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**In Search of Lost Memory: Preservation and ruination  
in the works of Jorge Semprún**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores Jorge Semprún's wish, first expressed in 1963, to see Buchenwald consumed by nature. It contextualises this desire first in relation to Semprún's wider corpus and the distinction that he draws between being on either the 'inside' or the 'outside' of the traumatic experience, and second in relation to Charlotte Delbo's articulation of the difference between 'looking' and 'seeing'. Through this exploration, this paper demonstrates the evolution of Semprún's thought and argues that both his original desire and the eventual contrary stance that he adopts, are equally symptomatic of his humanist beliefs, his commitment to the preservation and transference of memory, and his desire for an ethical and empathetic approach to the site of trauma, the politics of remembrance and the ruins of memory.

**KEYWORDS:** Buchenwald; Jorge Semprún; Charlotte Delbo; commemorative spaces; ruins; nature;

**LENGTH:** 8,213 words

Since the arrival of the Allied and Soviet forces at the gates of the concentration and extermination camps of Nazi Germany, arguments surrounding the possibility of understanding the experience of those on the inside of the barbed wire have resonated not only in the testimony of those who returned, but also in the critical material which followed their accounts. Until recently however, relatively little consideration had been accorded to the dilemma of what should happen to the physical remains of the former sites of death. Spurred by the dwindling number of *revenants*, and in connection with the ever increasing challenges of preserving, repairing or even reconstructing the ruins of the camps, the question of “what means can enable us to grasp, preserve and pass on [the] loss?” (Assmann, 2011: 362) has come sharply into focus via the reflections of, amongst many others, Buchli and Lucas (2001), Edkins (2001), Dalton (2009) and Rapson (2012, 2015). Building on these studies, this essay offers a close reading of Jorge Semprún’s first work, *Le Grand voyage* (1963) [*The Long Voyage*, 2005], which centres on his deportation to Buchenwald and to a lesser extent, the return to life thereafter. In particular it will concentrate on one extended paragraph of that work wherein Semprún fantasises about nature overrunning the site in order that it may be hidden, in its physical form at least, from the world of the living:

I was saying to myself that I would like to see that: the grass and the bushes, the roots and brambles encroaching, [...] on this human countryside on the flank of the hill, this camp constructed by men, the grass and the roots repossessing the place where the camp had stood. The first to collapse would be the wooden barracks, those of the main camp [...] soon drowned by the invading tide of grass and shrubs, then later the two-story cement buildings, and then at last [...] the special symbol of that whole, the massive square chimney of the crematorium, till the day when the roots and brambles shall also overcome that tenacious resistance of brick and stone [...] covering over what was an extermination camp, and those shadows of dense black smoke [...] that

smell of burning flesh [...] when all the survivors, all of us, have long since disappeared, [and] there will no longer be any real memory of this. (2005: 190)<sup>i</sup>

This passage, despite the insertion of numerous ellipses, is reproduced at length for the striking perspective it promotes in marked opposition to the more contemporary view “that we need to remember and that we must fight forgetting” (Reemtsma, cited in Assmann, 2014); indeed in 2009 the above passage was cited, in a broader discussion of the remnants of Auschwitz, by the historian Robert Jan van Pelt who proposed that “[t]he best way to honour those who were murdered in the camp and those who survived [may be] by sealing it from the world, allowing grass, roots and brambles to cover, undermine and finally efface that most unnatural creation of Man.” Such a “creation” is one which could teach little to those who were not imprisoned there; for although those who returned *may* find comfort in being able to revisit the site and anchor their memories to a physical setting, one of the most frequent concerns in survivor testimony narrates the tension between their memory of the site, the transmission and communication of that memory, and the ongoing preservation or even reconstruction of the site of remembrance (see, amongst many others, Levi, 1987: 389-390): for Semprún, “the only possibility [*sic*] way of resolving the contradiction between [such] opposing realities would be the disappearance of all ‘objective’ traces of the camp and its history” (Van Pelt, 2003: 382).

Van Pelt’s (2003) analysis of Semprún features as a relatively minor aside in a much larger discussion of contemporary curation and management strategies pertaining to Auschwitz.<sup>ii</sup> By contrast, this reading of Semprún seeks to relate this fantasy within the broader context of his first work through a comparative reflection on the necessity and possibilities of ‘seeing’ and ‘belonging’: two themes which feature prominently throughout all Semprún’s writings. Through this exploration of Semprún’s thought, the motives and implications of his ruinous dream, in 1963 at least, will be articulated. Finally, it will seek to explain the evolution of

Semprún's thought which leads, in 1994, to the contradictory conclusion that the site of Weimar-Buchenwald should be preserved as the symbol of future democratic and universalist expansion of Europe, a place of remembrance and promise, and "an international center of Democratic reason" (Semprún, 1997: 306-307).

Given this volte-face, the original desire to see Buchenwald decay and the textual space which Semprún devotes to this idea in 1963 seem rather anomalous in the context of Semprún's literary testimony, not least on account of his "longing for justice, freedom and international solidarity, and his multi-faceted, persistent and principled attempts to ground a body of political convictions in real possibility" (Brodzki, 2007: 147). For Levi (1987: 390), these attributes are those of former political prisoners for whom remembering is a duty; the traits of those who "do not want to forget, and above all do not want the world to forget, because they understand that their experiences were not meaningless [and] that the camps were not an accident, an unforeseen historical happening." Accordingly, to understand the original stance adopted by Semprún, it is worth first situating it within the context of Semprún's (1997: 180) "return to life" (a phrase which he adopts, with many reservations, for the convenience of the reader), and second in relation to some of the more common arguments to oppose the attempted preservation of the former camps.

