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Kertész versus Semprún: On the Aesthetic Mediability of Violence

Abstract: This article analyses the question of mediability of violence by the novels of two writers who survived the concentration camp of Buchenwald but had very different experiences of the camp: Imre Kertész, deported from Hungary as a Jewish adolescent, and Jorge Semprún, deported after being made prisoner by the Gestapo as a member of the Maquis. Both authors have an opposite conception of the traditional value in relation to the aesthetic mediability of violence. This contribution analyses the different approaches to tradition in the works of two authors, specifically in relation to the relationship between Weimar and Buchenwald. Weimar acts as a chronotop and a paradigmatic example of the stranded tradition. For Kertész, the atonality he claims for his aesthetics is analysed in *Der Spurensucher. Erzählung* (“The Searcher for Traces”), for Semprún, the debate on tradition is analysed in *Aquel domingo* (“What a Beautiful Sunday”) and *Viviré con su nombre, morirá con el mío* (“I Will Live with his Name, He Will Die with Mine”).

Keywords: aesthetic mediability of violence, literature and memory of violence, literature and concentration camp, Imre Kertész, Jorge Semprún

Streszczenie: Niniejszy artykuł analizuje kwestię mediatyzacji przemocy w powieściach dwóch pisarzy, którzy przeżyli obóz koncentracyjny w Buchenwaldzie, ale mieli bardzo różne doświadczenia z obozu: Imre Kertésza, deportowanego z Węgier żydowskiego nastolatka, i Jorge Semprúna, deportowanego przez gestapo za udział w ruchu oporu. Obaj autorzy mają przeciwstawną koncepcję wartości tradycji w odniesieniu do estetycznej mediatyzacji przemocy. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje różne podejścia do tradycji w pracach obu autorów, w szczególności i w odniesieniu do relacji między Weimarem a Buchenwaldem. Weimar pełni rolę chronotopu i paradygmatycznego przykładu osieroconej tradycji. Dla Kertésza atonalność, którą postuluje dla swojej estetyki, jest analizowana w *Der Spurensucher. Erzählung* („Tropiciel”), dla Semprúna debata na temat tradycji pojawia się w *Aquel domingo* („Jaka piękna niedziela”) i *Viviré con su nombre, morirá con el mío* („Będę żył z jego imieniem, on umrze z moim”).

Słowa kluczowe: estetyczna mediatyzacja przemocy, literatura i pamięć przemocy, literatura wobec obozów koncentracyjnych, Imre Kertész, Jorge Semprún

In his essay *The Hapless Century*¹, Imre Kertész speaks of the many people who share with him the experience of dictatorships, who were unable to lead their own lives during a period of their existence because all decisions were forced upon them by an external power. They could not recognise themselves later in this phase of their lives; they could not forget this experience, but it became a distanced anecdote for them. This past could not become an organic part of their person, not an experience that could be integrated. The characteristic and new experience of the twentieth century was “this unprocessed, indeed, often unprocessable character of experiences.”²

Kertész refers to Auschwitz as the essence of National Socialism, to the mass murder of the European Jews, to Stalinism. Auschwitz has become a universal parable in the European consciousness, it encompasses the entire world of the Nazi concentration camps as well as the general shock to the mind; it is a burning wound and a trauma, the final destination of European man after two thousand years of ethical and moral culture. It would be pointless to try to identify similarities and differences between the National Socialist and Stalinist camps, because: “suffering has no measure, injustice has no yardstick,”³ Kertész continues. Nevertheless, it is also obvious that they are based on different realities, from which individual suffering arises, and that this must be considered individually.

Survivors of all this violence have tried to write on it, have produced literary texts based on their traumatic memories. What they have in common, is that their writing is based on the memory of suffering, suffering inflicted by violence. It is sustained by the will to bear witness; they all speak for the dead, for their fellow prisoners and friends who did not survive. They seek an appropriate language that avoids both aestheticisation and automatism, that does not treat the past as past and reassuringly conveys that it has been overcome, but rather pursues the traces and scars and exposes the wounds that are still open. Their writing arises from the tension between their will to create and their subject matter, the need to create that stems from their own experience. They bear witness to different experiences of dictatorship; they are based on different levels of bewilderment and disorientation. They resist closed interpretations; to do them justice, one must let them speak for themselves by finding an appropriate hermeneutic approach.

