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Disrupting the (writing) subject: Jorge Semprún and first-person narration

In Jorge Semprún's 1994 text, *Literature or Life*, the first-person narrator focuses upon memories of his internment in Buchenwald concentration camp and evaluates his previous attempts to articulate this experience through literature. Referring to these attempts, he writes:

I'm not able, at this point, to conceive of a novelistic structure in the third person. I don't even want to consider tackling things from that direction. So I need a narrative 'I' that draws on my experience but goes beyond it, capable of opening the narrative up to fiction, to imagination...Fiction that would be as illuminating as the truth of course. That would help reality to seem true-to-life, truth to seem convincing.¹

He concludes: 'That's a difficulty I'll manage to overcome, sooner or later. In one of my drafts, I'll suddenly find the right tone, a suitable distance.'² As I will discuss, Jorge Semprún's work is concerned with precisely overcoming this difficulty as he attempts to find a narrative voice through which he can articulate experiences which seem to be precisely inexpressible within standard modes of discourse. The name of the narrator of *Literature or Life* is Jorge Semprún; the experiences and novels discussed within the text are Semprún's own. Is the narrative voice of this text then an autobiographical one? Under Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography, which I will discuss, the answer would be yes. Yet, in relation to Semprún's work, the division of fiction and autobiography is constantly and consistently destabilized through the ambiguity of the pronoun 'I' and the subject to which it refers. As I will argue, this ambiguity allows Semprún to maintain both the connection and the distance he desires from the experiences he articulates, enabling him to create a space within which fiction does not replace what he experienced, but rather simultaneously draws from and illuminates it.

¹ Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life* trans. Linda Coverdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1998) p.165

² Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life* trans. Linda Coverdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1998) p.165

In *The Autobiographical Pact* Philippe Lejeune discusses the difficulty of establishing the identity of the 'I' speaking in any text. Referring back to Emile Benveniste's claim that the pronoun 'I' only has referential possibility in relation to the specific discourse within which it is articulated and therefore can only be identified if we are already aware of who is speaking or writing, Lejeune concurs that 'I' as signifier signifies nothing external to the discourse within which it arises. Yet Lejeune does not, on the grounds of this, reject the idea that the identity of the 'I' of a first-person text can be established; instead, he places this identity within the idea of the proper name, something he describes as a 'distinct signal' which exists to express what is irreducibly unique in each individual.³ The importance of the proper name to the articulation, or indeed creation of a subject, is a key element of Lacanian theory; Fredric Jameson, in his discussion of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, cites Lacan as follows:

That a name, no matter how confused, designates a particular person-this is precisely what the passage to the human state consists in. If we must define that moment in which man becomes human, we would say that it is at that instant when, as minimally as you like, he enters into a symbolic relationship.⁴

The proper name thus allows the child to identify him or herself within established linguistic structures, to articulate a stabilized sociolinguistic sense of self in relation to others and thereby to enter into the Symbolic Order.

Within the structures of a first-person text, the proper name functions in a similar way, creating a unique sign which allows the reader to establish to whom the 'I' of the text refers. This referentiality may of course be a fictional one; the 'I' may refer to a proper name given to a character by the author. But for Lejeune, the proper name has another textual function for it allows the separation of autobiographical texts from fictional ones. He writes: 'What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name...The

³ Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact' in *On Autobiography* ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) p.29

⁴ Jacques Lacan, trans. Fredric Jameson in 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan' in *The ideologies of theory: essays 1971 - 1986. Situations of Theory, Volume 1* (London: Routledge, 1988) p.90

deep subject of autobiography is the proper name'.⁵ This 'contract of identity' depends upon the idea that, for a text to be autobiographical, the proper names of author, narrator and protagonist must be identical. There can be no ambiguity here; indeed, Lejeune is polemical upon this point: 'Here, there is neither transition nor latitude. An identity is or, is not. It is impossible to speak of degrees, and all doubt leads to a negative conclusion'.⁶ (5) A negative conclusion within the contract of identity produces fiction.

Yet in relation to the work of Jorge Semprún, autobiography and fiction conflate as opposed to separate; the literature or life dichotomy in the title of his text is in fact, in relation to his own work, a far less oppositional relationship. Semprún's textual discussions of his experiences before, during and after his internment in Buchenwald problematize any simplistic division between fiction and truth, the 'I' who appears within his texts and the 'I' who is writing those texts. Part of this disruption arises precisely through Semprún's deliberate confusion of the referentiality of the proper name. As I have noted, in *Literature or Life* the narrator-protagonist does share the name of the author; it is therefore, under Lejeune's conception, an autobiography. But several of the experiences which are related in *Literature or Life* also provide the basis of Semprún's earlier texts within which this contract of identity is not established. In *Literature or Life* the narrator describes falling from a train and waking in hospital having lost his memory; in Semprún's second novel *L'évanouissement* the same story occurs but is narrated not by Jorge Semprún but by a character named Manuel. Similarly, while in *Literature or Life* it is the narrator Semprún who is haunted by memories of the flames rising from the crematorium at Buchenwald, in Semprún's novel *La montagne blanche*, it is a Spanish writer named Juan Larrea who is tormented by what he calls this 'flame of abject horror'.⁷ By repeating the same stories in these different texts Semprún seems to move towards establishing an identity between narrators who share his name and those, in texts

⁵Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact' in *On Autobiography* ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) pp.19-20

⁶ Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact' in *On Autobiography* ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) p.5

