

THE SPIRIT OF THE RESISTANCE AS THE AXIS OF THE POLITICAL PROJECT OF THE EU. AN ANALYSIS OF *LITERATURE OR LIFE* BY JORGE SEMPRÚN

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Abstract || This piece of work analyses the process of memory construction in the work of Jorge Semprún, focusing in his novel *Literature or Life*. In this article, we explore the connection between the building of a collective identity that could be used as the basis of an European spirituality represented in the political project of the European Union. Our article tries to disclose the literary strategies that Semprún uses to establish this identification while proposing a critical analysis of its political implications.

Keywords || Jorge Semprún | *Literature or Life* | collective memory | european identity | resistance | affective community.

0. Introduction

In the fourth issue of this magazine we proposed to examine the connection between compared literature, cultural products related to memory and their relationship with the construction of individual and collective identities. The objective was therefore to insist on a contrastive approach that could be able to escape the literary text itself in order to articulate an assertion related to reality, not only for serving as an analysis tool of it, but also, and even more importantly, for working as an axis from which it could be transformed.

The situation derived from the so-called “testimonial literature”, widely analysed by different authors —was also dealt with in the fourth issue of our monograph by authors such as Jaume Peris (2005) or José Colmeiro—, focuses on using the testimony and the memory to elaborate an “official story” in many cases destined to be used as a justification for certain attitudes or political decisions. These “abuses of memory”¹ force us, comparative analysts, to adopt a critical position. Consequently, it is necessary to reflect not only on the way of narrating, but also on the implications this entails in the construction of an identity and a collective memory as well as their political implications in the present.

This is the approach that we have adopted to review the work of Jorge Semprún and more specifically, his novel *Literature or Life*. The complexity of his writing, articulated around the process of the historical-literary narration itself and its direct relationship with the construction of the memories of the concentration camps and the construction of a European identity, joins these processes of discourse construction while proposing a theoretical and practical exploration of the political impact of literature. Simultaneously, it casts into doubt the limits of testimony in its relationship with the novel and the autobiography, as well as with History and Memory. This way, whilst *Literature or Life* presents, from its own narrative construction, the dialectics between individual and community, it also claims the incorporation of subjectivity in political discourse by displacing the notion of historic “truth” in favour of the dialectical and dynamic construction of the collective memory. Using his personal experience as an articulating reflection of a collective experience, Semprún elaborates a testimony that exemplifies the connection between individual and community via the textual hybridization of two concepts: the notion of “affective community»² (Halbwachs, 2005) whose limits are intended to be amplified constantly by the writing of the own literary work, and that of “European spiritual shape”, analysed by Edmund Husserl in 1935 (Husserl, 1970)³. Starting from the interrelation of these two concepts, Semprún’s work intends to be part of the construction process of a “collective memory”. Likewise, he proposes a spatial-temporal redefinition which allows Europe to

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1 | See Todorov (2000).

2 | The novel claims therefore continuity with the European humanistic and idealistic spirit while trying to project it toward the European political system. In this regard, the presence of Maurice Halbwachs —which also has a clear testimonial function—, acquires a fundamental ideological value. Indeed, this figure is established not only as the narrative core of the novel (and that of the memory), but also as the theoretical coordinating point of the literary artifice itself as well as that of the discursive propositions derived from it. In The collective memory Maurice Halbwachs (2004) highlights the relationship between the experience and the collective experience when it comes to constructing memory. According to Halbwach’s study, memory is conceived as a dynamic process in which the relationship between the individual and the community re-signifies and re-constitutes memories continuously. In this sense, just as evocation depends on the other, the constitution of memory depends on the emotional link with memory, a link which permits the “affective community” to be brought together, being able to maintain this collective memory in an active process of construction and re-signification, that is, of presentization. The “school of thought” is the framework in which both the individual memory and the collective one can converge. This “school of thought” could be transmitted from one generation to another through the construction of an affective community.

overcome a traumatic experience and cooperate in a political project articulated according to Husserl's supranational model, which would become visible in the democratic Europe of the European Union.

In accordance with the above-mentioned principles, the aim of this article is, on one hand, to analyse the mechanisms with which Semprún establishes such connection and, on the other, to conduct a critical analysis of the political implications of this construction.

1. The testimony as a political exercise: the vindication of the political project of the European Union

In this regard, Semprún's testimony, written in 1995, six years after the Berlin Wall's fall and after the opening of Germany to the communitarian Europe, represents an ideological defence of the European political system as a symbol of overcoming experience and European fraternity. In fact, as Semprún admits, the European Union reflects the success of this "European spiritual shape", vindicated by Husserl.

