

## Death and Desire: Memories of Milena Jesenská in Jorge Semprún and Antonio Muñoz Molina

Few writers are as well-known as Kafka. The same cannot be said for Milena Jesenská,<sup>1</sup> Kafka's translator into Czech and former lover. Born in 1895, as an editor and translator Jesenská was an important figure in Czech cultural life in her own right. In Prague and, after her marriage to Ernst Polak, in Vienna, Jesenská moved in intellectual and artistic circles where she made the acquaintance of Kafka. Although briefly a Communist she broke with the party after the Moscow show trials in 1936. For her role in the Czech resistance to the German occupation she has been recognized as one of the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. Her active involvement led to her arrest by the Gestapo in November 1939 and eventual imprisonment in Ravensbrück, which she would not survive. In spite of this remarkable life she is often relegated to the margins as a voiceless and invisible addressee of Kafka's letters. For that reason, it is intriguing that two Spanish authors, Jorge Semprún<sup>2</sup> and Antonio Muñoz Molina, should include in their novels an identical quotation from Kafka's *Letters to Milena* that puts her at the centre of the reader's attention.<sup>3</sup> Although Jesenská does

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<sup>1</sup> In direct quotations the spelling of Jesenská will preserve that of the original text.

<sup>2</sup> Semprún inhabits a liminal position as a Spanish exile in France who has published the majority of his works in French. Much of his writing could also be classified as life writing rather than fiction. Notwithstanding this, a generic categorization has no bearing on the argument of this article.

<sup>3</sup> The quotation is taken from the postscript of a letter from April 1920, which constitutes Kafka's first letter in the German edition by Willy Haas and in the corresponding Spanish Alianza edition of his correspondence, which predates an updated and newly translated edition from 2015 (see Franz Kafka, *Cartas a Milena*, trans. by J. R. Wilcock (Madrid:

not appear as a main character, she holds narrative importance in Semprún's *L'Écriture ou la vie* (1994) and Muñoz Molina's *Sefarad* (2001). In both works the Holocaust plays a pivotal role. Semprún's text offers a metafictional reflection on the difficulty of writing about the experience of the Holocaust for which the author's own imprisonment in the German concentration camp of Buchenwald from 1944 to 1945 represents the starting point. Conversely, Muñoz Molina's novel is rooted not in the author's lived experience but in his reading of testimonial literature. Shifting narrative voices are employed in order to connect the memory of the Holocaust, for which the author draws on the testimony of survivors like Jean Améry and Victor Klemperer, to a broader notion of exile and exclusion. While the title *Sefarad* designates Spain in modern Hebrew it also evokes the expulsion of Jews from Spain in the wake of the Reconquest by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492.

This article sets out to show how the fictionalization of Jesenská enables both writers to connect their work to a wider European framework of cultural and literary memory that is

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Alianza, 2007), p. 8; Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1975), p. 5; also Franz Kafka, *Cartas a Milena*, trans. by Carmen Gauger (Madrid: Alianza, 2016), p. 29). Given the timeline, it is likely that Muñoz Molina refers to the earlier Alianza version in his 'Nota de lecturas', especially since it follows the translation word by word (Antonio Muñoz Molina, *Sefarad* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2013), p. 750); all references are to this edition, identified in the text by the abbreviation *S*. English translations are taken from Antonio Muñoz Molina, *Sepharad*, trans. by Margaret Sayers Peden (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008); the English edition does not capitalize the titles of chapters). In Semprún's text the indicated purchase date of 1956 also points to the Haas edition (see Jorge Semprún, *L'Écriture ou la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 334). All references are to this edition identified in the text by the abbreviation *EV*.

informed by the legacy of the Holocaust. Most importantly, I will argue that the representation of Jesenská relates to a fragmented way of seeing, in turn linked to photography and the railway, the uncanny and the spectre, which in both cases serves as a tool for interweaving literature, and memory, and time. The introduction of Jesenská is a shrewd literary move because it allows the authors to associate with Kafka whom they view as a canonical and visionary precursor, while eschewing possible issues that this may raise, such as accusations of appropriation or instrumentalization, or direct comparisons, enabling them to keep their Bloomian ‘anxiety of influence’ in check.<sup>4</sup> By positioning Jesenská as an intermediary, rather than resorting to Kafka as a direct interlocutor, the private and the public can be brought into dialogue. Her experience of communism and the Nazi concentration camp means that she becomes the embodiment of those who suffered under twentieth-century totalitarianism. For Semprún’s narrator, reading Kafka’s *Letters to Milena* comes to signify a subversive act against communist orthodoxy and the PCE’s party line (*EV*, p. 334). From his retrospective point of view, reading Kafka foreshadows the narrator’s disillusionment with communism that will come about after the XX Party Congress, a turning point that reveals ‘la réalité kafkaïenne de l’univers stalinien’ (*EV*, p. 341). Both authors coincide in assigning a prophetic quality to Kafka whose texts ‘ramènent à l’épaisseur, à l’opacité, à l’incertitude, à la cruauté du siècle, qu’ils éclairent de façon décisive’ (*EV*, p.340). The difference is that Semprún incorporates a critique of Stalinism in Kafka’s prophecy, whereas it mainly predicts the horrors of Nazism for Muñoz Molina. In addition to functioning as a symbolic reminder of the victims of Communism and Nazism, Jesenská also offers other advantages as a literary character, for instance the introduction of further intertexts such as Baudelaire’s ‘A une passante’ as well as a connection with an established poetic tradition of representing death

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<sup>4</sup> See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

and desire as interlinked. Through the intertwining of love and death in the fragmented image of Jesenská, Semprún and Muñoz Molina reveal and preserve the traces of traumatic loss within their narratives.

The ninth chapter of Jorge Semprún's *L'Écriture ou la vie* opens *in medias res* with a question: 'Pourquoi cette jeune femme m'avait-elle fait penser à Milena?' (*EV*, p. 324). The demonstrative pronoun employed in this rhetorical question directs the reader's gaze to the woman's presence, before the narrator clarifies in the following paragraph that he is merely looking at a photograph. The reference to Jesenská is complicated by the fact that it is mediated through another woman who will remain anonymous. Her image, preserved in the photograph, triggers the narrator's memories while he creates an association between her and Jesenská. The chapter borrows its title 'Ô saisons, ô châteaux' from Rimbaud, a procedure in line with much of the rest of the book, which can also be interpreted as Semprún's attempt to create a genealogy for himself as a writer.<sup>5</sup> Despite quoting Rimbaud, the reference in the title of the chapter here ironically refers to Kafka's *Das Schloss*, whose dark forebodings offer a stark contrast to Rimbaud's poem. The chapter is framed by the award ceremony for the Formentor Prize of which Semprún was the recipient in 1964. Its location in the fortress Hohensalzburg allows Semprún to interlace it with an evocation of his expulsion from the PCE (Spanish Communist Party) following a meeting in Prague castle. Each castle thus acts as the mirror image of the other, since the end of Semprún's political career facilitated his emergence as a writer. The mention of Kafka is postponed. Instead the reference to Milena acts as an intermediary, a stand in, until the narrator acknowledges that, in fact, he did not think of her but 'à une phrase de Kafka concernant cette dernière' (*EV*, p. 325).