Literary writing of surviving authors are texts of great complexity; they should each be considered from their own perspective. The initial questions to consider by working on them are: How is the memory of violence, of immeasurable pain, transformed into literature? What means of literary constructions are developed in the process? How is language used to reconstitute the subject as well

¹ I. Kertész, “Das glücklose Jahrhundert” [in:] *Die exilierte Sprache: Essays und Reden*, Übers. K. Schwamm, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2003, pp. 110–132. All translations of the quotations from German and Spanish in this essay are mine.

² *Ibidem*, p. 111.

³ I. Kertész, “Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager” [in:] *Die exilierte Sprache...*, op. cit., p. 52.

as to express woundedness? To what extent is literature based on memory also related to the future? These queries arouse the question of the aesthetic mediability of violence, the question about what is possible and what not, and each author solves it individually attending to his own experience of violence suffered.

The central theme of this literature is the necessity of bearing witness:

For man is a being of dialogue, he speaks incessantly, and what he says, what he testifies, his lament, his suffering, is intended not only as a description, but as a testimony, and he secretly – subconsciously – wants this testimony to become a value and the value to become a law-forming force.⁴

This happens in the aporia expressed in the dialogue between Jorge Semprún and Elie Wiesel:

E.W. [...] No one will ever know what you and I have experienced. We are trying, we are working for it. But I don't believe in it.

J.S. You can't talk about everything, you can't make everything imaginable, comprehensible. That's simply not possible.

E.W. Silence is forbidden, speaking is impossible.⁵

The aim of this contribution will be to analyse the question of mediability of violence by the novels of two writers who survived the concentration camp of Buchenwald but had very different experiences of the camp: Imre Kertész, deported from Hungary as a Jewish adolescent, and Jorge Semprún, deported after being made prisoner by the Gestapo as a member of the Maquis.

At the beginning of Kertész's novel *Fiasko*, the old man who is the protagonist stands in front of the desk he calls his *secrétaire* in his very small, claustrophobically detailed flat, and decides to read through his papers, notes and jottings. As he does so, he realises his plan to write a treatise on the aesthetic communicability of violence. In his reflections on this, he uses a passage in Semprún's first novel, *El largo viaje* ("The Long Journey"), as an irritating example of the inappropriate. It is the description of Ilse Koch, the wife of the commander of Buchenwald. Kertész sees in Semprún's description, which refers to the lampshades made of tattooed skin that she cherished, "blood, lust and demon in a single figure"⁶, something like a Lucrezia Borgia in Buchenwald, comparable to one of Nietzsche's blond beasts or to a sinner from Fyodor Dostoevsky's writing. That would give her a grandeur, a sublime immorality that is inappropriate for Kertész. For the more significant one makes her, the more "one diminishes that which surrounded

⁴ Idem, "Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager", op. cit., p. 44.

⁵ J. Semprún, E. Wiesel, *Schweigen ist unmöglich*, Übers. W. Bayer, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 18.

⁶ I. Kertész, *Fiasko*, Übers. G. Buda, A. Relle, Rowohlt Berlin, Berlin 1999, p. 62.