Algunos, posteriormente, comparando la época con esa utopía racional supranacional de una Europa inspirada por la razón y por el espíritu crítico, han puesto en evidencia el carácter aparentemente irrisorio de ese racionalismo abstracto y utópico, retórico. Y, sin embargo, esa razón democrática ha triunfado, y en la Europa actual, al margen de todos los problemas a los que han aludido quienes me han precedido, todos los problemas de la virulencia de los nacionalismos y de la disgregación de los imperios, resulta evidente que la idea capital que el anciano filósofo expresaba patéticamente en 1935 en Viena ha cobrado forma y ha cobrado cuerpo (Semprún, 2006: 261).

Semprún's novel constitutes therefore a practice of assertion of a fraternal contemporary Europe's notion, driven by humanist values and touched by a spirit of resistance. The novel intends both to vindicate and to enlarge the margins of this "affective community", towards a "school of thought" characteristic of Europe.

Thus, it helps constructing a European collective memory where the experience of the camps would acquire a new significance to show the EU as the result of the European overcoming of its history and ontology. In this respect, we consider it especially interesting to undertake a critical analysis of *Literature or Life*, so the view of the current European political situation which is being constructed can be explored.

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It could be more or less present at a certain historic moment while constituting, in any case, the constructive essence of memory (Halbwachs, 2004: 66).

3 | Edmund Husserl, in his essay "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity", pointed out the spatial-temporal dilemma in which Europe was immersed: Europe had the possibility to develop the project of a supranational Europe or to give up to the advance of the totalitarianisms and the spiritual disintegration. The European unification was made possible, according to Husserl, thanks to the fraternal character of the different European nations, twinned by a historical, philosophical and cultural tradition which would come to constitute a European spirituality (Husserl, 1970). This way, Husserl constructs an idealistic tradition associated with the principles of reason (ratio) of the Enlightenment as the theoretical grounding of this spirituality. This notion, which is vindicated by Semprún himself in numerous essays (Semprún, 2006), is established in the novel as the "school of thought" in which the testimony must be integrated and it is reintroduced, once again, as the constructive axis of the European Union.

1.1. The construction of a European imaginary.

The different literary tools present in the novel contribute to the development of two basic strategies: the new significance of experience and the mythic construction of memory. The combination of both represents an approach of the current European political situation while a mythic imaginary is constructed, as a strategy of production of that affective community, conceived as a point of reference in the articulation of that European spirituality. In this novel, Semprún creates a symbolism which imbricates the fictional life of his faithful representation as well as a historic reality and a European cultural tradition. Likewise, he contributes to the creation of a “referential tradition of myths or allegories” (Semprún, 1997: 181) which allows the representation of the Buchenwald camp. The narrative strategy of Semprún responds to the need to provide the representation with a series of references able to articulate an affective link between the reader and the notion of resistance. This way, the reader identifies himself with a figure which becomes part of a trans-historical community⁴.

1.2. The genre as the constructor of a European imaginary

First, it appears to be a required step to reflect on the genre choice through which the author undertakes the representation of experience. Thus, the construction of a transfigured autofictional self («Necesito pues un “yo” de la narración que se haya alimentado de mi vivencia pero que la supere, capaz de insertar en ella lo imaginario, la ficción» (Semprún, 1995: 181)) is especially relevant. The latter is divided into two voices which admit the artefactual character of the narration, while stating repeatedly his intention of testifying a historical event. This division into two voices reflects once more the interpretation of construction of Maurice Halbwachs’ autobiographical memory, according to which «el “yo” y su duración se sitúan en el punto de encuentro de dos series distintas y, en ocasiones, divergentes: la que se asocia a los aspectos vivos y materiales del recuerdo y la que reconstruye lo que únicamente forma parte del pasado» (Duvignaud, 2004: 12). Thus, the narrative voice flows between the representation of facts presented with an immediacy character, where the affective link becomes more marked by the use of the present tense, and the assumption of a mayor temporal-affective distance, stylistically noticeable by the use of the past tense.

This literary strategy is associated with Faulkner’s writing, directly alluded to in the novel, where “it’s memory that counts, that controls the rich mystery of the story, impels it along...” (Semprún, 1997: 165).

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4 | The strategy of Semprún agrees on this issue with the assertion of Hardt and Negri, who argue that the construction of a mythology of the resistance is reflected by the organizational capacity of the multitude as political subjectivity while constituting a strategy necessary for the latter to be recognized (Hardt y Negri, 2001: 413).