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<sup>5</sup> See also Daniela Omlor, *Jorge Semprún: Memory's Long Voyage* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 124.

As different temporal planes are superimposed in the narrator's mind, the distinction between Jesenská and her *doppelgänger* becomes blurred: 'Car je me trouve à voyager dans ma mémoire entre le mois de mai 1964 à Salzbourg, et le mois de janvier 1956, à Zurich: le lien étant l'image de Milena Jesenská, son évocation dans les lettres que Kafka lui adressa' (*EV*, p. 330). Clearly the starting point for the memory journey is the image described at the beginning of the chapter which is of the other woman, not of Jesenská. Her evocation in Kafka's letters creates a visual imprint in the narrator's mind for which the photograph of Jesenská's double seems to provide material proof even though the two are linked only by association. Thus, it would seem that Semprún employs the photograph not only as a memory cue, but also in full awareness of Roland Barthes' view that 'the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the object of the photograph is negligible, as we never learn more about the second Milena, and yet it serves as material evidence for the narrator's evocation of the past, testifying to the passing of time and situating a particular memory within the chronology of a lifetime.

The visual qualities of the textual quotation regarding Jesenská are brought to the fore thanks to the use of italics as well as the mixing of languages:

*Es fällt mir ein, dass ich mich an Ihr Gesicht eigentlich in keiner bestimmten Einzelheit erinnern kann...*

Je m'aperçois soudain que je ne puis me rappeler en réalité aucun détail particulier de votre visage. Seulement votre silhouette, vos vêtements, au moment où vous êtes partie entre les tables du café: cela, oui, je le vois encore. (*EV*, p. 326, emphasis in the original)

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), pp. 88-89.

In drawing attention to the act of translation, Semprún may subtly remind the reader of Jesenská's role as Kafka's translator, while also inserting the moment of narration in a multilingual universe similar to that inhabited by Kafka and Jesenská. This is significant for a writer like Semprún who has claimed: 'ma patrie, c'est le langage',<sup>7</sup> positioning himself outside national literary canons. At the same time, he makes visible the act of translating the past into the present through the recourse to memory and narration.<sup>8</sup> The quotation by Kafka which Semprún provides, first in German, then, expanded, in French translation (the second part in German is withheld for several paragraphs) universalizes the experience shared by Kafka and the narrator, at least for the male reader, since it is stated that: 'Il nous est à tous arrivé de remarquer d'abord la grâce d'une démarche [...]' (*EV*, p. 326). In fact, it is the unknown woman's gait which prompts the act of recall and turns her into Jesenská's double: 'Sa démarche, quelque chose dans sa silhouette, son port de tête, m'avait fait penser à Milena Jesenská' (*EV*, p. 326), together with their shared Czech nationality (p. 328). Underlying their duality, however, seems to be another moving figure that is not named: Baudelaire's 'passante'. In the photograph the woman is described by Semprún as follows: 'La jeune femme est de profil [...], [v]êtue de noir, une mèche sur le front, la main droite posée sur la nappe, repliée, frêle, son poignet orné de dentelle' (*EV*, p. 324). This description lacks a counterpart in Kafka's Jesenská but echoes certain elements of Baudelaire's sonnet 'A une passante', in which the eponymous character is depicted as '[l]ongue, mince, en grand deuil', 'd'une main fastueuse| Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet'.<sup>9</sup> As well as evoking

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<sup>7</sup> Jorge Semprún, 'Une tombe au creux des nuages' in *Une tombe au creux des nuages: Essais sur l'Europe d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), pp. 129-146 (p. 135).

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for pointing this out.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'À une passante', *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 92-93.

Baudelaire's *passante* the photograph is used to literary effect by Semprún. Contrary to the reader's expectations, information about the second Milena is deferred. The view of her remains impressionistic, foreshadowing the later association of Jesenská and a Renoir painting – presumably *The Lovers*, although this is never specified – that the narrator contemplates in Prague (*EV*, p. 348).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the photograph itself is not reproduced, a procedure common across Semprún's writing.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, Semprún creates a fragmentary vision that overlaps with Kafka's recollection of Milena<sup>12</sup> and Baudelaire's encounter with the *passante*. Although Semprún refers to the scene captured by the photograph of a jolly after-dinner group, its importance is wholly derived from the presence of Jesenská's double. In Barthesian terms, rather than focusing on the *studium* of the image, Semprún thus concerns himself with the *punctum*, 'sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.<sup>13</sup> Seeing the second Milena provokes a visceral reaction in the narrator because as a double she lifts the screen on the repressed memory of Jesenská and her death in the concentration camp, which speaks to the narrator's own traumatic past.

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<sup>10</sup> The narrator is fascinated by the idea that Jesenská may have looked at the same painting. The painting, thus becomes a chronotope where different times can converge and coexist.

<sup>11</sup> See also Jorge Semprún, *Adieu, vive clarté...* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 45, for the description of the only surviving photograph of Semprún's mother and Jorge Semprún, *La Deuxième Mort de Ramon Mercader* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 127, for a fictional photo album containing images of Semprún's parents. See also Omlor, *Jorge Semprún*, pp. 178-80.

<sup>12</sup> See Carolin Duttlinger, *Kafka and Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), in which she summarizes Siegfried Kracauer's view of 'the fragmenting effect of the photographic gaze' (p. 15).

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 27.

The comparison between Semprún's photograph and Baudelaire's poem is not gratuitous. Scholars have remarked on the sonnet's quality as a snapshot.<sup>14</sup> Semprún's use of ellipsis for the Kafka quotation, its italicization and splitting across two pages (at least in the Gallimard edition) arrest the eye (*EV*, pp. 326-27), in the same way that the ellipsis in the *volta* of Baudelaire's sonnet does ('Un éclair... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté'), bestowing on it the visual qualities of a photograph and rendering it in turn another snapshot.<sup>15</sup> Baudelaire's *passante* acts then as a hidden intertext, one of the 'palimpsestes d'une écriture oubliée' (*EV*, p. 332), which contains the missing link between Kafka's Milena and her Semprunian *doppelgänger*. The similarities with Baudelaire's *passante* are also brought out in Semprún's description of Kafka's love for Jesenská:

Sur cette apparition fugitive, indistincte, d'une silhouette en mouvement dans le brouhaha d'un café de Prague, Franz Kafka a construit l'édifice littéraire, aérien, superbe et poignant, d'un amour stérile, destructeur, se nourrissant exclusivement de l'absence, de la distance, du manque. (*EV*, p. 343)

The adjective 'fugitive' again recalls Baudelaire's 'fugitive beauté',<sup>16</sup> and much of what Semprún remarks is also true for the poetic voice's passion for the *passante*. As Walter Benjamin points out:

The delight of the urban poet is love – not at first sight, but at last sight. It is an eternal farewell, which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus, the sonnet deploys the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Blood, 'The Sonnet as Snapshot: Seizing the Instant in Baudelaire's "A une passante"', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 36 (2008), 255-69.