First, consider the sentiment that even the most well-intentioned of contemporary visitors to these sites will be able to derive little knowledge from their memorialisation. During their operation the sites of killing and their purpose were bound to each other, inseparable in their contemporaneity. In the present day however, the purpose of these sites is one of commemoration, mourning and pilgrimage. As Van Pelt rightly notes, these multiple 'opposing realities' which surround and which *are* those sites are difficult to reconcile. Following the arrival of Allied forces at Buchenwald, the site "qui fut un camp

d'extermination" (Semprún, 1963: 225) ["which *was* an extermination camp" (2005: 190, emphasis added)] is no longer tied to its historical, political purpose.<sup>iii</sup>

This void which exists between the contemporary visitor and the sites of traumatic history may be further exacerbated by the saturation of media images which have been in wide circulation in the decades following the event. In an oft-cited passage, Susan Sontag (1977: 19-20) recalls the "negative epiphany" after her first exposure to footage taken by the Allied forces at Bergen-Belsen. More recently, Keil (2005: 480) has argued that:

[r]epetitive representation – in films, texts and images, corrupts the sacralised nature of the object or location, or at least adulterates perceptions of it, producing feelings of disappointment when confronted by the original, which is smaller, or shabbier, or somehow more banal than expected.

That repeated exposure to even the most shocking images of violence serves only to anaesthetise the pain contained within them is foreshadowed in Edkins' (2003: 138-139) analysis of the preservation of Dachau. Therein she considers the effect that such a mollification and banalisation of past suffering may have on the contemporary reconstruction of the camp that visitors expect or even desire to see:

[t]he barracks where each prisoner had his own bed, with a shelf for belongings and a hook for their cap? Surely not, this looks far too civilised, by no means horrific enough. Or the stripped-down version, where each bed was home to four or five prisoners and the details such as personal wardrobe space had almost disappeared? Still not horrific enough for you? How about the final layout [...] where all semblance of separate beds [...] had disappeared? They were replaced by sleeping platforms, in three layers, where the lack of divisions meant that more prisoners [...] could be accommodated. These certainly look as though they might be more uncomfortable.

Following these anxieties, one may wonder whether the saturation of imagery of the atrocity has created a rigid conception of how these sites should be (re-)presented. On the one hand, this conception defies comprehension; on the other, it has been rendered only too familiar and accessible. To this end, Caroline Wiedmer (1999: 166) remembers the conclusion of a conversation overheard between teenagers leaving the Sachsenhausen concentration camp: “*Schindler’s List* was better”. Of course, by “better”, what the group actually meant was that the film has a narrative; it has a sweeping and majestically affective soundtrack; it allows the recognition of individuals; it celebrates the survival of those who were “clever or good or brave or loyal or beautiful” (Horowitz, 1997: 137) – all in marked contrast to both the reality of anonymous, random, industrialised murder, and the static, arranged and contrived exhibits of a museum (see Levi, 1987: 389-90).

Equally unsettling is Timothy Luke’s suggestion (2002: 64) that sites such as Buchenwald may simply “leave the highly entertained visitor with an uneasy faith that this sort of horror can never happen again.” From such malaise it is easy to hear an unsettling paraphrasing of the narrator’s concluding words in Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* [*Night and Fog*] (1955): too many refuse to see; too many refuse to hear the cry to the end of time. Such recourse to blindness moreover is not limited to the present day; it dominates, unsurprisingly, survivors’ accounts of the woefully inadequate immediate reactions of those who first found the camps, the first to attempt to see, and in some instances the first to think they saw: “Frightful. Yes, frightful!” (Antelme, 1947: 301). These difficulties, inherent in attempts to see and respond to the camps, further resonate in three vignettes penned by Charlotte Delbo. Having described a selection of the horrors that she witnessed in Birkenau, each vignette concludes with six simple words: “[e]ssayez de regarder. Essayez pour voir” (1970: 137-9). In the English edition of this work, these six words are rendered as: “[t]ry to look. Just try and see” (Delbo, 1995: 84-6). However, this translation fails to account for the choice of two different

prepositions to link imperative to infinitive in the original text. Accordingly, a more faithful (if less eloquent) rendering of the French might be: “try to look. Try so that you may see.” Delbo’s first injunction is that her readers should try to look at the pitiful scenes that she describes. Then, and only then, the request follows that the reader tries to understand them. Thus, Delbo articulates a difference between looking (implying observation, detachment) and seeing (implying empathy, recognition, comprehension, affect, imagination). Moreover in recognising that neither of her injunctions is guaranteed to be successful, Delbo also emphasises that in this instance it is the attempt which is important; through such efforts, the possibilities for empathy and partial comprehension, however fleeting, may only be accentuated.