Combined with a styled language, able to transcend experience, this narrative strategy reasserts this idea of memory reconstruction.

This is how Semprún articulates, in a literary way, Halbwachs' sociological theory, which stands that «un acontecimiento no ocupa su lugar en la serie de hechos históricos hasta un tiempo después de producirse» (Halbwachs, 2005: 55). Semprún creates a narrator who accounts a story where plausibility features such as the constant use of historic dates, the inclusion of autobiographical data or the appearance of real characters abound in order to provide the narration with an objective character. Nevertheless, he reconstructs the memory explicitly and redefines experience by a rhetoric strategy which forces the reader to question the “truthfulness” of the testimony. The opposition of these two narrative voices allows him to elaborate an overcoming interpretation of the historic and ontological experience, which is simultaneously refrained by the narrative structure of the novel. Thus, in the last chapter, the individual-author himself emblemizes the overcoming of the experience in the camps, not only for returning to Buchenwald, but also for having finished the account. Likewise, the new generations, represented by Semprún's grandchildren⁵ and Cohn-Bendit, are erected as the recipients of the testimony and the continuers of a European political future inspired in the resistance and the values of a humanistic tradition while being integrated, like the reader himself/herself, in the same European mythic universe.

In this regard, the narrative voice reads out the experience which eventually attempts to be a reflection of both Semprún's view of the same European present and the constitutive essence of the European Union. At the same time, the genre ambiguity enhances the subjective notion of the event and the account. As a consequence, *Literature or Life* explicits the constructive character associated with History while exemplifying the practice of the “collective memory” construction by the constant dialogue between “autobiographical memory” and “historic memory” (Halbwachs, 2005: 53). This is how Semprún's testimony achieves distance from the attempt to construct a historic *truth*, in favour of cooperating with a memory project able to construct a mythic imaginary articulated in accordance with affections.

1.3. The date as a temporal frame of the European mythic imaginary

The construction of this imaginary is shown, first, in the construction of a temporal frame of the memory. In this sense, in the work of

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5 | In this sense, Maurice Halbwachs (2004), in *The Collective Memory*, claims the family frame and particularly, the figure of grandparents-grandchildren as crucial for the transmission of this “school of thought”.

Semprún the “date” is singularly significant and its inclusion works, as above-mentioned, as a plausibility strategy.

On the other hand, it involves a rhetoric tool which allows the reader to be included in an identifiable and common temporal frame. The date means therefore a key factor when representing a temporality which includes the experience in the historic discourse and which articulates dialogically the collective memory with the autobiography. Hence, the novel represents a “self” which assumes its own biography as a temporal frame of the account and therefore, dates acquire a new value. That is the case of the month of April, which is not only related to Buchenwald’s liberation but also to the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic. Simultaneously, the “self” compares collective events to dates with an affective character which construct this European symbolic imaginary in accordance with humanism. On this basis, both in his literary work and essays, Semprún argues a mythic construction of events, where the figure of Elias Canetti can be associated with that of Bloch; the former gave a speech the same day that the latter was born. So it happens with Baudelaire and Halbwachs, with Semprún’s own literary representation, with Buchenwald and the Battle of Madrid; Semprún and Halbwachs discussed on their cots a Baudelaire’s poem the same day of the anniversary of the outbreak of the Battle of Madrid. This is how, through memory association processes⁶, a mythic temporal frame characteristic of the resistant European humanism is being constructed. This is where History is compared to the events and where the author sets his own work.

1.4. The camp as the origin

According to Halbwachs, just as memory acquires its temporality in relation with social frameworks, space comes to be an essential element in the construction of an affective community. Thus, «todo lo que hace el grupo puede traducirse en términos espaciales, y el lugar que ocupa no es más que la reunión de todos los términos» (Halbwachs, 2005: 133). In this regard, the concentration camp is conceived as a spatial crossroad in which the European idealist tradition culminates. The latter is represented as much in the conversations between Goethe and Eckermann, two centuries ago, as in the poets, musicians and European philosophers evoked in the conversations at the latrines or around Maurice Halbwachs’ cot, as well as in the underground acts of resistance themselves. The new conception of space, supported by the Faulknerian narrative structure and the construction of a space-continuum, contributes thus to the construction of a collective memory which includes the camps in an original mythic space which can be identified as a homeland. Therefore, the Buchenwald camp (so close to Weimar, symbolic centre of the European humanism, which had also served