<sup>15</sup> Blood, 'The Sonnet as Snapshot', p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> Baudelaire, 'A une passante', p. 93.

In the case of Baudelaire, love ‘at last sight’ is the result of the transience of the encounter, the unattainability of a hypothetical ideal love and the inability to freeze a moment in time, which the sonnet, nonetheless, manages to do. In the figure of Semprún’s double Milena, the ‘shock of the encounter’<sup>18</sup> is fused with premonitions of death and the concentration camp, given that no retrospective evocation of Jesenská appears untainted by knowledge of her premature death in Ravensbrück.

The paradoxical nature of the writer’s (and the photographer’s) endeavour to preserve a fleeting moment which underlies Baudelaire’s poem is humorously picked up on by Semprún’s narrator in the present of the framing narrative: ‘Je n’arrive quand même pas à me concentrer sur cet instant historique. Je sens que je vais le rater, qu’il va passer, s’évanouir, avant que je n’en aie pris conscience’ (*EV*, pp. 334-35). This is evidently ironic since the whole chapter could be considered a ‘prise de conscience’ of that particular instant even if the immediacy of the moment cannot be conveyed through the permanence of the text. Elsewhere, in a self-conscious literary move, Semprún draws attention to the author’s ability to play with the time of narration:

Si tel était mon bon plaisir, je pourrais figer Carlos Barral<sup>19</sup> dans son attitude présente, je pourrais l’immobiliser dans un présent aussi prolongé qu’il me plairait.  
(*EV*, p. 345)

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap, 2006), p. 185.

<sup>18</sup> Blood, ‘The Sonnet as Snapshot’, p. 257.

<sup>19</sup> Carlos Barral was an important Spanish poet and publisher who helped establish the Formentor Prize.

Quite literally, Semprún here refers to the authorial intent to capture the moment in an attempt to keep time still. In the chapter ‘Flat Death: Snapshots of History’ in her book *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* Elissa Marder observes a similar effort in Baudelaire who connects it to the medium of photography: ‘The poem attempts to arrest, photographically, the impossible temporal disjunction evoked by her [the *passante*’s] passage’.<sup>20</sup>

It is possible though to extend this preoccupation with the fleetingness of the present beyond the purely temporal. In the case of Baudelaire, Marder argues that

[t]his poem presents a relay of deaths: the first death precedes the poem and the woman’s veil is a figure of its passage; then she, in turn, passes away. It is this relay of perpetual passings, layered upon one another, that the poet repeatedly mourns.<sup>21</sup>

The merging of death and desire, or Eros and Thanatos,<sup>22</sup> can be traced from Baudelaire to Semprún who imprints it on his reading of Kafka:

Un amour à mort se déploie [...]. Un amour dont la violence stérile se fonde sur le seul souvenir d’un corps en mouvement, image sans doute obscurément travaillé par

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Flat Death: Snapshots of History’, in *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 68-87 (p. 83).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Freud first stipulates the death drive as an antagonistic force to the sexual or live drives in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’. For more details, see Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. by John Reddick (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 41-102.

l'interdit de représentation de la loi hébraïque, transcendée par l'arrogance d'une volonté abstraite de séduction, de possession spirituelle. (EV, p. 327)

The fleeting image of Milena in Kafka's letter is here associated with the religious prohibition of figural representation by Semprún. Furthermore, while love unto death may evoke the Romantic ideal of *Liebestod*, their relationship is remembered precisely because it cannot be disentangled from the memory of their untimely deaths. Kafka repeats the pattern of failure from previous relationship by limiting his interactions with Jesenská to the exchange of letters and very few physical encounters, marred by sexual frustration. Albeit not in a strictly Freudian manner, Semprún creates a parallel between the desire for erotic fulfilment and a death wish derived from a traumatic repulsion to repeat. Jesenská's tormented relationship with Kafka together with her death in Ravensbrück provide him with a conceptual shortcut that gains added weight thanks to the allusions to Baudelaire's *passante*.

In addition to the Baudelairean image, Semprún inserts the foundational power of memory found in Kafka into his reading of the photograph by claiming that 'un amour [...] se fonde sur le seul souvenir d'un corps en mouvement' (EV, p. 327). Curiously though, the quotation by Kafka seems to underline the fallibility of memory: '“*Es fällt mir ein, dass ich mich an Ihr Gesicht eigentlich in keiner bestimmten Einzelheit erinnern kann...*”' (EV, p. 326). (It occurs to me that I really can't remember your face in any precise detail.)<sup>23</sup> Instead, it is the narrator who sets out to 'élucider les rapports entre la mémoire de la mort et l'écriture' (EV, p. 328). This relationship between the memory of death and writing crystallizes in a flashback to Prague in 1960:

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<sup>23</sup> All English translations are taken from Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. by Philip Boehm (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 4.

Je m'étais souvenu d'un souvenir de neige scintillant à la lumière des projecteurs, souvenir poignant que venait de faire éclater comme un feu glacé le souvenir de Milena elle-même: Milena Jesenskà, morte dans le camp de concentration de Ravensbrück. Je m'étais souvenu de ce souvenir de neige tombant sur les cendres de Milena Jesenskà. Je m'étais souvenu de la beauté de Milena dispersée par le vent, avec la fumée du crématoire. (*EV*, p. 348)

The evocation of snow is generally associated with the memory of concentration camps across a number of Semprún's texts.<sup>24</sup> At the end of *Le Grand Voyage* (1963) the narrator already refers to 'cette lumière glacée sur ce paysage de neige'<sup>25</sup> and connects it to memory: 'Gérard essaye de conserver la mémoire de tout ceci [...] il faut remuer des tonnes de coton neigeux dans son cerveau'.<sup>26</sup> The simile 'comme un feu glacé' is synonymous with 'lumière glacée' in Semprún's first novel. In a reversal of the occurrence with the photograph, the memory of the concentration camp in Prague triggers the reference to Jesenskà. At the same time, the coldness of the searchlights on the snow of the concentrationary landscape becomes infused with the paradox of Petrarchan love in the example taken from *L'Écriture ou la vie*.<sup>27</sup> In Milena's image Semprún condenses various memories. The mention of her beauty seems to recall more aptly Baudelaire's *passante*, whereas 'les cendres' is more reminiscent of Paul

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<sup>24</sup> This significance is pointed out in an earlier chapter where the image of snow comes to haunt Manuel: 'La neige nocturne dans le faisceau lumineux des projecteurs' (*EV*, p. 275).