Whilst efforts to see should thus of course be praised, in the present day a growing need to be seen to be seeing (eg. Dalziel, 2016; Mitschke, 2016) is now emerging at Holocaust memorial sites. Whilst such tendencies may indeed allow “Holocaust tourists [to] use photography to perform an ethically engaged subjectivity” (Reynolds, 2016: 9), they are equally prone to provoke more than a little unease for reasons surrounding the sacredness of the site, and the potentially frivolous nature of such engagement. Less discussed, though prompting no less disquiet, is the implied visibility of the historical event which accompanies such performances: in taking a selfie, the photographer is promoted to be seen to be seeing ‘it’. Thus the traumatic excess of the historical past is rendered into a tangible presence which can be quantified, apprehended and understood. Alain Resnais’s second film, *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), warns of the dangers inherent in such an approach to the traumatic past: when a Japanese man and his French lover discuss what she has seen in her visit to the ruins of the eponymous city, she insists that she has seen everything, much to his disdain – “You saw nothing at Hiroshima. Nothing” (Duras, 1960: 6). As Cathy Caruth (1996: 28) explains, the woman’s lack of vision is not a result of the places she visited and perceived, but is far more



integral to the traumatic event. The problem is “*that* she perceives, precisely, a *what*.” To see Hiroshima emblematically or symbolically and not the void of the tragic event itself, is to not see; that event, akin to the Holocaust, “cannot be captured in the realm of sight [...] it exceeds [it]” (Edkins, 2003: 113).

Set against these rightfully bleak analyses of Edkins, Van Pelt, and Caruth, and the desperate, despairing testimony of Antelme, Delbo and Levi, it is tempting to read Semprún’s objection to the preservation of Buchenwald as a protest against what may now be viewed as the increasing commodification and voyeuristic pull of the sites of death: what Lennon and Foley (2000: 10) broadly term “dark tourism”. Moreover the symbolic romanticism which is connected with ideas of growth and rebirth is clear: vegetation may lend “peace to what was once a malevolent landscape” (Rymaszewski, cited by Rapson, 2014: 76).

However, such arguments, and that specifically made by Van Pelt (2009) for “an erasure of memory” by nature, miss the nuances expressed in Semprún’s wider corpus. For it is precisely in memory of those who were not lucky enough to survive, that Semprún writes. At no point does he testify to the logic of the place where “it” happened; rather, as he searches for the collision point between Evil and fraternity, he continuously testifies to the life and death of the other: the fifteen Jewish children; Hans; Maurice Halbwachs; “that old bloke”; Morales; Julien; the Hortieux brothers; “the young German soldier who was singing the Paloma”; François L; Yann Dessau:

I began to speak. Perhaps because nobody was asking me anything, plying me with questions, pressing me for information. Perhaps because Yann Dessau would not come back and someone had to speak in his name, in the name of his silence, of all the silences: thousands of stifled cries. Perhaps because the returning ghosts must sometimes speak for those who have disappeared, the survivors taking the place of those who have gone under. (1997: 137)

As alluded to above, this determination to speak out manifests itself not only in Semprún's testimony on behalf of the victims of the concentrationary regime, but also on behalf of those whom he killed as an active member of the French Resistance.<sup>iv</sup> Accordingly, he feels obliged to twice bear witness to "the young German soldier who was singing the Paloma" (1967: 161-8; 1997: 31-37) since the original account in *L'Evanouissement* (1967) [*The Blackout*] "had hardly any readers" (1997: 35). Such, as will later become further apparent, is the essential importance for Semprún of remembering all victims of conflict and mass murder.

In addition to this testimonial purpose, Semprún's works are also inescapably written for the education of future generations: hence the dedication of *Le Grand voyage* to Semprún's son: "for Jaime, because he's sixteen years old", and also that of *Quel beau dimanche!* (1980) [*What a Beautiful Sunday!* (1983)] to his grandson, Thomas, "so that he may – later, after – remember this memory." As Kathryn Jones (2007: 50) notes:

[Semprún's] appeal for future listeners points towards an ongoing notion of testimony, and [his] emphasis on the transmission of testimony to the next generation highlights his desire to create witnesses to the witnesses for the time when the survivors and their immediate memory have disappeared.

To this end, the lengthy citation which prompted this discussion, occurs in *Le Grand voyage* almost as an afterthought, albeit one of great importance, amidst this transmission of testimony. To contextualise it amongst the "Proustian narrative structure that kaleidoscopically conflates time zones" (Kaplan, 2003: 324), a few weeks after the liberation of Buchenwald, Semprún and his companion Michel are searching for any trace of the 'Tabou' resistance network and their comrade Hans whom they believe fell to enemy fire more than two years earlier. This search is interrupted with the lengthy citation with which this essay opened. Thereafter as Semprún and the reader return to the present of the narration,

the search for Hans is succinctly summed up by Michel: “there’s nothing more to see here” (191). In the first instance this “nothing” refers to the clearing in the forest and the lack of any trace of their friend. However, given the context of the extensive interruption, it seems equally valid to read this “nothing”, at the time it was written at least, as a reflection on both the future that Semprún desired for Buchenwald and its perceived visibility (or, more precisely, its invisibility) in the present of the novel. Such is the disjunction between past and present meanings that even for those on the inside of the event, there is simply nothing left to see; nothing that can be imagined in its totality; nothing that can be understood. In part, for Semprún and other survivors, as has been extensively discussed by Agamben (2002), such disjunctions may arise quite simply according to the singularity of the individual’s experience – or rather, following Semprún, their untranslatable *Erlebnis* or *vivencia*: “the [crossing] through death [as] an experience of life [...] life as the [active] experience of itself” (1997: 138). Thus in *Quel beau dimanche!*, the reader is introduced to Walter, one of the few remaining German Communists who had been interned at Buchenwald since 1933. Walter is a pleasant man who, Semprún writes, “talks to us”:

When I say ‘us’, it’s not quite right. There are layers, a sort of hierarchy. The most invisible of which is really us [...] We who have been there since 1943, more or less. We’re ten years behind them [...] in 1943 they’d been in prisons and camps for ten years. What can we know of their lives, their interests? How can we understand what drove them mad? We were outside, we were drinking beer. They were inside. We were outside, we walked in Parc Montsouris. They were inside. We were outside, brushing against [...] young women. They were inside. (1980: 215)

This difference between what it means to be a primary witness on the ‘inside’ or a secondary witness on the ‘outside’ functions as a pressing *leitmotif* throughout Semprún’s writing.

Indeed in *Le Grand voyage*, as the deportation wagons trundle slowly through the Moselle

valley, Semprún observes people walking alongside a road towards a tranquil village where wisps of smoke rise calmly from chimneys.<sup>v</sup> With the realisation that these people have their own houses to go to, their own lives, their own stories and their own worries, Semprún laments:

I am inside and [...] they are outside [...] I'm inside, for months I've been inside, and the others are outside. I'm inside and they are outside. It's not only the fact that they are free [...] it's merely that they are outside [...] They, quite simply, are outside, and I am inside [...] we are inside. There's the outside and the inside, and I am inside.  
(2005: 22-3)

In the same work, this barrier between deportees and civilians, insiders and outsiders is given further prominence by the switch in narrative voice which occurs in the novel's brief coda: as the wagons approach their final destination, "an extra- and heterodiegetic narrator offers an account of Semprún's arrival at the camp" (Jones, 2007: 36). The reader may no longer participate in this journey as an insider; instead, the rupture occasioned by the camps is experienced in the third person as "Gérard jumps down onto the platform, into the blinding light" (Semprún, 2005: 217) of the camp's searchlights. Ofelia Ferrán (2007: 90) reads this switch in narrative voice as a means of preservation undertaken by the author during the writing of the novel, arguing that upon arriving at Buchenwald "the memory now becomes too painful, the wound so great that the narrator must completely break with the character (himself) he is remembering in order to survive his narration." However, it is interesting to note Dalton's argument (2005: 216-217) that such refusals to allow outsiders to enter the camp via the narrative 'I' are echoed in both Louis Malle's semi-autobiographical film *Au revoir les enfants*, and Claude Lanzmann's "incarnation" or "resurrection", *Shoah* (Lanzmann, cited in Felman, 1994: 97). Writing of the final scene of Malle's film, in which Jean Kipplestein is dragged through a hole in the school's wall by a German soldier, Dalton

argues that this image asks us “to imagine the place where the boys and the priest have been taken to – a place located outside the cinematic frame and outside our realm of experience.”

Dalton then cites Fred Camper’s meticulous analysis of the ending to *Shoah*. There the camera finally enters the camp through the iconic gatehouse of Birkenau not via its own movement, but rather via a zoom with the camera remaining on the outside of the camp: an “acknowledgement that neither Lanzmann nor we can truly pass through the gates of Auschwitz as its inmates did.”

This inability to share or understand the experience of those deported is further emphasised by Semprún during his first encounter with Allied soldiers (1997: 3-16). For Brodzki (2007: 164), such meetings “reinforce the existential difference between survivors and the rest of the human race.” However, despite the inadequacies of any words that they are able to formulate in response to the sight which greets them, Semprún nonetheless comes to realise that their perspective as outsiders is also essential for those, even former insiders such as himself, who would seek to look upon and understand the atrocity. Writing of the roll call square which he has never before seen from the outside, Semprún (2005: 70) notes that “it was deserted beneath the spring sun, and I stopped, my heart beating. I had never seen it empty before, I must admit, I hadn’t ever really seen it. I hadn’t really seen it before, not what you call ‘seeing’” (2005: 70).<sup>vi</sup> Indeed it is only during the fifteen days following the “opening” of the camps (Didi-Huberman, 2002) that Semprún is able to see Buchenwald from the outside and thus consolidate this secondary perspective. The necessity of this viewpoint resurfaces when, following a supply trip into a neighbouring village, Semprún encounters an elderly woman whose house directly overlooks the camp:

She must be wondering what I want, it’s certain. Though she wouldn’t understand if I told her that I simply want to see. To look, from the outside at that enclosure in which we’ve been caged for years. Nothing else. If I were to tell her that that was what I

want, she wouldn't understand. How could she? To understand this physical need to look at it from the outside, you have to have been inside. She can't understand. (2005: 153)

In this passage the gap between prisoner and civilian, and the necessity of a dual perspective to even attempt to understand the experience are again stressed. However, in considering the perspectives required by the outsider for the achievement of that same goal, it is worth recalling Delbo's injunction to her reader. "Try to look; try so that you may see." For when Semprún turned to the elderly occupant to ask how she had not seen the flames belching out of the crematoria chimney, it is clear from her response that she had indeed looked upon the camp. But what is also clear is that she chose not to see. She, and the inhabitants of the village who feign ignorance of the camp and the plight of those detained there, represent "German society's passive acceptance of the camps" (Jones, 2007: 46). From this narrative, one facet necessary for outsiders who would engage with the history of the camps becomes apparent: they must be willing to engage with the horrors of that past; they must be willing (to attempt) to gaze into the abyss and resist the luxury of voluntary blindness which is unavailable to the insider: "I wanted to see and I'm seeing. I'd like to be dead, but I'm seeing" (Semprún, 2005: 154).