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6 | This associative process is a construction tool of the evocation in all the work as Soto Fernández points out: «En virtud de ese proceso asociativo lo blanco vincula el bosque de hayas con la tormenta de nieve que cayó sobre París el 1 de mayo cuando desfilaban libertadores y deportados, al tiempo que esta imagen atrae a otra, también de nieve que reaparecerá en Ascona como una visión letal que hará fracasar sus intenciones literarias. El sueño de la nieve volvió quince años después, en su reclusión en 1962 en Concepción Bahamonde, cuando recobró la memoria escuchando los relatos de un compañero sobre Mauthausen; éstos exorcizaron su terror al recuerdo y lo dispusieron para “afrentar la muerte a través de la escritura”. A la cadena de imágenes asociadas se une el simbolismo de las efemérides: también el 1 de mayo de 1964, nueve años después del desfile en París en el que la tormenta de nieve cayó sobre los liberados de los campos alemanes, vuelve este fantasma en el ejemplar blanco de caracteres de *El Largo viaje*, con el que Carlos Barral suple la edición española de la novela, que la censura impidió fuera imprimida para la entrega del Premio Formentor celebrada en Salzburgo. El principiante escritor interpretó, en aquella maqueta vacía de contenido, la tarea perpetua de renovar el interminable relato de su experiencia»

as a concentration camp under the totalitarian domination of the GDR (Semprún, 1994: 12)) is conceived as a symbolic centre of the project of a democratic reconstruction of Europe, whose core would be located in the reunified Germany, the only country hit by the presence of the two European totalitarianisms. As Semprún asserts:

My point is that the same political experiences that have made the history of Germany a tragic memory can also allow Germany to take its place in the forefront of a democratic and universalist expansion of the idea of Europe (1997: 307).

The camp is likewise proposed as a symbol of this reordering of experience and it is articulated dialogically with the rest of mythic elements to build an affective community which confers a shared collective memory on the European. In this sense, Semprún's novel attempts to overcome national differences in the constructions of memory. Bearing in mind that, as Semprún himself admitted in his speech for the Peace Prize in Frankfurt, language is the true homeland of humanist spirit:

A fin de cuentas mi patria no es la lengua, ni la española ni la francesa: mi patria es el lenguaje. O sea, un espacio de comunicación social, de invención lingüística; una posibilidad de representación del universo, de modificarlo también, aunque sea mínima o marginalmente, por el lenguaje mismo (Semprún, 1994: 16).

This political recovery corresponds with the attempt to establish a "supranational literature", overcoming the bordering spaces through the inclusion of authors such as César Vallejo. This is shared, at the same time, by Husserl's standpoint, which argues that the European spiritual shape goes beyond the geographical limits of Europe⁷. Furthermore, the inclusion of authors associated with Jewish-German tradition, such as Freud, Halbwachs, Levinas, Benjamin, Adorno or Celan, comes to be an overcoming strategy of a tradition which was targeted to be annihilated by Nazism. The failing of this strategy implies, as Semprún points out, «una de las grandes lagunas en la construcción actual de Europa» (2006: 278).

1.5. The memory of the resistance: the constitution of an ethic of the resistance.

The approach of community sustained by Semprún is therefore intimately linked to the humanistic notions defended by Husserl. Nevertheless, Semprún transcends the approach of the latter, structuring this community on the basis of the notion of resistance. In this regard, *Literature or Life* seeks to overcome a transcended and renewed experience, where a memory of the resistance, rather than a memory of the camps themselves, can be built. The fact of this notion being constructed together with different biographical

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7 | "In the spiritual sense the English Dominions, the United States, etc., clearly belong to Europe" (1970: 273)

and collective situations will end up establishing a connection not only between diverse historical events, such as the Spanish Civil War, the French Resistance, the German concentration camps or the Democratic movement of Charter 77, but also between different individuals or biographical experiences; Semprún's own literary representation with Leon Blum, César Vallejo or even Paul Celan. It is like this that this notion comes to be proposed as an essential spirit of the European future and to be associated with the European spiritual shape defended by Husserl.