<sup>25</sup> Jorge Semprún, *Le Grand Voyage* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), pp. 278-79.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>27</sup> Petrarchan love is typically associated with the distance between lover and beloved as well as the use of paradox as exemplified by the title of Leonard Forster's study *The Icy Fire: Five Studies in European Petrarchism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

Celan's 'Todesfuge' ('Death Fugue') from which Semprún quotes elsewhere in *L'Écriture ou la vie* (EV, p. 372).<sup>28</sup> Within the narrative framework of *L'Écriture ou la vie*, the image of snow also expands to include the constraints upon Semprún as a writer. The Spanish version of his first book could not be printed in Spain due to censorship, the editor Barral thus hands him a blank copy. This leads to the observation that: 'La neige d'antan recouvrait les pages de mon livre, les ensevelissait dans un linceul cotonneux. La neige effaçait mon livre, du moins dans sa version espagnole' (EV, pp. 350-51). Although this time the point of reference is the whiteness of the blank pages, the lexical field of death is clearly present in the choice of 'ensevelir' and 'linceul'. The underlying idea seems to be that the near-death experience of the concentration camp, of which Milena is a reminder, will always leave its mark on his writing, something which is made visible in the Spanish edition through the absence of words.

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<sup>28</sup> Whether Milena Jesenská's ashes were actually scattered or not remains unclear. In *Kafkas Freundin Milena* (Munich: Müller, 1963), Margarete Buber-Neumann relates that Milena's body was not burned in the crematorium of Ravensbrück but instead transported to Prague (p. 312). This is expressed more ambiguously in the English translation: 'On Dr. Treite's order, Milena's body was left in the vestibule of the crematorium. He had sent Dr. Jesensky a telegram, notifying him of his daughter's death and informing him that he could have her remains sent to Prague' (Buber-Neumann, *Milena*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (London: Collins, 1989), p. 205; subsequent translations are from this edition). Semprún was certainly familiar with Buber-Neumann as he mentions her in a later novel as an incarnation of Germany's fate, given that she was incarcerated twice, first in the Gulag, then in the Nazi concentration camp (Semprún, *Le Mort qu'il faut* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 197).

Remembering Milena is complicated by the fact that the extract in *L'Écriture ou la vie* consists of an almost verbatim quotation from Semprún's *Quel beau dimanche* (1980). In the aforementioned novel, remembrance takes place in the present tense, perhaps indicating that there is a qualitative difference between the way in which painting and photography preserve their subjects. The significance of Milena is extended even if the setting in front of the Renoir painting is the same. Following the above quotation referring to the flashback to Prague, in the novel from 1980 Semprún adds:

Je me souviens du regard vivant de cette jeune femme de Renoir qui avait contemplé, trente ans auparavant, le regard de Milena la contemplant. Je me souviens du regard de cette jeune femme éternellement vivante contemplant le visage de cette jeune future morte, Milena Jesenska [sic], [...] et devenant sans le savoir [...] irréaliste, aussi légère qu'une fumée de crématoire dans le paysage désolé [...] Je me souviens d'un souvenir de Buchenwald surgi au sein du souvenir de Milena, devant un tableau de Renoir.<sup>29</sup>

The version from *L'Écriture ou la vie* is much more concise. It eliminates the obvious emphasis on the act of seeing, leaving the reader to make some of the connections. Nonetheless, the introduction of the earlier photograph as a trigger, together with the Kafka extract, enable Semprún to reinforce the associations between seeing and remembering, Milena and death, not least through the mediation of Baudelaire. What is expressed explicitly in the quotation from *Quel beau dimanche* can be read into the photograph of Milena's double as *punctum*:

[s]he is going to die. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me an absolute

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<sup>29</sup> Semprún, *Quel beau dimanche* (Paris: Grasset, 2003), pp. 353-54.

past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence. [...] Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.<sup>30</sup>

The photograph thus serves to condense Semprún's own experience in Buchenwald through that of Milena. This also fits the reversal of roles with which the quotation from *Quel beau dimanche* continues: the narrator imagines that he could have died and be merely a dream of Jesenská's:

Je me souviens d'un souvenir évanescent de moi-même dans le souvenir de Milena, comme si c'était elle qui avait rêvé, un dimanche à Ravensbrück, la visite que je ferais vingt ans plus tard au palais Sternberg, pour y contempler cette toile de Renoir qu'elle connaissait sans doute. Je me souviens d'un rêve de Milena rêvant mon existence'.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the photograph brings to light Jesenská's absence through the substitute woman. Milena's double is a perfect example of the Freudian notion of the uncanny. She is simultaneously a stranger, that is not Jesenská, and familiar, in that she reminds the narrator of her, rendering her position liminal in that she is both present and absent. The layering of different memories, that of Kafka's Milena and Baudelaire's *passante*, attests to the absence

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<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> *Quel beau dimanche*, p. 354. This reversal echoes Primo Levi's dream within a dream: 'It is a dream within a dream [...]. I am sitting at a table with my family [...] everything collapses and disintegrates around me [...]. Now everything has changed to chaos; [...] I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home' (*If This Is A Man: The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Everyman's Library, 2000), p. 454).

at the centre of these texts, where desire comes to displace the memory of death.<sup>32</sup> This is true for the intertexts as well as for Semprún's narrative. This absence comes to haunt the reader as it enables the narrative's temporal shifts between the present of narration, the past of the photograph in 1964, and the train journey in 1956, during which Semprún's narrator reads Kafka's *Letters to Milena* (*EV*, p. 341).

Hidden underneath, however, are flashbacks to 1945 and the previous year. In Freudian terms, Milena's double thus represents 'the return of what has been repressed',<sup>33</sup> while her association with desire acts as a screen. The lust projected onto the young woman deflects from the fear of death that Milena embodies, which surfaces only towards the end of the chapter with the mention of her death in Ravensbrück (*EV*, p. 348), finally culminating in the narrator's realisation of 'la présence de la mort' (*EV*, p. 350) in May 1945. Freud leaves no doubt that the double is an 'uncanny harbinger of death' and that 'it is only the factor of the unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of "chance"'.<sup>34</sup> The recurrence of Milena Jesenská across *Quel beau dimanche* and *L'Écriture ou la vie* illustrates the repetition inherent in the act of writing the traumatic memory of the concentration camp. This compulsion to repeat manifests itself metatextually through the endless loop of rewriting 'un seul livre, sans cesse renouvelé' (*EV*, p. 354).