her: the reality of a world designed for murder; for whatever significance one ascribes to her, one only subtracts this significance from this world.⁷ The realm of the great individual figures is that of tragedy and fate, of eternity; any mediation of the totalitarian systems of violence by representative figures must suffer shipwreck because the essence of their situation is based on the insignificant and always interchangeable personality. Ilse Koch did not stand against the moral order, but rather embodied it: “The moral world order that Buchenwald offered was that of murder, but it was a world order, and it suited her.”⁸ In other words: “Where murder is a commonplace, one does not become a murderer out of rebellion, but out of zeal for service.”⁹ In this context, murderers are interchangeable – the question of whether victims and executioners are too is posed through the back door, so to speak, but does not invalidate the position and responsibility of the individual: good becomes an exception, an act of freedom that defies the given order. *Fiasko* also contains the story “I, the Executioner”, which is penned by the figure of Berg and which Kertész also publishes individually. Berg sees himself as a victim and an executioner and shakes the reader’s self-awareness by assuming that both are possible in him, the reader. “How can we make a representation from the perspective of the totalitarian without making the perspective of the totalitarian our own perspective?”¹⁰ Kertész asks in his “Galley Diary”. Based on tonality as a generally recognised convention, he declares the atonal language he advocates as “the invalidity of agreement, of tradition.”¹¹ He endeavours to find a “post-Auschwitz” language where consensus “with the past shaped by rationalism, enlightenment and humanism”¹² is no longer possible. I would now like to explain the debate between Kertész and Semprún on the aesthetic mediability of violence by examining the different approaches to tradition in the works of the two authors, specifically in relation to the relationship between Weimar and Buchenwald. In doing so, I take Weimar as a chronotoph for a paradigmatic example of the stranded tradition. I will limit myself to a few works that seem particularly fruitful in this respect: for Kertész, I will take *Der Spurensucher. Erzählung* (“The Searcher for Traces”) and try to determine the atonality in it; for Semprún, *Aquel domingo* (“What a Beautiful Sunday”) and *Viviré con su nombre, morirá con el mío* (“I Will Live with his Name, He Will Die with Mine”).

Right at the beginning, however, I give an example of the very different approach to literary tradition and to culture in general that both authors provide when they explain the education under which they grew up. The description of

⁷ Ibidem, p. 67.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 65.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ I. Kertész, *Galeerentagebuch*, Übers. K. Schwamm, Rowohlt Berlin, Berlin 1993, p. 21.

¹¹ Idem, “Die exilierte Sprache” [in:] *Die exilierte Sprache...*, op. cit., p. 212.

¹² D. Ebert, “Atonales Erzählen im *Roman eines Schicksallosen* – Vom Finden einer Romanform, um ‘Auschwitz schreibend zu überleben’” [in:] *Das Glück des atonalen Erzählens. Studien zu Imre Kertész*, ed. idem, edition AZUR, Dresden 2010, p. 129.

the approach is determined by their respective different experiences of the camp. These experiences are the starting point of their thinking and their writing. Kertész radically demonstrates the murderous absurdity of an education whose values are orientated towards the admiration of antiquity, religion and the nation and which not only does not prevent the industrial extermination of people, but facilitates it, without the victims brought up in these values being able to defend themselves against it:

“I believe in God, in the Fatherland and in the resurrection of Hungary”, I prayed at the beginning of class. [...] “Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse”, I crammed in Latin class. “Shma jisroél, adonái elohénu, adonái chod”, I learnt in religion lessons. My consciousness was fenced in from all sides, taken possession of. I was educated. With good words and strict admonitions, I was brought to maturity in order to eradicate me. I never protested and endeavoured to do my best. [...] I was a moderately zealous, not always blameless member of the silent conspiracy that was directed against my life [...].¹³

For Semprún, who came from an upper middle-class Spanish family and was already in exile in France with his entire family when the war began, imprisonment in the camp was the result of his previous political activity; it was the consequence of his decision to join the Maquis. This is a fundamental difference to the Jewish experience of the camps, which is determined by the selection and the existence of the gas chambers, the “final solution”. For Semprún, the culture and tradition in which he was brought up does not represent an absurdity that cannot correspond to life; on the contrary, it is an instrument of identity formation and can then also be a support for him in the camp. The broad Western, cosmopolitan cultural tradition becomes his home and has an integrative effect. With his Red Spanishness, he renounces the Spain that actually existed, opting for perpetual exile and a life between two languages, Spanish and French. In fact, he wrote his novels in French.