In fact, this new conception of the experience of the camps as a space for resistance represents a leitmotiv in the novel, conveyed through different literary strategies which present a structural, stylistic and symbolic character. The first becomes present since the novel begins with the introduction of the "prisoners" as the camp liberators; the second, for the word "resistance" itself appears in the novel, in numerous occasions, associated with the concentration space, and language is defended as a tool for transcending experience; the third, through the new conception of space and time transmitted in the writing which is presented as a way of resistance. Semprún's standpoint of memory is thus able to introduce the voice of resistance in the historic dialogue of construction from which it has been traditionally excluded. A mythic framework is therefore constructed, permitting the unification of the different movements of resistance as well as the constitution of an ethical propelling force of the individual and his/her communitarian articulation, that is, his/her political representation. Furthermore, incorporating the notion of resistance in the European spiritual character, regarded as the constitutive ideological centre of the EU, implies therefore considering the European democratic political construction as a space of resistance, as the peak of the European humanistic aspirations.

1.6. Language as a tool of resistance

The vindication of language as a tool of resistance deserves special attention. As we have already seen, language is an essential element in the construction of meanings in Jorge Semprún's novel. This way, the capacity of transcending experience operates through its sublimation when it becomes a literary artifice, to what Semilla Durán refers as the *transfusion* of the individual's body and memory into the body and memory of the writing⁸.

As it is symbolized after he lost consciousness when "falling" off the tram, it is only through language that a logic for objects can be re-established; it is thus the only way of being the possessor of a "self". This appears to be the intention of Jorge Semprún throughout the construction of the novel: to represent a reality in the concentration

camps which emerges from the transformation of memory through language, and such reality to be assumed as a parallel process to that of assumption of a personal and collective (European) identity. Therefore, language comes to be a tool which enables the resistance while building a mythic order of both reality and individuals.

1.7. The European *new man*

It is indeed Buchenwald who comes to be the mythicizing origin of the individuals, starting from, as Pla points out, Semprún's own autobiographical process of mythicization.

Hence, Semprún's novel attempts to include the reader in the process of construction of this new European citizen through the recovery of *exemplifying* individual figures from his literary work and essays: Semprún's own literary representation, Maurice Halbwachs or Jean Patocka; the latter as both the keeper of Husserl's political approaches and as political martyr. These represent the "heroism of reason" able to face the European disintegration (Semprún, 2006: 279).

In *Literature or Life*, the reader is certainly confronted with a stylization of the experience which contributes to this mythic construction of the camp while providing the characters with a heroic and tragic image: "All we who were going to die had chosen the fraternity of this death through a love of freedom" (Semprún, 1997: 24). It is only by showing the death that Semprún avoids the mythicization; Halbwachs and Morales' death by dysentery, characteristically pathetic as opposed to the heroism through which their lives are represented, are only transcended by the will and fraternity of the individuals surrounding the dead, along with the verses, by Baudelaire and Vallejo consecutively, which acquire the character of an extreme unctio.

Thus, one of the principal sense constructions resulting from this strategy of resignification through which remembrance is overcome, is the formulation of a European individual immersed in the resistant, humanistic and fraternal spirit and for whom experience means just an obstacle (or, rather a necessity) for its total execution. In this respect, Husserl's approach, in a reflection typically characteristic of the modernist and avant-garde thought of that epoch, had already identified the emergence of the European spiritual notions, and the subsequent creations of community, based on the figure of a "new man" emerged in the classical period of Greece and which, through the "idea", it would be part of a "progressive" construction of the same contemporary notion of humanity (Husserl, 1970: 277). It is by splitting Semprún's own literary representation into two voices and by the transcendent overcoming through language (which is defended as

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8 | See Semilla-Durán (2004 and 2005).

one of the most important tools of resistance) that the representation of a new European citizen emerged from the concentration camps is made possible.

1.8. The common destiny of the supranational Europe

In the same way that experience is presented as the transformer and regenerator of the individual, the fact of going through the experience of the camps entails a step which allows the configuration of a democratic political system. In this respect, Semprún links his return to Buchenwald to the process of German unification and then, the individual's overcoming process is equalized with the European process of reconstruction. On this basis, the lecture by Husserl, through a Darwinist terminology applied to the political organizations — visible, for instance, when he referred to the European crisis as “the European sickness” (Husserl, 1970: 272) — which develops an idea of political and moral overcoming reflected in the different ways of being articulated as a community, associates indissolubly the notion of a supranational Europe with the idea of ontological and historical progress. Thus, the text of Husserl reflects the belief in a common European destiny, an idea supported by the Semprún's literary construction through this construction which overcomes the experience. Such utopian formulation would be represented in the EU.