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<sup>32</sup> The scope of this article does not allow for a sustained engagement with the fact that these absences are clearly gendered.

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David Lintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 144.

A photograph is also of significance for Muñoz Molina's engagement with Jesenská even if it is likewise absent from *Sefarad*. In a newspaper column which predates his novel the author explains:

A otra mujer, cuya fotografía se ha publicado también en estas semanas de agosto, le ha ocurrido justo lo contrario: fue tan real como cualquiera de nosotros, los que estamos a este lado de las páginas escritas y de las pantallas, pero el tiempo, el azar y el amor de un hombre, Franz Kafka, hicieron de ella primero una sombra epistolar y luego un personaje de la literatura [...].<sup>35</sup>

(Exactly the opposite has happened to a woman whose photograph has also been published this August: she was as real as any of us, those of us who are on this side of the written pages and screens, but time, chance, and the love of a man, Franz Kafka, first turned her into an epistolary shadow and then into a literary character.)

Having enumerated literary figures that ended up acquiring a reality of their own, Muñoz Molina holds that the opposite is true for Jesenská, who has become unreal. He explains that it was only through seeing photographs of her that he became aware of her existence independently of that of Kafka. Prior to seeing her image:

Milena era una ausencia y una sombra, una mujer a la que yo no atribuía una vida soberana e irreductible, sino una cualidad pasiva de objeto del amor de un hombre, destinataria silenciosa de cartas cuya urgente intensidad cobraba algo de inútil porque

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<sup>35</sup> Antonio Muñoz Molina, 'La sombra de las cartas' ('The Shadow of Letters'), *El País*, 21 August 1996 <[https://elpais.com/diario/1996/08/21/cultura/840578413\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/1996/08/21/cultura/840578413_850215.html)>

[accessed 14 August 2019], all translations from this article are my own.

no se conservan las respuestas, una proyección de la vida de otro, de sus recuerdos o sus sueños.<sup>36</sup>

(Milena was an absence and a shadow, a woman to whom I did not attribute a sovereign and irreducible life of her own but rather the passive quality of love object of a man, the silent addressee of letters whose urgent intensity acquired a degree of futility because the replies no longer exist, the projection of someone else's life, of his memories or dreams.)

Yet it could be argued that Muñoz Molina is drawn to her figure precisely for its ghostly qualities, that awareness of her photograph increases his view of her as a spectre, as Barthes puts it.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this is heightened by Muñoz Molina's observation that 'quien pareció una sombra adquiere una presencia nítida de soberanía y heroísmo, *una cualidad futura de víctima* que nos estremece al mirar su cara serena en las fotografías y saber su destino' ('she who seemed a shadow acquires the neat presence of sovereignty and heroism, *the future condition of victim* which makes us shiver when looking at her serene face in the photographs and knowing her fate').<sup>38</sup> Despite referring to her presence, Muñoz Molina's discovery of Jesenská's image parallels the insight derived from the photograph inserted in Semprún's text. By emphasizing her role as future victim, what he gazes at is her 'death in the future'.<sup>39</sup> Together with his reaction to the photograph, Muñoz Molina points to the distance between Kafka and Jesenská and the unreliability of memory as conditions for Jesenská's spectrality:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 89, emphasis in the original.

<sup>38</sup> 'La sombra de las cartas', my emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

En una de las primeras cartas que le escribió, Franz Kafka le dice que no sabe recordar su cara, y esa imprecisión tan dolorosa de la memoria se contagia a los rasgos de la persona amada y recordada, empieza a convertirla de antemano en el fantasma que será después: ‘Sólo recuerdo cómo se alejaba usted entre las mesitas del café; su figura, su vestido, todavía los veo’.<sup>40</sup>

In one of the first letters that he wrote to her, Franz Kafka says that he cannot remember her face and that painful imprecision of memory contaminates the traits of the person that is loved and remembered, he anticipates her turning into the ghost that she will become later: ‘I remember only the way you walked away between the tables of the café, your figure, your dress, that I still see’.

Muñoz Molina here makes use of the same quotation that he was to include in *Sefarad*. In the novel Jesenská features alongside other victims of the Holocaust and the idea of Milena as ‘fantasma’ is picked up on when she is described from Kafka’s point of view as ‘la mujer que casi no es más que un fantasma de la imaginación y de las cartas. *El miedo es la infelicidad*’ (S, p. 220) (‘a physical woman who is scarcely more than a ghost of his imagination and their letters. *Fear is unhappiness* (p. 31)). Contrary to what we might expect, in the fictional work Jesenská is not given a voice. The italicized sentence taken from Kafka’s diary is purged of the reference to her.<sup>41</sup> When, within *Sefarad*, the character Milena tells the character Buber-

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<sup>40</sup> ‘La sombra de las cartas’.

<sup>41</sup> The entry reads: ‘M. hat recht: die Furcht ist das Unglück’ (‘M. is right: fear is unhappiness’) (Kafka, *Tagebücher 1914-1923* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), p. 200). This passage is quoted in Haas’s epilogue to the earlier Alianza edition, where it is translated as ‘El temor es la desdicha’ (‘Fear is misfortune’) (Kafka, *Cartas a Milena*, p. 252). The full quotation also appears in Buber-Neumann, *Kafkas Freundin Milena*, p. 105. In the Spanish

Neumann about her relationship with Kafka in Ravensbrück, this occurs in reported speech. Much space is taken up by Milena recounting Kafka's literature for her friend (S, p. 218), a detail that the actual Buber-Neumann expands on in her book by explaining that Jesenská recounted 'eine ganz eigene Version dieser Novelle Franz Kafkas [*Die Verwandlung*]' ('her own private version of Kafka's novella [*The Metamorphosis*']),<sup>42</sup> granting Jesenská some creative agency. However, this is lacking in Muñoz Molina's version. As a result, although Jesenská is present, her presence is more akin to an absence. Whereas in Semprún's text Jesenská's absence is evoked through her double, in *Sefarad* Milena's lack of agency and voice give her a ghostly quality. Her ghost haunts the narrative in the same way that it had already haunted Kafka's letters. At the end of his article Muñoz Molina had mused that rather than Kafka becoming a ghost for Jesenská actually the opposite happened, as he goes on to show in his novel.<sup>43</sup> The final quotation from one of Kafka's *Letters to Milena* that concludes the article introduces Kafka's own thoughts on the spectral:

Quizás antes de morir él pensaba que acabaría siendo una sombra epistolar en la biografía de Milena, ese fantasma en que se convierte quien rememora demasiado a alguien, quien escribe demasiadas cartas. 'Los besos por escrito no llegan a su

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edition of the latter we find 'el miedo es la infelicidad' (Buber-Neumann, *Milena*, trans. by M. A. Grau (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2017), p. 87).