In *Der Spurensucher*, Kertész deals specifically with the relationship between Weimar and Buchenwald, with the Janus-faced nature of Weimar. In the epilogue for the Suhrkamp Verlag edition, he describes how this story came about. In 1962, while writing *Roman eines Schicksallosen* (*Sorstalanság; Fateless*), he travelled to visit the sites of his life; he visited Buchenwald and Zeitz. This visit provides the motif for the narrative, which Kertész also perceives as an emotional “relief” from the rigid linguistic discipline in the writing of *Fateless*. The attempt to revive the past viewing the places, to search for its traces in the spaces he survived, fails for the seeker of traces as well as for Kertész; he cannot find them at the sites that have become museums. Kertész, who confesses in the epilogue to the journey that the tracker undertakes in the novel, describes his error:

¹³ I. Kertész, *Galeerentagebuch*, op. cit., p. 108 (also idem, *Fiasko*, op. cit., p. 112).

I wandered as a stranger over strange scenes, neither finding anything outside nor feeling anything inside. [...] I realised that if I wanted to fight against my transient self and the constant changeability of the settings, I had to recreate everything anew, relying on my creative memory.¹⁴

The literary tradition that Weimar, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller's city, evokes, is also called upon for this recreation of the past, albeit in order to reject it, because Auschwitz radically calls it into question. This becomes particularly clear in *The Searcher for Traces*. After the failed visit to Buchenwald, the tracker goes with his wife for dinner in a restaurant in Weimar described as with a sophisticated ambience and palm garden. It is easy to recognise in it the "Elefant" hotel, where Lotte stays in Weimar for her visit to Goethe in Thomas Mann's novel *Lotte in Weimar*. The references to Goethe and Thomas Mann are very much present in Kertész novella. In the course of the chapters, the tracker is sometimes in succession, sometimes alternately, the guest, the agent, mostly the emissary, very briefly the seer; in this way, as with Gustav von Aschenbach in Mann's *Death in Venice*, the narrator defines for his protagonist a state that sends a signal rather than psychologising about him. In Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, too, the protagonist is defined by his condition. And in the end, the tracker is also temporarily the stranger. In contrast to the protagonists of Mann and Camus novels, however, the tracker is also defined by a function, the fulfilment or failure of which is the subject of the story. A lady with a face covered by a mourning veil, whom the envoy has already seen during his visit to Buchenwald, reminds him of his mission to search for traces, which has failed in the musealized camp visited by tourists. After lunch, which is rush hour in the next chapter, a conversation about Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris* takes place in a street café, introduced by the emissary's wife, who has seen the volume in a bookshop and is trying to remember the story. The emissary exposes Goethe's conciliatory conclusion as a lie to reality, because in reality Orest and Pylades were surrounded, disarmed and tied up, Iphigenia was ravished before their eyes and the men were then slaughtered in front of Iphigenia. The king would have waited until Iphigenia's face showed "the apathy of a misery that can no longer be increased", an apathy that reminds the reader of the apathy of the Muselmann in the camp, in order to give her the coup de grace. "In the evening, everyone went to the theatre to watch the king of the barbarians show mercy on stage while they laughed their heads off, hidden in the boxes."¹⁵ Here, the tonality of a pre-Auschwitz humanism is written against; the language and the image of man of the German classical period and tradition are exposed as deceptions.

¹⁴ Idem, *Der Spurensucher. Erzählung*, Übers. G. Buda, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 127.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 89.

The seeker of traces embarks on a search for his past by following its traces. According to Walter Benjamin's definition, a trace (*die Spur*) is the "appearance of a proximity, however distant that which it left behind may be."¹⁶ Traces are associated with memory – and with the proximity of the remembered. Since Charles Baudelaire, however, the past "cannot be represented as duration, but can only be indicated through the enactment of a dynamic fleetingness."¹⁷ The poetics of memory in modernity is the poetics of the moment. Marcel Proust introduces the almost programmatic opposition between a conscious memory that is doomed to failure and a successful involuntary one; only from the latter can the past be approached through writing and storytelling. For the writer, the work of art would be the only means of rediscovering lost time.

