levi’s words would erase, via text, the silence and oblivion which delineate the two groups. Moreover a direct translation would impose a limit on the infinite possibilities available to the narrator whose subject matter is fundamentally inexhaustible.

As revealing as this may be however for our understanding of Semprún’s writing, it does open up the question of value, both for the reader and Semprún himself. Of what value, for the reader attempting to gain a greater insight into the *univers concentrationnaire*, in a work where-in the same discourse is reformulated and repeated? Perhaps, more importantly, of what value are such acts of testimony to the survivor who is ineluctably condemned, in the ‘working-through’ of the experience, to mimic the voice of another in order to ensure that his

words are understood? Is Semprún's adoption or echoing of Levi (amongst, it must be stressed, many others) strictly ethical?

Of these questions, the first may be relatively easily answered by referring to the very incomprehensibility of the camps and their purpose. It is of little matter the number of testimonies, interviews, or documentaries that the witness-by-proxy reader engages with: at the end of his journey, he will be as ignorant as the moment he turned the first page. Of course certain works may articulate certain ideas with more aplomb than others; some may approach the camps from a philosophical perspective; some may be based purely in fact; yet others may be wholly invented. The possible approaches to the subject remain infinite. And yet at the end, the impassable void of death and the demise of the other is reached. This event can be described one thousand times over, and yet its fundamental truth as an event external to the reader's (and writer's) life can never be grasped. As Maurice Blanchot has written, dying in its particularity is not shareable, even as it is also what each subject has in common with other human beings (1995: 23). It is for this that Semprún (following Levi once again) writes that whilst the 'ineffable' is nought but a lie, an alibi and a sign of laziness, the impossibility of communication itself is a truth: once again, we are approaching a rupture; this time however it is not culture that has been torn in two by the camps; rather it is a rupture between those who lived to return from the camps and their subsequent encounters with 'men from before, from the outside, emissaries from life – [bearing] a stunned, almost hostile, and certainly suspicious look in [their] eyes' (1994: 26-27). Thus from testimony it is not enlightenment *per se* that the reader should seek. Rather, and paradoxically, it is an acceptance of the absolute incomprehensibility of death, and simultaneously the implications of survival (and the guilt associated therewith) that should be sought.

To answer the second question Dominick LaCapra, distinguishes between two modes of remembrance and testimony. The first, 'acting-out', is based on repetition and the repetition compulsion. For people who have undergone a trauma, this compulsion may be evidenced as an inescapable reliving of the past, as the event is repeated time and again in psychic nightmares and flashbacks, or in the physical realm, as a remembrance occasioned by words, smells and tastes. Importantly it is not only the initial victim who may discover himself acting out a traumatic event, but any two characters implicated in the Oedipal scene, and in later life, of transference and repetition. Beyond the chief protagonists of this scene as outlined by Freud it is possible to posit that such transference also occurs between master and disciple. Indeed as LaCapra points out, it is perhaps inevitable that when any subject is studied, and in particular a subject of the emotional and traumatic gravitas of the camps, there is a tendency

to repeat the very problems being studied (2001: 142). To this we should add that such a tendency can only be exacerbated when the desire for identification with the victim and the valorisation of their work proceeds, for whatever reason, unchallenged and unimpeded. Semprún's appropriation of this one motif of Levi is of course repetitive; in no small part is it a disciple's imitation of the master. However, it is not compulsive – Semprún remains at all times in charge of his text, and the imitation there-in is a deliberate ploy which allows him to live vicariously and contain within his own 'acting-out' the experience of Levi.^x At this point it should be emphasised that this vicarious living, and excessive identification or empathy concerns only the return to life in the years following the liberation of the camp – Semprún explicitly states that, as a strategy for survival and to avoid confusing the experience of other deportees with his own, he deliberately avoided reading any other first-hand accounts of internment (1994: 305). Indeed as we have already noted, despite the plethora of cultural references present throughout Semprún's corpus, Levi is the only author, let alone survivor, to have an entire chapter devoted to his life, writing and death. As importantly, it is worth noting that although Semprún would go on to discuss deportation, in person, with a *revenant* as notable as Elie Wiesel, he explicitly refused all opportunities to meet with Primo Levi (318):

I felt no need to meet [him]. I mean: to meet him outside, in the exterior reality of this dream that life had become ever since our return. I felt that between us everything had already been said. Or had now become impossible to say. I found it unnecessary, perhaps even improper, for us to have a conversation between survivors, a dialogue of the rescued. And anyway had we really survived?^{xi}

Improper and unnecessary: two reasons given by Semprún for refusing to meet with Levi. To these reasons one may question a further possibility – would such an encounter have rendered the dream of death within the dream of life only too real? Through his writing, living Levi's dream of death and the dream of the Lager as his truth, Semprún vicariously and immortally lives and works through the dream-of-death-that-is-life experience of those who returned and wrote of their difficulties in coming to terms with their experience, without succumbing to the pressures experienced when he first attempted to bear witness:

Whilst writing tore Primo Levi from his past [...] it thrust me back into death, drowning me in it. I choked in the unbreathable air of the manuscript: every line I

wrote pushed my head underwater as though I were once again in the bathtub of the Gestapo's villa. I struggled to survive. I failed in my attempt to speak of death in order to reduce it to silence: if I had continued, it would have been death, in all probability, that would have silenced me (1994: 322).