<sup>42</sup> Buber-Neumann, *Kafkas Freundin Milena*, p. 94; *Milena*, trans. Manheim, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for pointing out that this reversal is not unlike that imagined by Semprún's narrator in *Quel beau dimanche* when he fancies himself to be merely dreamt by Milena.

destino’, le había dicho él en una de las suyas, ‘se los beben por el camino los fantasmas’.<sup>44</sup>

(Perhaps before dying he thought that he would end up being an epistolary shadow in the biography of Milena, that ghost one becomes upon remembering someone too much, upon writing too many letters. ‘Written kisses never arrive at their destination’, he had said in one of his letters, ‘the ghosts drink them up along the way’.)

Kafka’s reference to ghosts reveals the fallacy of writing, albeit the writing of letters, before he goes on to include the electrical telegraph, the telephone, and wireless telegraphy in his considerations. In trying to overcome the distance between two people by means of a letter, the writer enters into ‘ein[en] Verkehr mit Gespenstern und zwar nicht nur mit dem Gespenst des Adressaten, sondern auch mit dem eigenen Gespenst’ (‘an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one’s own ghost’).<sup>45</sup> He seems to indicate that writing actually hinders communication as it is unable to transmit thought or touch unmediated.<sup>46</sup> Kafka’s suggestion in the same letter that the railway was invented in order to eliminate the ghostliness that inhabits human relations is of note

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<sup>44</sup> Muñoz Molina, ‘La sombra de las cartas’. The Kafka quotation is taken from the letter dated end of March 1922 (Kafka, *Briefe an Milena* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1983), p. 302; Kafka, *Letters*, p. 218). It also appears in Haas’s epilogue in Kafka, *Cartas a Milena*, p. 252.

<sup>45</sup> Kafka, *Briefe*, p. 302; Kafka, *Letters*, p. 218.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Man kann an einen fernen Menschen denken und man kann einen nahen Menschen fassen, alle andere geht über Menschenkraft’ (Kafka, *Briefe*, p. 302) (‘One can think about someone far away and one can hold on to someone nearby; everything else is beyond human power’) (Kafka, *Letters*, p. 218).

here. His view of ghosts seems to be a combination of repressed psychological phenomena and the traditional image of the spectre. Not least because he states that ‘Briefe schreiben aber heißt, sich vor den Gespenstern entblößen, worauf sie gierig warten’ (‘Writing letters, on the other hand, means exposing oneself to the ghosts, who are greedily waiting precisely for that’).<sup>47</sup>

Milena’s spectre can be seen in parallel with the Kafkaesque story of Camille Safra that unfolds at the end of the chapter ‘Copenhagen’ (‘Copenhagen’) since it is in this very chapter of *Sefarad*, organized around the idea of a train journey, that the first reference to Jesenská occurs. After WWII, Camille and her mother return to France, from where they had fled to escape Nazi persecution, to enquire about the fate of their relatives. When the door of their hotel room will not open, a panic mounts in the women until they are finally freed. Later they discover that the hotel had been the Gestapo headquarters during the war (*S*, p. 241). In her final days, Camille’s mother continues to be haunted by the experience, very clearly a screen memory for ‘la muerte de la que ella y su hija habían escapado hacía cuarenta y cinco años’ (*S*, p. 242) (‘the death that she and her daughter had escaped forty-five years before’ (p. 44)). The inexplicability of the situation that they find themselves in, together with the historical context, invites an uncanny reading that precisely fits the idea of repetition and the return of the repressed. At the same time, the episode alludes to the haunted house of more traditional ghost stories.

The chapter’s narrative frame of rail travel permits Muñoz Molina to tap into a tradition of writing that he is well aware of (‘En la literatura hay muchas narraciones que fingen ser relatos contados a lo largo de un viaje, en un encuentro al azar de un camino, en torno al fuego de una posada, en el vagón de un tren’ (*S*, p. 202) (‘In literature there are many

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<sup>47</sup> Kafka, *Briefe*, p. 302; Kafka, *Letters*, p. 218.

narratives that pretend to be stories told during a journey, at a chance encounter along the road, around the fireplace of an inn, in the coach of a train' (p. 24)). The narrator points out that the anonymity of the train facilitates the performative aspects of the self by negating it (S, p. 201). Moreover, within the train, the perception of time and space is altered and thus the experience of reality itself. This reflects Michel de Certeau's view that '[i]nside [the train carriage] there is the immobility of an order. Here rest and dreams reign supreme. [...] This order, an organizational system, the quietude of a certain reason, is the condition of both a railway car's and a text's movement from one place to another.'<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, Muñoz Molina's narrator enters a realm of heightened sensation linked to the world of memory and dreams. This is accentuated further by Muñoz Molina's predilection for night trains within this particular narrative strand.

Todo era tan raro esa noche, la del primer viaje, raro y mágico, como si al subir al tren – incluso antes, al llegar a la estación – yo hubiera abandonado el espacio cotidiano de la realidad y hubiera ingresado en otro reino muy semejante al de las películas o al de los libros, el reino insomne de los viajeros (S, p. 209)

(Everything was strange that night, that rare and magical night of my first trip; it was as if when I got on the train – or earlier when I arrived at the station – I had abandoned the everyday and entered a kingdom very much like the world of films or books, the insomniac world of travelers. (p. 27))

The above quotation reveals this process of entering a world outside purely rational reality. In addition to literature, the train journey is also connected to the moving image per se, that is the cinema. Thus, the significance of the railway goes beyond Samuel

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<sup>48</sup> *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 111.

O'Donoghue's interpretation of it as 'a simulacrum of the process of empathizing with a victim of trauma'.<sup>49</sup> In his article O'Donoghue endeavours to establish a dialogue between the spatial 'turn' and trauma studies. Thus, he finds that:

Train journeys in *Le grand voyage* and *Sefarad* are a metaphor for the therapeutic process of narrativizing traumatic experiences. The trains of the psyche, narratives are vehicles enabling victims to travel back to traumatic events. [...] what Semprún and Muñoz Molina offer the reader is a textual re-enactment of the therapeutic process, in which journeys and trains are foregrounded using a representational strategy that reinforces the authors' thematic concern with narrative therapy.<sup>50</sup>

While this is a valid interpretation that can be successfully applied to the story of Camille Safra it is not clear whether the authors' primary concern is indeed that of narrative therapy. In fact, Muñoz Molina enhances the poetic density of the narrative thanks to the many layers of suggestiveness that are tied to the railway. These positive connotations of trains are mobilized through 'cinematic vision',<sup>51</sup> described as follows by Laura Marcus in the chapter 'The Things That Move: Early Film and Literature' in her monograph *The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period*:

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<sup>49</sup> 'Negotiating Space in Literary Representations of Holocaust Trauma: Jorge Semprún's *Le grand voyage* and Antonio Muñoz Molina's *Sefarad*', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 93:1 (2016), 45-61 (p. 57).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> Laura Marcus, 'The Things That Move: Early Film and Literature', *The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 18-43 (p. 20).