The traces should lead the envoy to a reencounter with the past, but this does not materialise. Nevertheless, he experiences two moments in which that what he has seen is transcended into timelessness and which are characterised by the memory of this past. The first could be described as an epiphany, the second as a vision. As he walks through the city, his single-minded gaze "drifting impotently" and searching for something hidden, the envoy is suddenly captivated by a special, yellow, glowing light that he remembers: "Yes, that certain glow of the sky and that certain imperial yellow", he says.¹⁸ The sight of the yellow colour of the façades, which have not been changed, the light that falls on them, shakes him – the envoy – and makes him transcend the moment. He has been hunting for knowledge, now he recognises in a flash the truth of the city, its reality: its buildings and ornaments, "The mask of eternity fell away from them and the instantaneousness of their existence, their unique randomness and hair-raising absurdity became apparent. The envoy saw and recognised: it was the city, not as it wanted to be shown, but as it had to be."¹⁹

Throughout the epiphany, the emissary has become the commissioner, he sees through the appearance of the city, its decay, which can certainly be interpreted symbolically: the world that it represents has decayed, has become hair-raisingly absurd due to the violence of the near past.

The second vision-like experience takes place in a street café, where he sits with his wife after the failed visit to Buchenwald. After the conversation about Iphigenia and her "unmasking", the protagonist, who is now once again labelled an emissary, suddenly sees a young man. He could be compared to the stranger whom Aschenbach unexpectedly sees at the beginning of *Death in Venice* and who awakens a vision in Aschenbach. The young man seen by the fictional emissary is

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. V/1, ed. R. Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1983, p. 560.

¹⁷ N. Pethes, *Mnemographie. Poetiken der Erinnerung und Destruktion nach Walter Benjamin*, Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1999, p. 25.

¹⁸ I. Kertész, *Der Spurensucher*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

Albrecht Dürer; the painter's gaze opens the eyes of the emissary, who now becomes a seer. The fact that Dürer in particular is invoked opens up a further space of intertextualities and associations: now also to Dürer as the author of the engraving *Melancholia*, describing a condition and a characteristic of the creators in our cultural tradition. The city scene under a scorching sun at a busy crossroads becomes an image of the *dies irae*, a kind of dance of death:

And all at once everything took on its meaning, the frantic series of loosely swirling apparitions filled with content all at once. He saw, just as he had seen the city in the morning. [...] and it was as if the confusion of voices down there was forming into a single muffled cry, rising to a response, a unanimous lament: Woe, woe to those who inhabit the earth...²⁰

The tracker has found no traces that would have created a proximity to the past. But it is this past that makes his visions possible. In a certain sense, Proust's epiphany is reversed: the *mémoire involontaire*, sensually evoked by the recognised light of the present, does not make the past present in the present, nor does it remind us of the past, but it reveals the present; it suddenly leads to a new, unmasking view of the present, leads to knowledge. In this realisation of the truth of the present, the silenced past, its untraceable traces of violence, also speak. In this way, the traces of the decay of the culture before Auschwitz resonate, a search is made for a "post-Auschwitz" language, the silencing of language in language is analysed with the aid of the traces of the past, so to say, its untraceable traces of violence. In this way, *Der Spurensucher* resonates with the decay of culture before Auschwitz, searches for a "post-Auschwitz" language, bears witness to the silencing of language in language with the help of images, visionary images. And the search for knowledge, for realisation is seen by Kertész as an act of freedom.