However, a subsequent encounter with two *Mission France* volunteers who wished to visit the camp because "they had been told it was fascinating" (1997: 119) demonstrates that solely to wish to see the horror (regardless of motive, voyeuristic or otherwise) is also not sufficient to the task of transmitting memory.<sup>vii</sup> Having enlisted Semprún to act as their guide, the narrator again finds himself able to survey the camp with an outsider's perspective. Standing in its grounds, one of the volunteers catches sight of the crematoria chimney and asks if it is the camp's kitchen. A simple, albeit naïve question; and yet it confirms to Semprún that he must show them, as far as possible, the truth of the event: accordingly he

shows them the hooks mounted in the ceiling from which inmates, with their arms tied behind their backs, were suspended by their wrists; he shows them the cellar of the crematoria which also functioned as a torture room; he shows them the bull whips and the clubs; the mechanical lift which transported bodies to the ovens; the corpses, half-cremated, which lie therein.

I took them towards the crematory that one of them had taken for a kitchen. Show them? Perhaps the only possible way to make people understand, is indeed show them. The young women in blue uniforms, in any case, have seen. I don't know if they understood, but as far as seeing goes, they saw [...] They had to see, to try to imagine. Then I led them out of the crematory, into the interior courtyard surrounded by a high fence [...] In the middle of the courtyard, there was a pile of corpses a good nine feet high. A heap of yellowed, twisted skeletons with terror-stricken faces. We could hear the Russian accordion on the other side of the fence, still playing the frenzied *gopak*, its cheery strains swirling about that mound of cadavers. (1997: 121)

These two volunteers are amongst the first civilians to visit Buchenwald; traces of its operation are still visible and as such their desire to see is sated. However, by the end of their 'tour', they understandably neither wish nor are able to see any more – such is the scale of the atrocity; such is the surreal grotesqueness of “ce qui fut un camp d'extermination.”

Accordingly, for Semprún at least, to be a secondary witness requires both the desire to look and an infinite desire to see. Whilst the woman whose house overlooked Buchenwald had gazed upon the camp, she chose neither to see nor to imagine the events unfolding there. By contrast the two volunteers from *Mission France* wished to see (albeit for a rather dubious reason), but lacked the fortitude to continue with their task.<sup>viii</sup> In both instances comprehension and understanding are thwarted, though one position is perhaps slightly more

ethical than the other. For the reader too, the horror seen by the two volunteers is unthinkable and unbearable, and it is tempting to say, unimaginable:

[w]e have thus reached one of these realities that make us say that they surpass the imagination. Henceforth it's clear that it is only by choice, which is to say by an act of imagination, that we may try to say something about it. (Antelme, 1947: 9)

For Antelme and Semprún it is precisely on account of such unimaginable realities, that the necessity of literature for the outsider's attempts to understand and respond is revealed; in this vein, Charlotte Delbo, despite exposing "the failure of the literary imagination [...]" [resorts] to the familiar trope of the desert in order to describe thirsting at roll call" (Chare, 2014: 105). Moreover as Lawrence Langer (1975: 79) stresses, "the power of the imagination to evoke an atmosphere does far more than the historian's fidelity to fact." And yet this power is of course relative; in the context of the scale of suffering endured at these sites, one of the underpinning questions of Semprún's literary journey through memory concerns the limits of the imagination, not least since "nobody from the outside can understand" (2005: 153). For Semprún, it is simply impossible for the outsider, no matter how well-intentioned, to be able to see the reality of the camps for that suffering exceeds the imagination. Moreover in the present day, despite all the signposting, documents and evidence of the crime, many visitors to these sites seem unable to comprehend "that they walk on human ashes" (Bialot, 2002: 25). On the one hand, this disjunction arises with the 'death of the other'. On the other hand, as discussed via the German Communist, Walter, it arises simply on account of the impossibility of knowing the individual and subjective experiences of all those who knew the camps from the other side of the wire. This impossibility, it must be stressed, occurs not due to any failing on the part of the witness to describe the worst excesses of their experience, but rather on account of the inability of the witness's interlocutor to listen to the totality of their testimony: "the ineffable you hear so much about is only an alibi. Or a sign of laziness. You



can always say everything: language contains everything [...] But can one hear everything, imagine everything?" (Semprún, 1997: 13-14)