Representations of cinema in its early years were inseparable from the cultural and conceptual fascination with questions of motion and movement. These, in turn, were related to an understanding of film motion as, for better or worse, essentially ‘locomotive’. Cinema was frequently [...] represented as a form of ‘transport’ – with its dual connotations, like those of *kinema*, of ‘motion’ and ‘emotion’ – and as a machine with the powers to move the spectator through time and space in ways to some extent anticipated in the great machine of the nineteenth century, the railway, but now magically realized in the virtual realm of representation.<sup>52</sup>

In *Sefarad* this romantic and cinematic view of the railway is reinforced by the glimpse of a seductive woman: ‘rubia, alta, despeinada, extranjera’ (*S*, p. 210) (‘a tall blond foreigner [with] windswept hair’ (p. 27)), echoing the sexual anticipation expressed earlier ‘[u]na mujer y un hombre se miran con una punzada de intriga y deseo al acomodarse el uno frente al otro en un tren’ (*S*, p. 200) (‘[[[a] woman and a man look at each other with a tingle of intrigue and desire as they take seats facing each other’ (p. 23)). The description of the woman is not unlike that of one of Hitchcock’s *femmes fatales*, who remain the forever unattainable object of ‘el deseo ignorante, asustado y fervoroso de los catorce años’ (*S*, p. 210) (‘[the innocent, frightened, and fervent desire of a fourteen-year-old boy’ (p. 27)).<sup>53</sup> It is significant that

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> Critics have repeatedly drawn attention to Muñoz Molina’s interest in cinema. See Marta Beatriz Ferrari, ‘El cine, la tradición y Borges en *Beltenebros* de Antonio Muñoz Molina’, *Hispanic Journal*, 21 (2000), 435-46; Nathan E. Richardson, ‘A Kingdom of Shadows: Muñoz Molina’s *Beltenebros*, Film Theory, and Spain, 1944-1989’, *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea*, 29 (2004), 257-81; Timothy P. Reed, “‘Tócalo otra vez, Santiago’: Mass Culture, Memory, and Identity in Antonio Muñoz Molina’s *El invierno de Lisboa*”,

Muñoz Molina mentions '[e]l primer viaje' (S, p. 209) ('my first trip' (p. 27)) in the earlier quotation indicating that the first train journey is a rite of passage akin to the moment of sexual initiation. This impression is also reinforced by the inclusion of the anecdote about a fervent sexual encounter aboard the train from Granada to Madrid between a friend of the narrator's and an unidentified woman (S, pp. 204-07). As the vision of the 'extranjera' disappears on the moving train she registers the gaze of the other(s) left behind on the platform, firmly placing the focus on the act of seeing and being seen: 'Aún me parece que la estoy viendo, aunque ya no sé si lo que recuerdo es un recuerdo' (S, p. 210) ('I can still see her, although I don't know now whether what I remember is in fact a memory' (p. 27)) and '[e]n jirones intranquilos de sueños veía de nuevo a esa mujer al quedarme dormido' (S, p. 211) ('[i]n shifting tatters of dreams, [I saw] the woman [...] again as I dozed' (p. 28, translation adapted)). As de Certeau states, the way of viewing becomes paramount to the experience of the railway. When looking out, things 'do not change their place any more than I do; vision alone continually undoes and remakes the relationships between these fixed elements'.<sup>54</sup>

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*Letras Hispanas*, 1 (2004), 18-36; Eric M. Thau, "'We'll always have Lisbon": Cinematic Intertextuality in Antonio Muñoz Molina's *El invierno en Lisboa*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 40 (2012), 301-13; Olga Lopez-Valdero Colbert, *The Gaze on the Past: Popular Culture and History in Antonio Muñoz Molina's Novels* (Lewisburgh, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007). Muñoz Molina also took part in a presentation of Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* in early 2019 (see Antonio Muñoz Molina, 'Cine y palabras', *El País*, 9 February 2019, <[https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/02/05/babelia/1549380296\\_687119.html](https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/02/05/babelia/1549380296_687119.html)> [accessed 21 August 2019]).

<sup>54</sup> *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 112.

The act of seeing and the unbridgeable distance that de Certeau links to the movement of the train are also vital to how the author imagines Kafka and Jesenská's relationship. As in the examples of physical attraction linked to the railway, the defining aspect of Kafka and Jesenská's relationship for Muñoz Molina is the distance between them that facilitates an idealized view of the other from afar:

El amor entre Milena Jesenska y Franz Kafka está cruzado de cartas y de trenes, y en él importan más la lejanía y las palabras escritas que los encuentros reales o las caricias verdaderas. (S, p. 219)

(The love affair between Milena Jesenska and Franz Kafka is crisscrossed with letters and trains, and in it distance and written words count for more than real meetings and caresses. (p. 31))

The physical distance between the two lovers is overcome by the access to trains and letter-writing, yet the movement of the train and the absence of a direct interlocutor in the letter also enable them to continue to imagine the other. De Certeau once more relates this apparent contradiction to the railway:

The windowpane is what allows us to *see*, and the rail, what allows us to *move through*. These are two complementary modes of separation. The first creates the spectator's distance: You shall not touch; the more you see, the less you hold – a dispossession of the hand in favor of a greater trajectory for the eye. The second inscribes, indefinitely, the injunction to pass on; it is its order written in a single but endless line: go, leave, this is not your country, and neither is that – an imperative of separation which obliges one to pay for an abstract ocular domination of space by leaving behind any proper place, by losing one's footing.