The story ends with the news of the suicide of the lady with the mourning veil, which the tracker, now defined as a stranger, reads about at the railway station in Zeitz. The news induces him to think arguments in order to protect himself in his thoughts from possible accusers. The reference to possible accusers casts a shadow of guilt over the envoy, whose mission has failed. In the conversation he had with the lady in the restaurant, he felt called to account by her. He had responded to her statement "There is only injustice" by referring to his attempt to right the wrongs: "By bearing witness to everything I have seen." The emissary, the commissioner, can only have been sent, commissioned, by the dead. The lady, an Antigone figure, points to the impossibility of reparation, the emissary to a *dies irae* in the present. The Antigone figure of the lady in mourning poses the question of whether her attitude is not the only appropriate way to deal with the Holocaust. As a mourner, she also refers to the absence of Jewish memory in

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 94.

the musealized Buchenwald camp of the 1960s, where only the antifascist fighters, the communists, were remembered.

Her memorial of irreconcilability thus points out his guilt to the surviving emissary who is planning a trip to the sea. The envoy searches for his accusers; from his perspective, his life is also under suspicion of guilt. When he becomes a stranger, echoing Camus, *L'Étranger*, we must remember that *l'étranger* is a murderer. The searcher of traces is definitely a stranger in the world because of his past and also because of his realisation. But at least, his statement that his truth cannot be communicated can at least be revised. After all, the reader has learnt it.

Semprún also asks himself how the camp and man-made death can be told, what kind of language can be found for it. However, his confrontation with tradition takes place under completely different conditions. He introduces his autobiographical volume *La escritura o la vida* ("Literature or Life") with a quote from André Malraux: "I seek the decisive region of the soul where absolute evil confronts fraternity." The paratext thus introduces one of the fundamental aims of this autobiographical text. Malraux had an identificatory function for Semprún during his time in the Resistance: "In the Resistance, I became a figure of Malraux"²¹, he says about his reading of *L'Espoir* ("Man's Hope"). The solidarity and brotherhood that Malraux portrays in literature and that Semprún experiences in the Maquis group "Tabou" can later be transferred to the community of his fellow prisoners in the camp. In this respect, the significance of *L'Espoir* for him can hardly be overestimated. And also the importance of "fraternité" as something to be confronted with evil. Semprún emphasises that the idea of fraternity came to him from reading, and he lived his reality in Buchenwald.²² Literature, the literary tradition and intertextuality also serve him to create this fraternity, which cannot banish death and evil, but can transcend them.

The transcending function of literature is best shown in Semprún's novel *Viviré con su nombre, morirá con el mío* ("I Will Live with his Name, He Will Die with Mine"). Published in May 2001 and written entirely from a first-person narrative perspective, this novel deals narratively with an identity conflict of the first-person narrator. It tells how in Buchenwald, as a consequence of a Gestapo enquiry about Semprún, his communist comrades look for a dying man of the same age in order to swap both their names in the administration's index cards, then declare Semprún dead and let him live on under the other man's name. The whole thing turns out to be unnecessary in the end, so Semprún is able to live on with his own name after all. The story comes in part from Stéphane Hessel's biography; one can therefore speak of autofiction. Furthermore, this is a procedure that has been used repeatedly to save the lives of prisoners. Living together with the dying man of the same age, the question of identity and the coincidental

²¹ J. Semprún, P. Allières, "Écrire sa vie. Entretien avec Jorge Semprún", *Pôle Sud* 1994, no. 1, p. 31.

²² See F. Augstein, *Von Treue und Verrat. Jorge Semprún und sein Jahrhundert*, C.H. Beck, München 2002, p. 135.

reasons for the survival of the one and the death of the other form the core of the narrative. The dying man whom the first-person narrator meets and whose name he is to bear, a French student of the same age, has arrived in Buchenwald on the same transport as the narrator. He is in a cachectic state, already unable to speak. Semprún seeks him out at the latrines. This building evoked Arthur Rimbaud's *Bethsaïda, la piscine des cinq galeries* ("Bethsaïda, the pool of five galleries") for Semprún at first sight; he needs Rimbaud's text to grasp the reality:

Bethsaïda, the fishpond with the five halls, was a place of disgust. It lay there like a tub of doom, filled to the brim with rain and darkness). [...] Neither fishpond nor halls, of course. Nevertheless, the poetic incantation was true: it was definitely a "tub of doom." Other words in Rimbaud's text also seemed to me to describe what I saw [...] "The beggars crawled inside over the steps, the white and blue rags with which each wrapped every stump of his limbs. O washhouse of warriors and cripples, O bath of the people" [...].²³

However, the language of literature not only serves him to describe reality. It creates communication. In the end, Semprún succeeds in rescuing the Muselmann from his cachectic state through Rimbaud's poem. When Semprún can no longer recite because he has forgotten the last verses, the Frenchman does so with a restored voice and can thus become a companion, a fellow sufferer. The remembered literature contributes to the construction of the ego, refers to reality, gives the young Frenchman back his memory and thus his identity. And it also refers to itself. For the end of *Bethsaïda*, which Semprún no longer quotes, reads: "Le Paralytique se leva, qui était resté couché sur le flanc, franchit la galerie et ce fut d'un pas singulièrement assuré qu'ils le virent franchir la galerie et disparaître dans la ville, les Damnés."²⁴

Literature describes a miracle, the reference to it accomplishes it. The Muselmann finds his way back to himself as a subject, just as the paralysed man learns to walk again. He dies a little later; his last words, which the first-person narrator only identifies much later, are a quote from Seneca. One could say that he dies conscious of himself as a subject. Literature does not banish death, but it serves as an attempt to transcend it. And it functions communicatively by recalling and quoting words that others have already said. In this way, the written word becomes spoken word, and the quoted literary word is transferred into a dialogue situation in which there is a speaker and a listener and the speaker influences the listener by speaking.

²³ J. Semprún, *Viviré con su nombre, morirá con el mío*, Tusquets Editores S.A., Barcelona 2001, p. 46.

²⁴ A. Rimbaud, "Proses évangéliques" [in:] *Œuvres complètes*, ed. A. Adam, Gallimard, Paris 1972, p. 163 f.

In Semprún's work there is also a kind of metafunction of literature: it is used as an instrument to reflect on the narrated reality and on one's own narrative process. For example, literary figures are included as characters in the novels; their reflections are placed in the narrative presence. Semprún's dialogue with Goethe and Weimar takes place in this way. Goethe becomes an almost obsessive figure in the novel *Aquel domingo* ("What a Beautiful Sunday"), but also in "Literature or Life". In "What a Beautiful Sunday", Semprún takes Goethe for a walk with Johann Peter Eckermann on the Ettersberg, where the concentration camp was built. The argumentative thread that allows this is Léon Blum's presence in Buchenwald, who had written the essay *Nouvelles conversations de Goethe avec Eckermann* (1897–1900) in 1901. Semprún's fictional immortal Goethe would have written a speech from beyond the grave in response to Paul Valéry's famous *Discours en l'honneur de Goethe* of 30 April 1932, which once again, as Semprún's text assures us, summarised "the Goethean synthesis of the classical spirit and the Faustian demoniac."²⁵ As this document is now out of date, Goethe, who is being kept alive by Semprún, wants to publish a new book by Eckermann entitled "Goethe's Conversations with Léon Blum." This book by Eckermann is introduced by Semprún as a fantasy of the real Léon Blum imprisoned on the Ettersberg.

In the conversations imagined by Semprún, the themes of culture and the relationship of intellectuals to power are discussed. The underlying question is how a past of enlightened classicism can be reconciled with a concentration camp in Weimar. Goethe looks at the camp from a distance. The following paragraph can be seen as a polemical examination of the German cultural tradition. The alleged narrator is Eckermann:

Then Goethe took me by the arm again and made me take a few steps towards the camp gate. "Do you see this inscription?" he asked me, "To each his own." I don't know who the author is, who took the initiative. But I find it very meaningful and very encouraging that such an inscription adorns the entrance gate to a place of deprivation of liberty, of re-education through forced labour. After all, what is the meaning of to each his own? Is this not an excellent definition of a society that has been formed to defend the freedom of all, the freedom of the general public, if need be, even at the expense of an exaggerated and unfortunate individual freedom? I said it to you more than a century ago, and you recorded it in your conversations under the date Monday, 9 July 1827.²⁶