A close reading of Semprún, in an attempt to understand the motivations behind his desire in *Le Grand voyage* to see Buchenwald reclaimed by nature, thus confirms the scale of the challenge facing those who would gain even a fragmented knowledge of either Buchenwald or indeed any site or event which may fall under the broad umbrella term, 'the Holocaust'. The difficulties inherent in this task include the impossibility of knowing the other's life and death; the varying languages and epistemological capabilities separating those on either the inside or the outside of the event; the differences, in terms of empathetic comprehension, between what it means to look, see and imagine, and the motivation and attention to these verbs that will differ according to the circumstances of each individual to attempt them. Only by being aware of all these factors may we understand why it is that, in 1963, Semprún longs to see Buchenwald reclaimed by nature. Contrary to Van Pelt's reading, this fantasy is to facilitate neither the erasure of the past nor the suturing of the many conflicting and traumatic memories which surround it: not only would such attempts be antithetical to a project of living for the memory of others, but to suture the past, at a site of the traumatic complexity of Buchenwald 1933-1945, must also inevitably mean to exclude a part of its history, or at the very least to accord it less prominence.<sup>ix</sup> It is also worth remembering that attempts to control and erase memory and the past through deliberate acts of ruination and amnesia, may only highlight, preserve and direct attention towards them.<sup>x</sup> Between these positions, "the grass of forgetting is not selective – it grows anywhere" (Assmann, 2014).<sup>xi</sup> It is for this reason that Semprún wished to see the roots, brambles, and grass obscure the former site of Buchenwald and its history, precisely and paradoxically in order that memory and memories may continue to be preserved and transmitted; only at that point would it have been possible for the onlooker to stand *inside* the former site of death even whilst at the same instant remaining on

the *outside*.<sup>xii</sup> From such a position of dual occupancy and with a simultaneous dual perspective, those who would see would find themselves challenged to look behind the invading tide of grass and shrubs. Of course it is possible that they would not see anything – that, after all, is precisely the void and the infinite series of questions which were created by the camp regime. But as Webber (2004: 115) argues, to provide answers has never been the purpose of such sites: rather, “they must shock people into asking questions.” Moreover the ethical significance of such interrogatory acts of memory and the imagination “lies *not* in the result, *but in the fundamental nature of the attempt*” (Rapson, 2015: 76, emphasis added).

Guided by an intertextual mesh of external stimuli grounded in literature, testimony, film, the archive, and the limits of the imagination, such attempts to see behind nature’s foliage may, for Semprún at least, have aided outsiders to ask such questions and “experience a form of genuine empathy, [even] whilst elements within them act as a constant reminder that full identification will always be impossible” (Rapson, 2012: 176).

Perhaps, it is with this statement that we may come to understand Semprún’s original wish as that of a humanist who sought to transmit a genuine, if inevitably fragmented, understanding of his experience to future generations. Perhaps, more importantly we can read it as the desire of someone who longed to see the democratisation of memory and the narratives of history: in letting nature reclaim and cover the barracks, crematoria and grounds of the camps, the structural violence inherent to conscious attempts to remember and forget the worst extremes of the Nazi state could have been avoided in such a way that new generations, unencumbered by past politics and narratives of remembrance and commemoration, could “visit [these sites] under new circumstances and invest them with new meaning” (Young, 1993: 3). Thus sites such as Buchenwald could have become eternal palimpsestic canvasses on which new memories could be seen, inscribed, forgotten and overwritten, according to the “cultural imaginations of successive generations of readers of Holocaust testimonies” (Sanyal, 2002:

3).<sup>xiii</sup> Such fluidity of memory, the essence of Marianne Hirsch's term "postmemory", could itself have facilitated "public discourses" and "collective conversations" about the past, rather than the homogenous, unifying or indeed exclusionary concept of collective memory (Fulbrook, 1999: 144-6). Moreover for Semprún, those new generations of visitors, in their attempts to see, look and understand may have been able to do so, not in the shadow of the deaths of the victims, but rather in the light of their lives; that, after all, is why Semprún writes: neither for the memory nor the details of the historical event, but rather for the memory of the *people* who disappeared: "in the April sunshine, among the rustling beeches, these dreadful and fraternal dead needed no explanation. They needed us to live, quite simply, to live with all our strength in the memory of their death" (1997: 122). With that in mind, it perhaps becomes easier to understand Semprún's dream that the grass and the bushes, the roots and the brambles may grow freely over the material remains of Buchenwald; for Semprún, writing in 1963, it could only be at that point that the visitor to that site may try to look so that they may try to see; perhaps, for Semprún at least, only at that point could it be possible to realise an ethical and empathetic approach to the hidden nuances of such sites, memory and the politics of remembrance.

Unsurprisingly however, given Semprún's notoriety for contradictory and paradoxical statements, such a reading must confine itself to *Le Grand voyage*. For whilst his wish that the camp be engulfed by the forest, surfaces again in both *Quel beau dimanche!* and *L'Écriture ou la vie* (1994) [*Literature or Life*, (1997)], attention must be paid to the manner in which this idea is presented in these two works. In the former, it is with "timidity" that Semprún "limits himself to recounting that old dream" in fewer than forty words (1980: 22). Fourteen years later, this fantasy is recounted once more via a brief conversation which the reader is led to believe took place between Semprún and the camp librarian towards the end of the war:

“What do you want us to do with Buchenwald? Turn it into a place of pilgrimage, of meditation? A [holiday] resort?”