⁷ Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1998) p.293

which are classed as novels, who do not. Yet the Semprún who narrates *Literature or Life* explicitly rejects the idea of identity or rather identification between his authorial self and his characters:

when *La montagne blanche* [*The White Mountain*] appeared, I had occasionally been asked some foolish questions. Foolish or pointless. In what way did Juan Larrea resemble me? Had I identified with this character? It's already hard enough to identify with oneself, I'd offered by way of an answer (an evasion, rather) – too hard for an identification with one's own fictional characters to be plausible. Or even advisable. No, no identification with Juan Larrea, in spite of things we had in common: being Spanish, writers, former deportees.⁸

Yet, Semprún's rejection of a 'contract of identification' between character and author here is itself disrupted for, as he goes on to note, the proper name Juan Larrea is not purely fictional: it is in fact one of the pseudonyms which he employed during his work for the Spanish resistance. This duality of political pseudonym and fictional voice is a feature of all Semprún's texts; his first-person narrators Gérard, Manuel, Federico Sanchez, all refer back to pseudonyms which he employed during his time as a resistance fighter. For Lejeune, the use of a pseudonym does not necessarily disrupt the contract of identity; as he writes: 'The pseudonym is simply a differentiation, a division of the name, which changes nothing in the identity'. By using the pseudonyms which he employed in his political work for the names of his narrator-protagonists, Semprún therefore appears to remain within Lejeune's requirements for autobiography by creating a contract of identity with the 'I' of his texts. Yet Lejeune's description of the pseudonym as 'simply a differentiation, a division of the name' highlights an issue at the heart of defining autobiography solely upon the stable referentiality of the proper name. For, if it is the proper name which, in Lacanian terms, enables entry into the Symbolic order and establishes and stabilises identity both textually and extra-textually, a division of this name is anything but simple; rather it reflects a fundamental instability at the heart of this identity and, perhaps, a rejection of the Symbolic and the limits of its linguistically-constructed order.

⁸ Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1998) p.243

For E van Alphen this rejection of the representational possibilities contained within the symbolic order is a crucial part of an attempt to articulate the inexpressible. He writes:

When the survivors of the Holocaust are unable or hardly able to express their experiences, the difficulty can be explained as follows: the nature of their experiences is in no way covered by the terms and positions the symbolic order offers to them...In short, the problem is not the nature of the event, nor an intrinsic limitation of representation; rather, it is the split between the living of an event and the available forms of representation within which the event can be experienced.⁹

This, I would argue, is precisely why Semprún refuses to situate his texts explicitly within either fiction or autobiography. Through a disruption of the referentiality of the pronoun 'I' in his text, he seeks a different space of representation which does not insist upon separating the imaginary from the real. Within this space, fiction and autobiography intersect to create not something coherent from these memories, but something lived and livable. The Semprún narrating *Literature or Life* makes precisely this point when he suggests that the textual death of Juan Larrea in *La montagne blanche* was necessary to enable the author Semprún to continue living outside the text. He writes:

He committed suicide, dying in my place, a few years later, in the pages of *La montagne blanche*...Juan Larrea...whom I sent to his death in my stead...Juan Larrea, who had taken the place death had always reserved for me by its side...The round of lives and deaths, real or fictitious, thus seemed to come full circle.¹⁰

The possibility that a fictional character can live, and die, not *with* the author but *instead* of him takes Lejeune's contract and alters its components; the 'contract of identity' which Semprún creates here is not one in which his first-person narrators mirror directly the events of his life; rather it is one in which they offer an exploration of the unrealized possibilities contained within this life.

⁹ E. van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma' in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999) p.27

¹⁰ Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life* trans. Linda Coverdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1998) p.246

By fragmenting the narrative 'I' of all his texts via a multiplicity of proper names which have both a textual and extra-textual referentiality, Semprún, I would argue, achieves a tone of writing which enables him to attain both connection and distance from the events and the selves which he articulates. Semprún's refusal to imagine a singular 'self' is a rejection of the idea that his texts, be they autobiographies, novels or a synthesis of the two, can offer an authoritative form of knowledge upon what he relates. For Mikhail Bakhtin, this is precisely how autobiographical texts should operate: 'Memory' in memoirs and autobiographies is of a special sort: it is memory of one's own contemporaneity and of one's own self. It is...personal memory without pre-existing chronological pattern, bounded only by the termini of a single personal life'.¹¹ Yet it is in a sense this 'single' personal life which Semprún's texts problematize, for his life, as he sees it, was utterly, and irrevocably fractured by what he experienced. As the narrator of *Literature or Life* describes, upon his return from Buchenwald, he was 'struck by the sudden overwhelming feeling, in any case, that I have not escaped death, but passed through it...That I have, in a way, lived through it. That I have come back from it the way you return from a voyage that has transformed and – perhaps- transfigured you'.¹² This transformation and transfiguration is one which Semprún articulates by transforming and transfiguring the narrative possibilities of the first-person voice so that it remains simultaneously fictional and true, character and author, consigned to the past and living in the present. In his revision to the 'The Autobiographical Pact', Lejeune himself admits that autobiography is ultimately itself a form of fiction: 'Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing'.¹³ But perhaps, as Semprún suggests, the autobiography which can exist is one which integrates this element of fantasy into its own essence, and which rather than simply accepting the impossibility of identity or referentiality makes this the very subject of its writing,

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987) p.24

¹² Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London and New York: Penguin, 1998) pp.14-15

¹³ Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact' in *On Autobiography* ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) p.132

thereby writing a new subject which reveals and revels in its fragmentation both within the text and beyond it.