In conclusion, Jorge Semprún's literary proposal implies providing the testimony with a new meaning and converts it into a textual artifice subject to a new political practice. Therefore, the testimony achieves distance from the wish of establishing a historical truth for, on the contrary, steadying itself as an active tool in the processes of construction of collective memory by articulating subjectivities. Likewise, Semprún's intention transcends the mere remembering attempt in order to re-signify the concentrationary experience both in a spatial-temporal and political sphere. It is for this reason that *Literature or life* articulates a mythic imaginary able to establish a common affective frame where literature and experience can be imbricated and where Husserl's notion of “European spiritual shape” can be expressed. As the author claims, the humanistic traditional values inherent in this spiritual shape (to which Semprún incorporates the principle of resistance) have led to a school of thought able to articulate a supranational and democratic political project erected in accord with the notion of historic and ontological progress and represented in the European Union. Semprún's testimony entails not only an attempt to cooperate with the constitution of this European affective community through the expansion of its borders, but also a vindication of the European spiritual values and those

of the democratic experience resulted from the European political reconstruction and protected by the EU itself.

2. Political and methodological implications of the analysis of *Literature or Life*

As we have already mentioned, Semprún's ethical-political approach involves the attempt to presentize the experience through the inclusion of the reader in an affective community which shares a group of constitutive values permitting the establishment of a fraternal link able to overcome the confrontation between European and which has its political expression in a supranational Europe (an expression constituted by the EU). It is precisely in this regard that the novel may have an approach on experience able to confer it with a political character while reintroducing into the political field problems which, as several authors⁹ have already warned, are being discursively displaced toward the USA. Undoubtedly, *Literature or Life* implies having overcome the philosophical discourse by conflating an intellectual resistance (starting from a selection of ideological proposals which combine features characteristic of modernity such as the value of the subjectivity and the individual) with a proposal of active¹⁰ and textual resistance. In this respect, the fact of converting the testimony itself into praxis so that the theoretical-discursive action is refrained by the act of writing, without abandoning, at the same time, the aim of the spiritual transcendence, proves to be very interesting. So it is the case, although controversial from a political point of view¹¹, of the strategy of a mythic frame construction through which to seek to claim and include in the present the principle of resistance and to construct a common language which enables its different representations to be combined. Such objective, as noted by Hardt and Negri (2001: 57) entails an important task of study. Nevertheless, we think that *Literature or life* proposes an interpretation of the experience which prevents us to undertake an analysis of the present European political situation and cooperates with a paralysing process of memory. It is precisely for this reason that we consider it interesting to try to explore the political and methodological implications of Semprún's approach.

First, some authors question the effectiveness of the mechanisms of memory construction argued by Halbwach by suggesting that, when proposing stable memory formations, the transformations in social relationships, temporality, space and the information derived from the global era are disregarded. Taking this into account, Semprún's practical proposal would prove ineffective for the fact of ignoring the historical-political context in his discourse-making process.

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9 | Look further in this respect in Wieviorka (1998).

10 | In this respect, Semprún's voice asserts: «I know they were deeply involved in the underground World of the Resistance. The real one, I mean, the only one, in my opinion: armed resistance». (Semprún, 1997: 172).

11 | This strategy is used, for instance, to create an identity link between the State of Israel and Judaism. On the other hand, this tool is controversial as far as the respect for the truthfulness of experience is concerned. Furthermore, it may support a militaristic discourse, as Todorov (2000) warned. We note this later on, when questioning the same notion of European spirituality.

2.1. The lack of existence of a grey zone: the “radical evil”

Following a more in-depth analysis, although the mythic construction of the experience enables, as already shown, to exert an affective link on the reader so he can recognize himself in an affective community of the resistance, this very mythization also implies proposing a vision of experience which is quite kept away from the present, and constructing a heroic individual who ignores the true individual of the camps.

As a consequence, a dichotomised interpretation of the reality of the concentration camps is established. Then, the cold and aseptic glance of the Nazi guardian, the representative of the “radical evil”, is confronted to the fraternal glances which all the interns of Buchenwald exchanged. As the novel itself expresses, the account explores what Malraux himself establishes as «la región crucial del alma donde el Mal absoluto se opone a la fraternidad» (Semprún, 1994: 69). The conclusion is that the representation of a *grey zone*¹² does not exist in Semprún’s novel. This notion has led to significant reflections on the individual and his/her relationships with sovereignty, even if these are disregarded in Semprún’s novel.