“Absolutely not! I’d like the camp to be abandoned to the erosion of time, of nature... I’d like it to be engulfed by the forest.” (1997: 63)

Thus the importance that Semprún attaches to the original fantasy, and indeed the conviction with which he expresses it, seem both diminished. The reason for this moderation of his thought between 1963 and 1980 becomes apparent at the start of the conversation cited above. Therein the librarian stresses the need for the repression and re-education of all former Nazis. In adopting the euphemistic language of the Nazi state to anticipate the identical discourse of the Soviet regime a few years later, the reader is reminded of the manner in which these sites would soon denote a “crisis of historical commemoration” (Farmer, 1995: 97), a crisis of remembrance, and perhaps most importantly in the context of this discussion, a personal crisis for Semprún whose “project of writing about Buchenwald [...] was utterly shaken by his realisation that the actual projection of Communism was the gulag and not the political vision of a classless society, free of alienation, which had previously sustained him” (Tidd, 2005: 410).<sup>xiv</sup> It is with this realisation that, the task of remembering the victims of Nazism becomes inextricably intertwined with the task of remembering the victims of Communism: as a result, Semprún’s later *récits* intersperse the memories of his own deportation with reflections on, amongst others, Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*, Gustav Herling’s *A World Apart*, Solzhenitsyn’s eponymous hero, Ivan Denisovich, and indeed the remembered memory of his comrade in Buchenwald, Pyotr: “the living embodiment of Soviet man: the new man, the true man” who having escaped from a Buchenwald kommando either died “a Communist broken by Communism, exhausted by the cold, the hunger [...] without ever understanding [...] what error he had committed”, or became “a Stakhanovite of

forced labour, a pitiless overseer, a shrieking hate-filled robot of Correct Thought, a murderer of his fellow deportees” (1983: 86-93).

It is on account of this dual attention to historic memory that Davis and Fallaize (2000: 78) conclude that Semprún “is unusual amongst Holocaust writers in that he does not give the Holocaust unique status, and Buchenwald is depicted as one source of trauma and dissolution amongst others.” Such depictions first emerge in *Le Grand voyage* when Semprún seeks to address the difference between his experience and that of those deported and murdered for their genetic lineage (2005: 96-97; 162-166). However, it is in his later works, following his expulsion from the Party in 1964, that the awareness that the end of Nazism can no longer be celebrated as the end of the concentrationary regime becomes increasingly central to his narratives: for in the same year as *Le Grand voyage* was published, Solzhenitsyn published *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and thus “destroyed the innocence in which we languished” (1983: 275). With the loss of that innocence, the possibility of “remaining in the comfort of [his] voluntary deafness” (2001: 146) was no longer viable: “for those who do not want to talk of Stalinism, must also be quiet on fascism” (1995: 85).

More importantly, in the context of the previous discussion of this essay, to wish to see Buchenwald reclaimed by nature is also no longer an appropriate response. Inevitably, the difficulties which remain in according equal acknowledgement to the stories of all who suffered at the site are magnified. Importantly though for Semprún, it is no longer possible, solely on the base of an assumed political credence, to distinguish the human freedoms capable of producing Good and Evil; nor is it possible to decry the inhumanity of Evil, since even the most “sadistic torturers all belonged to the human race just as much as the best and purest among [...] the victims” (1997: 164).

So it was that upon returning to Buchenwald in 1992, Semprún was reminded of Paul Celan’s poem, *Todesfugue*. In particular in the context of this visit, he reframes one line: “der Tod ist

ein Meister aus Deutschland.” “Death is a master from Germany.” Of course the death which devastated mainland Europe 1933-45 was a consequence of the political accession of Hitler. However, as Semprún notes, death was not the preserve of German power. Semprún himself had known death as a master from Spain. “And the French Jews, tracked and deported by the truly French Vichy government knew death as a master from France. And Varlam Shalamov has spoken of death as a master from Soviet Russia” (1995: 88). Thus Semprún concluded that death is a master sprung from humanity, and whilst the victims of fascism had indeed “climbed as clouds of smoke into the sky, to make their graves in the clouds”, the victims of Stalin were covered by a forest in which neither Goethe nor Eckermann had ever walked; a forest in which the young “of today and tomorrow *must* walk” (Semprún, 1995: 91). Ironically, his initial desire to see the reversal of the Nazi’s deforestation programme at Ettersberg was eventually, at least partially, realised. However, these trees had not sprung from nature or the natural decay of that “camp constructed by men” (2005: 190); rather, accompanied by the deliberate destruction of large segments of the camp, they were planted by the Soviet authorities in an act of repressive erasure (Connerton 2008) both to hide the mass graves of those interned and murdered post-1945 and to aid the forgetting of the crimes committed in the name of the ideology for which Semprún himself had once so ardently fought:

Surely there was a way of erasing [...] the guilt I felt at having lived in the blessed innocence of the memory of Buchenwald, the innocent memory of having belonged to the camp of the just, without the slightest doubt, whereas the ideas for which I thought I was fighting, the justice for which I thought I was fighting, was serving at the same time to justify the most radical injustice, the most absolute evil: the camp of the just had created and was running the Kolyma camps. (1983: 96)

And yet, as Semprún knows only too well, to erase either guilt or memory is not a solution for those who would understand the past and transmit memory. As such, although the prominence which Semprún accords to his old fantasy is much reduced in his subsequent works, his literary recollections neither forget nor erase it: to do so would be but a further manipulation of memory concerning both a site and a history where the claims to memory, commemoration and mourning are already so vast and so many.<sup>xv</sup>

Having thus housed the extreme violence of both totalitarian experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, both Germany and Buchenwald overflow with attempts to create and distort both memory and amnesia. It is on account of this tension that Semprún concludes that it is Germany that is best placed to promote the democratic and universalist expansion of the idea of Europe (1997: 307). Moreover, it is on account of that shared past that there are few places more fitting than the Ettersberg hill to install a European institution dedicated to education, democracy and memory:

Buchenwald is the place of historical memory which best symbolises this double task: that of grieving to critically master the past; that of setting out the principles of a European future which will allow us to avoid the errors of the past. (1995: 92)

Such is the complicated nature of the excavational memory work undertaken by Semprún throughout all his writing. Such is the conclusion of more than sixty years devoted to the attempted reconciliation of survival, remembrance, political allegiances and historical traumas. Such is the enduring challenge to future generations.