²⁵ P. Valéry, "Discours en l'honneur de Goethe" [in:] *Œuvres de Paul Valéry*, vol. 5, Éditions de la N.R.F., Paris 1935, pp. 96–98; also: L. Blum, "Critique littéraire. Nouvelles conversations de Goethe avec Eckermann. Premiers Essais politiques. 1981–1905" [in:] *L'Œuvre de Leon Blum: Critique littéraire, nouvelles conversations de Goethe avec Eckermann, premiers essais politiques*, vol. 1: 1891–1905, Éditions Albin Miche, Paris 1954, pp. 193–335.

²⁶ J. Semprún, *Aquel domingo*, Tusquets Editores S.A., Barcelona 1980, p. 290.

What follows is Goethe's well-known commentary on censorship as promoting the spirit. From the perspective of the reality of the camp, the dangerous path of an enlightenment associated with despotism and also the ambivalence of the relationship between culture and power become visible. The figure of Léon Blum leads to similar reflections on social democracy and power. In the context of the reality of the camp, Goethe's comments act almost as an emetic. They also show that Semprún is familiar with Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as Adorno's *Negative Dialectic*.

Kertész's definition of atonality for his writing stands in relation to his critical reflection about the tradition of humanism and enlightenment, determining a poetics of ever radicalising hopelessness, of affirmation leading to negation, of the negation of tragedy and heroism as inappropriate. The new genealogy of meaning that emerges is based on the awareness and tradition of the absurd. If the references to Goethe and Mann's *Death in Venice* were dominant in *Der Spurensucher*, in the later novel *Liquidation* it is the reference to Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*. The absurd takes centre stage, in Kertész's sense as a phenomenon immanent in the world, as a concept of general orientation. An existentialistic absurd, one could also say; it continues to be radically determined by the experience of the camp, the dubiousness of survival, living under dictatorship and writing about it. Whereby the search for knowledge is a path to freedom, from the awareness that we are left to our own devices in ethical terms on the threshold of the 21st century. The confrontation with tradition and its rewriting by Kertész are characterised by this. Semprún, on the other hand, counters the experience of radical evil in the camp with the experience of brotherhood as a leitmotif, not as an exception. In Semprún's memoirs, literature in general, the reference to it, plays a decisive role in formulating his own memory; it serves both survival in the camp and the formulation of survival, it serves metaliterary considerations on the possibility of writing and the structuring of the works. He can insert torture, camps and violence into a historical order in whose struggles he has played a role, and describes them with the help of texts and images of a cultural tradition that becomes his home; Kertész, on the other hand, has only experienced history as stagnation and dictatorship. Significantly, in *Fiasko*, shortly after putting Semprún's book down in anger, the old man picks up one that he treasures and of which neither author nor title is revealed to us. It is the *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke. He reads from it "The future is fixed, dear Mr Kappus, but we move in infinite space."²⁷ Kertész and Semprún have a very different approach to tradition, which is always conditioned by their camp experience: this experience is the starting point of their writing. In their novels, both deal with this tradition in a metaliterary way in order to put their experience into words. And Kertész's negative reflection on Semprún's description of Ilse Koch mainly serves him on the very rocky path of developing a poetics that is of a very unique,

²⁷ I. Kertész, *Fiasko*, op. cit., p. 105.

idiosyncratic, clear-sighted and existentially extreme radicality. Kertész experiences history as a standstill... and his writing arises from the experience of pain: “The happily lived life is a simple life: consequently mute”, he writes in his “Galley Diary”.²⁸ Perhaps, like Rilke, he was also afraid that happiness would make it impossible for him to write.

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²⁸ Idem, *Galeerentagebuch*, op. cit., p. 64.