2.2. The continuity with the tradition

Consequently, Semprún’s re-signifying proposal prevents the system of thought prior to the camps to be the object of criticism; he undertakes a continuist project which is mainly exemplified in the vindication of a humanist philosophy and culture. Although it is true to say that Semprún’s choice is to construct an idealized community of the resistance, the latter results in a lack of reflection, unlike in authors such as Adorno, Kertész or Celan, who do reflect on the responsibility of the modern European (even resistant¹³) thought for the constitution of the concentration camps. On the contrary, culture, and mainly literature and philosophy, are praised to the extent of being set as spiritual reference points; likewise, poetry replaces the *kaddish* or the extreme unction.

On the other hand, in view of Semprún’s continuist proposal, the question of the “impossibility” of this continuance arises, since this philosophical tradition, which Semprún echoes and which will be the discourse shaping element of this European spiritual shape, is strictly linked to a Jewish (especially German) tradition, whose representation is infinitely reduced after World War II. In this respect, Semprún’s strategy, that of presentizing this tradition through evocation, is clearly insufficient. Semprún himself admits the need to think of the absence of the Jewish culture in Europe and to try to re-incorporate it into tradition: «¿Cómo sustituir, cómo volver a incitar,

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12 | This term is taken from the title of the second chapter of the novel “The Drowned and the Saved” by Primo Levi. It has been used by the critics to refer to the impossibility to create a mythification or a moral demonization of the protagonists of the concentration camps.

13 | I refer herein to Benjamin and Celan’s criticism of his figure as an engaged intellectual unable to analyze the role of Germanic culture in the founding of a system of thought which would permit the camps.

cómo volver a absorber, a atraer la cultura judía para que fecunde una vez más la cultura europea? » (Semprún, 2006: 275).

2.3 The EU as the representative of the humanistic values

Fundamentally, while the re-signification of the experience is presented as a satisfactory measure for the construction of a figure of resistance which functions as a linking element between European history and politics, it is, on the contrary, kept away from the analysis of the relations between sovereignty and the individual, preventing a reflection on the experience of the camps to be dissociated from a discourse on the transformation of the individual (in this case, enabling the overcoming). Nevertheless, it contributes to the historical-political dissociation of the experience (a dissociation which is, undoubtedly, partly compensated in the novel through the inclusion of a historic continuum relating to this figure of resistance) while providing the testimony with a kind of *happy ending* characteristic of that abovementioned Americanisation of memory. This strategy of re-signification helps construct an idea of historical and ontological progress which constructs a present politically dissociated from the past, while sustaining a notion, that of progress and so, that of destiny¹⁴, which, as authors like Bauman or Levinas note, is essentially “civilizing” and military. In that respect, we think that, in his attempt to protect democracy from the totalitarian accusations which may weaken it, the interpretation of *Literature or Life* is too indulgent with the European present, as well as with the political system of the EU which represents its supranational project, while connecting the EU to this notion of European spiritual character (the same notion of resistance included) through the idealization of such political project. Indeed, Semprún stresses, in his essays, the need to protect the contemporary democracies from the attacks coming from the leftist Marxist positions and the European intelligentsia. Referring to the essay of Orwell *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Semprún supports a European democratic construction based on the defence of the “democratic practical reason” (Semprún, 2006: 82). In this sense, he agrees with Améry’s assertion, who stands that groundless attacks to Fascist European democracies reflect a weak political analysis and weaken European political articulations (Améry: 2004)).

On one hand, the EU is founded on the basis of an agreement between the European countries sustained by criteria similar to those proposed by this “European spiritual shape” argued by Semprún. However, as compiled in the Copenhagen Criteria¹⁵, a set of economic assumptions are also taken into account. These are indissolubly adhered to these spiritual principles so the European project not only is associated with a set of political principles inspired in the humanistic and enlightened principles, but also (and mainly)

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14 | The spiritual shape of Europe implies a “teleology which is immanent in it, which makes itself known, from the standpoint of universal mankind as such, as the breakthrough and the developmental beginning of a new human epoch—the epoch of mankind which now seeks to live, and only can live, in the free shaping of its existence, its historical life, through ideas of reason, through infinite tasks” (Husserl, 1990: 274).

constitutes the political articulation which enables the founding of a neo-liberal economic system in Europe. The link between both the political and the economic criteria signifies this economic model as an essential notion of Europe and it includes the values of the capitalist system in this “European spiritual shape”. In fact, Semprún himself admits in his essays this European articulation related to economic notions. Nevertheless, he associates them with the underlying democratic and humanistic spiritual shape (Semprún, 2006: 136). This relationship, however, forces us to question the compatibility of both principles and, thereby, the European ability to guarantee the application of the humanistic values to its political execution. In this sense, it is not about distorting the notion of democracy itself by linking it to the European totalitarianisms, but rather about analysing and condemning, if necessary, the applications of its sovereignty and admitting the new ways of political corruption in the European neo-liberal democracies.