Empathetic imitation and identification with Levi help to circumvent this possibility. For whilst the focus of *Le Grand Voyage* remains the transport to the camp, it is only in *Quel beau dimanche!*, which oscillates between internment and the years following the war, and *L'Écriture ou la vie*, which takes as its theme the difficulties of the 'return to life', that the most significant paraphrasing of Primo Levi begins to occur. It is this, the return to life which Semprún, through Levi, lives as the partial experience of another: it is a vicarious process which allows him critical distance and perspective on the belated effects of the traumatic event as they affect the individual; a process which thus offers him a means to work through his own experience by living, appropriating, and re-writing the experience of another. Semprún thus haunts and is haunted by Levi. Levi's suicide in 1987 however will change that. From that moment, Semprún, with the death of his surrogate-self, emerges into the reality of a life that is real; a life marked with finitude by the joyful presence of death's shadow where-in the illusory life-that-is-already-death outside the camps has been left, at last, behind. 'Suddenly the announcement about the death of Primo Levi, the news of his suicide, changed my perspective. I became mortal once more' (1994: 319). It is this critical distance which is the key to LaCapra's notion of working-through, and thus gaining a belated comprehension of the past:

In acting out, one relives the past as if one *were* the other, including oneself as another in the past – one is fully possessed by the other or the other's ghost; and in working through, one [acquires] some critical distance that allows one to engage in life in the present, to assume responsibility – but that doesn't mean that you utterly transcend the past. It means that you come to terms with it (148).

Finally as to the last question regarding the ethical justification of such a presumption of identity, this is a much more difficult question to answer, and for that reason one that we shall not attempt to answer here, except perhaps by leaving the last word to Primo Levi. Though speaking in relation to the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the weight and implications of these words far transcend their original focus:

Each individual is so complex an object that there is no point in trying to foresee his behaviour, all the more so in extreme situations [. . .] Therefore I ask that we meditate on [their] story [. . .] with pity and rigour, but that a judgement of them be suspended (1989: 43).

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ⁱ Nb this and all subsequent page references refer to the original French texts.

ⁱⁱ Amongst others, see Semprún 1980: 110-11; 131; 157; 193-194; 221; 415. Semprún 1986: 110; 199; 223. Semprún 1987: 37. Semprún 1994: 21; 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is not intended to dispute that Semprún himself had the sensation that life was but a dream after Buchenwald. Rather it is to question why his vocabulary and style of writing mimic so closely the words of Primo Levi.

^{iv} To name but a few: Gérard or Manuel of *Le grand Voyage*; Manuel of *L'Evanouissement*; Juan Larrea of *La Montagne blanche*; Federico Sanchez of *Autobiographie of Federico Sanchez*. All these characters, partly fictionalised, partly located in the reality of underground missions undertaken for the Communist Party, contain fragments of Semprún himself.

^v 'Until the First World War, everybody made the same journeys. It was the same Europe for everyone.' (1986: 68-9). As such, Semprún's writing is built into and within European culture, containing references to, amongst others, Proust, Goethe, Kafka, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Wittgenstein, Bizet, Heidegger, Levinas, Husserl, Camus, Aragon, Brasillach, Drieu La Rochelle, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, and Beethoven. See <http://francoise-kroichvili.perso.neuf.fr/auteurs%20cites%20par%20J%20Semprun.htm> [accessed 03/06/15] for a comprehensive list of more than 650 authors, artists and other notables referenced, however obliquely, by Semprún.

^{vi} "What are the ways and means employed by one generation in order to hand on its mental states to the next one?" (Freud 1990: 158).

^{vii} Cf. Deborah Lipstadt (2004) for a detailed account of the phenomenon of Holocaust denial.

^{viii} Cf. Sartre 1947: pp. 11-14. Although it falls outside the scope of this essay it is perhaps also interesting to consider the correlation between community, fraternity and resistance to torture that is also evident in both Semprún, Sartre and of course Robert Antelme: Sartre 1947: 13; Semprún 1967: pp. 44-45; Antelme 1947).

^{ix} Though one may wish to question the possibility of being "heard"; Robert Antelme recalls the woefully inadequate reactions of the first American soldiers to reach Dachau: 'Frightful, yes frightful' (1947: 301).

^x 'It's me who's writing this story and I'll do as I want (Semprún 1963: 26); 'I am the cunning God the Father of all these threads' (Semprún 1980: 11). In this last citation it is also worth noting the play on words in the original French, whereby 'fils', here translated as threads in relation to the interwoven stories of Semprún's *récit*, could equally mean 'sons' in a reference to the variety of personas adopted by Semprún in the "story" of his life.

^{xi} Semprún 1994: 318. In this citation it is also possible to isolate a potential further echoing of Levi, whose poem of 1945, *Buna* concludes: "If we were to meet again // In that world sweet beneath the sun // With what kind of face would we confront each other?" (1988: 5)