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<sup>i</sup> Wherever possible, all translations and accompanying page references are based on published editions.

<sup>ii</sup> Much has been made of the distinction between the former extermination camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka and Sobibor, and the former concentration camps, such as Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen. The former are emblematic of the Jewish Holocaust; the latter of the politically motivated repression and murder of opponents to the Nazi regime. Given Semprún's status as a Spanish Red and subsequent deportation to Buchenwald, the principal focus of this essay will be that site. However, given the wealth of academic and more popular debate concerning the preservation and memorialisation of all former sites connected with the Holocaust, and indeed Semprún's own deliberate confusion of the two phenomenon (Herman, 2016) it is perhaps inevitable that this difference will be slightly elided during the course of this discussion.

<sup>iii</sup> The decision to add emphasis to the English translation is a reflection of Semprún's use of the past historic in the original text.

<sup>iv</sup> See Anderson (2006: 565-568) for a fascinating discussion of the narrative technique deployed in the narration of this episode and its effects on the reader.

<sup>v</sup> The contrast between these wisps of smoke coming from the village and the dense, impenetrable and choking smoke of the crematoria is only too evident; this contrast moreover further emphasises the difference between the insider and the outsider, and the significance that these two different agents are able to attribute to the same signifier.

<sup>vi</sup> Semprún continues: "I saw this countryside which had been the setting for my life for two years, and I saw it for the first time. I saw it from the outside, as if this countryside which had, until yesterday, been my life, was now to be found on the other side of a mirror" (2005: 70).



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<sup>vii</sup> Typical of Semprún's journeys into memory, this scene occurs more than once within his works: first within *Le Grand voyage* (69-72; 74-76); secondly in *L'Ecriture ou la vie* (119-122).

<sup>viii</sup> For the sake of accuracy, it is worth here pointing out a slight discrepancy in the various accounts of this episode as narrated by Semprún. In *Le Grand voyage*, both volunteers flee the spectacle of the camps; however, one lingers behind to tell her guide that "[she would] like to see more" (2005: 75); Semprún declines her request, saying that he is too exhausted. When this same episode is again recounted in *L'Ecriture ou la vie*, no mention is made of her appeal.

<sup>ix</sup> It is worth stressing that at this point Semprún's difficulty in reconciling the many histories of Buchenwald concerns solely the contrast between the site on the doorstep of the city of Weimar culture, and the site where so many Jews, Roma, Sinti, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and political prisoners, all with their own individual stories and claims to memory, were murdered. Within *Le Grand voyage*, there is nothing to suggest at this point in time his awareness of the site's subsequent role as NKVD Special Camp No.2.

<sup>x</sup> See Adrian Forty's insightful discussion (1999: 10-11) of the removal, post-1989, of all visible traces of the Communist regime in both the former Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe, and the effect thereof upon subsequent attempts to forget the past.

<sup>xi</sup> With this citation, it is possible to conceive of an eighth type of forgetting to complement the seven categories proposed by Connerton (2008), distinct insofar as it would not require human action (or indeed inaction) to be realised.

<sup>xii</sup> It is interesting to note here the correlation between Semprún's thought and the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial proposed in 1957 by Oskar and Zofia Hansen. Their design comprised a granite walkway, suspended above the site of Birkenau, from which visitors to the site would be able to peer down on the ruins of the camp. "The proposal was relentless. It prohibited

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encounter and refused to surrender to the illusion of memory [...] Only silence and the bizarre granite walkway to pose the question for future generations: What happened here? [...] Future generations [would] walk through Birkenau but, not being of it they [would] be constrained to walk over it. It [would] be their lot to pass over that terrain, unable to grasp the events of the killing fields” (Dwork and Van Pelt, 2002: 377-378).

<sup>xiii</sup> Such canvasses are, according to Semprún (1997: 276), “the dream of any writer”, since they allow the author to spend their life perpetually rewriting the same book. This discussion takes place as Semprún recalls the award ceremony for the Formentor Prize which had been awarded to *Le Grand voyage*. Amongst the various editions of the work which were on display, the pages of the Spanish translation are entirely blank, or “available” – a result of the censorship of the Francoist regime. For Semprún these white pages are a joyous confirmation that the task of writing is not yet over, and that words and memory are inexhaustible (1997: 268-277).

<sup>xiv</sup> In a similar vein, see also Michael Rothberg’s discussion of the same sentiment in the work of Charlotte Delbo: “[p]art of her bitterness derives from the fact that the struggle in which she and Paul were engaged, and for which he gave his life, had failed to fulfil their hopes. Communist social revolution, on whose promise their antifascism was premised, was revealed as capable of crimes of a comparable magnitude to those of the Nazis” (2000: 173). See also Semprún 1980: 419-424.

<sup>xv</sup> See Azarayahu (2003: 1-20) for a comprehensive discussion of the uses of Buchenwald, both as a detention site and as a site for and of memory where “meaning transcends [the] official interpretations and intentions cast in the authoritative mould of a commissioned memory” (20).

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