2.4. The notion of “European spiritual shape”

On the other hand, we consider it essential to stop to analyse the notion of “European spiritual shape” argued by Husserl and coined by Semprún in order to shape his political project ideologically. As Husserl expresses:

There is something unique here [in Europe] that is recognized in us by other human groups, too, something that, quite apart from all considerations of utility, becomes a motive for them to Europeanize themselves even in their unbroken will to spiritual self-preservation; whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, would never Indianize ourselves, for example (Husserl, 1970:275).

This assertion shows not only a “Eurocentric” conception of reality (which, as argued by Hardt and Negri, is essentially counterrevolutionary since “Eurocentrism was born as a reaction to the potentiality of a newfound human equality; it was the counterrevolution on a global scale” (2001:77)), but also and more significantly, a relationship with the other in terms of absolute ethical or spiritual hierarchy which can easily appear as the sustainers of a dichotomized criterion of civilisation-barbarism, the promoter of the phenomena of the camps (Bauman, 2006) and, as authors like Arendt (1982) add, undoubtedly, that of the previous Imperialism. In effect, regarding its constitution in terms which are revealed as excluding (for Husserl, this spirituality is not shared by “the Eskimos or Indians presented as curiosities at fairs, or the Gypsies, who constantly wander about Europe” (Husserl, 1970: 273)), the notion of a Europe as the centre of culture and thought, the possessor of a historic destiny, perpetuates, indeed, an expansionist and imperialist ideological system. Undoubtedly, *Literature or Life* proposes a relationship with the “otherness” which dissents notably with this imperialist notion. In fact, Semprún himself

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15 | There exist three binding conditions for the entry in the European Union: the political criteria (the existence of stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, the respect for human rights and protection of minorities), the economic criteria (a functioning market economy, as well as the ability to cope with the pressure of competition and the market forces at work inside the Union) and the *acquis communautaire* (the ability to assume the obligations of membership, in particular adherence to the objectives of political, economic and monetary union).

admits, in his essays, the need to constitute a Europe characterized by the inclusion of the differences shaped in multilingualism and in the inclusion of the Arab and Hebrew traditions as well as in that of the Eastern Europe countries (Semprún, 2006:137).

In this sense, Semprún himself reconstructs the vision of Husserl in an attempt of surpassing it. Nevertheless, we should ask ourselves to what extent the symbolic-ideological construction of Europe, and that of its political and economical project, the European Union, gets close or away from this position and whether it is possible to insert these same humanistic principles into a democratic construction able to go beyond the local sphere in order to prove universal. Simultaneously, as Huyssen points out “it is important to recognize that while memory discourses appear to be global in one register, in their core they remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states” (Huyssen, 2000). In this respect, we think that the same Eurocentric and resistant conception appears to sustain somehow a certain lack of criticism with the present, and more specifically, with the political project of the EU while avoiding confrontations with more critical stances towards the latter.

2.5. Political and methodological implications

In this respect, albeit we share the proposal of resistance emanated from the author’s work as well as the need to articulate it with reference to a community, we think that the political implications of Semprún’s proposal is relatively effective. This proves so insofar as *Literature or Life* re-signifies the totalitarian experience as a necessity in the path of progress of the European political and ontological history and it then fails to call into question certain controversial aspects of the thought which fosters the experience of the camps such as an exclusive Eurocentric conception leading to the constitution of a barbarian otherness and the idea of national destiny—in this case supranational— while maintaining an indulgent attitude toward the European present and its political organization. Thus, Semprún’s indulgent view—his transformation of the *happy ending*— results finally in a perpetuation of a dis-presentized construction of memory.

Notwithstanding, the analysis of this political proposal allows us to draw the notion of European spiritual shape as a figure of analysis which is relevant to justify the European communitarian construction and which is proposed as a conflictive theoretical formulation. In this regard, this figure, in its articulation, must be the bearer of all these contradictions and paradoxes. On the other hand, the analysis of Semprún’s political proposal makes us question the possibility of undertaking a true presentization of the experience which does not identify, and therefore question, the contemporary individual and

the European democracies, while exploring, without disregarding the deep differences between the different historic moments, the continuity of the relationships between the sovereignty and the individual.

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