But paradoxically it is the silence of these things put at a distance, behind the windowpane, which, from a great distance, makes our memories speak or draws out of the shadows the dreams of our secrets.<sup>55</sup>

Although de Certeau is discussing the distance that separates the passengers on the train and the objects that they perceive on the outside, it is indicative of the way in which the movement of the train determines a way of seeing by means of the separation that it enforces. It is precisely this paradox of physical distance and mental proximity in memory, dreams, and the imagination that Muñoz Molina develops. It is to this end that he quotes the same extract from Kafka's letter that Semprún had already referred to:<sup>56</sup>

Antes de empezar a escribirse se habían visto una sola vez, en un café, sin reparar mucho el uno en el otro, y de pronto él quería rescatar de los márgenes de la memoria un recuerdo que no podía ser preciso, la cara en la que no había llegado a fijarse, aunque tan sólo unos meses después iba a estar enamorado de ella. *Advierto que no consigo recordar su rostro con detalle. Sólo recuerdo cómo se alejaba entre las mesitas del café; su figura, su vestido, todavía los veo.* (S, p. 218)

(Before they started writing, they saw each other only once, in a café, scarcely noticing each other, and now suddenly he wanted to reclaim from the fuzzy fringes of memory the face of this woman, [a face that he had failed to notice although only a few months later he was going to be in love with her]. [*It occurs to me*] *that I cannot remember your face in detail. I remember only your moving away between the small tables in the café: your figure, your dress... I still see them.* (p. 31, translation expanded and adapted)) The absence of detail in

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 112, emphasis in the original.

<sup>56</sup> To the best of my knowledge, Muñoz Molina does not indicate familiarity with Semprún's œuvre, however surprising this gap in his literary repertoire may seem.

the visual recall in the italicized Kafka quotation is here not linked to the passage of Milena, as in the case of Semprún, but matches the new way of seeing that the rapid movement of the train (and the cinema) entails. The quotation illustrates the ‘abstract, ocular domination of space’ at the cost of ‘losing one’s footing’ through the fragmented image of Milena. At the heart of Milena’s memory then lies an incompleteness that Muñoz Molina chooses to preserve. Rather than necessarily being therapeutic, the ghostliness of Milena maintains a view of her from a distance, emphasizing the loss of ‘one’s footing’ and of ‘a proper place’, to which, in spite of best efforts, the reader may fail to restore these characters. The initial fleeting glimpse of the beloved that the future lover tries to salvage for memory ends up prefiguring the devastation of the Holocaust. Death and desire thus also come to co-exist in Milena’s appearance in *Sefarad*.

A variation of this interconnection also plays out in the chapter ‘Oh tú que lo sabías’ (*S*, p. 310) (‘oh you, who knew so well’ (p. 92)), which takes its title from Baudelaire’s ‘A une passante’.<sup>57</sup> Once more the Baudelairean intertext facilitates a careful interweaving of memories of death and desire. Isaac Salama, a Sephardic Jew who lived through the Holocaust in Budapest but was saved by the intervention of Sanz Briz and later settles in Tangier,<sup>58</sup> encounters a beautiful stranger on board the train to Casablanca. As a student in Spain, Salama’s attempts to leave the legacy of the Holocaust behind eventually lead to a car

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<sup>57</sup> Like Semprún, Muñoz Molina alludes to the French poet across a range of his works (see Richard Sperber, *The Discourse of Flanerie in Antonio Muñoz Molina’s Texts* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2015)). Muñoz Molina, *Un andar solitario entre la gente* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2018) also references ‘A une passante’ (p. 289).

<sup>58</sup> Ángel Sanz Briz was a Spanish diplomat who saved the lives of more than five thousand Jews from Hungary (see Muñoz Molina, *Sefarad*, pp. 122-23).

accident during which he suffers life-changing injuries. In order to dissimulate the resulting disability and keep the illusion of the possibility of love alive, Salama does not disembark in Casablanca, providing the woman with a false phone number and address instead (*S*, p. 353). As a result, the original scene of the poem is transposed from the streets of Paris, inhabited by the *flâneur*, to the interior of a railway carriage. The chapter ends: ‘Oh tú a quien yo hubiera amado, recitó el señor Salama aquella tarde en su despacho del Ateneo Español, con la misma grave pesadumbre con que habría dicho los versículos del kaddish en memoria de su padre, [...] oh tú que lo sabías’ (*S*, p. 354) (*‘Oh you, whom I would have loved, he recited that evening in his office in the Ateneo Español, moved as deeply as if he were chanting the Kaddish in his father’s memory [...]. Oh you, who knew so well’* (p. 122, original emphasis)).<sup>59</sup> In the final sentence, the sonnet’s expression of desire is once more suggestive of death through the reference to the Jewish mourner’s prayer, the kaddish.

It is the image of the train that enables Muñoz Molina to connect the two opposites of desire and death. Having established the train as a space outside reality that can reveal one’s innermost desires and as a means of connection between lovers like Kafka and Jesenská, he is then able to subvert the image and show the train as a mode of transport to the underworld of the concentration camps:

[A]lgunas veces las estaciones nocturnas parecen el ingreso en el reino de Hades, y sus nombres ya contienen como un principio de maleficio: Cerbère, donde los gendarmes franceses humillaban en el invierno de 1939 a los soldados de la República Española [...]; Port Bou, donde Walter Benjamin se quitó la vida en 1940; Gmünd, la estación fronteriza entre Checoslovaquia y Austria, donde alguna vez se encontraron

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<sup>59</sup> Salama quotes the final verse of Baudelaire’s sonnet: ‘Ô toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!’, Baudelaire, ‘A une passante’, p. 93.

Franz Kafka y Milena Jesenska, citas clandestinas en el paréntesis de tiempo de los horarios de los trenes, en la exasperada brevedad de las horas que ya estaban agotándose en cuanto se veían, en cuanto subían hacia el cuarto inhóspito del hotel de la estación, donde el paso cercano de los trenes hacía vibrar los cristales de la ventana. (*S*, p. 213)

Sometimes stations at night do resemble the entrance to Hades and their names contain curses: Cerbère, where in the Winter of 1939 the French gendarmes humiliated the soldiers of the Spanish Republic, [...] Port Bou, where Walter Benjamin took his life in 1940; Gmünd, the station at the border between Czechoslovakia and Austria where Franz Kafka and Milena Jesenska sometimes met secretly, within the parentheses of train schedules, within the exasperating brevity of time running out the minute they saw each other, the minute they climbed the stairs toward the inhospitable room in the station hotel where the rumble of passing trains rattled the windowpanes. (pp. 28-29))

The names of the border stations do not incite excitement but fear, even in the case of the rendezvous of Kafka and Milena.<sup>60</sup> The railway as a backdrop to their affair here indicates the

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<sup>60</sup> This has already been set up earlier by Muñoz Molina when a still anonymous Kafka is seen boarding the train, nervously awaiting border checks at Gmünd (*S*, pp. 200-01). In all likelihood, Muñoz Molina took inspiration from an anecdote detailed by Kafka in his letter to Milena from 5 July 1920 in which he recounts that his Austrian visa had expired ensuing in a bureaucratic episode at Gmünd whose resolution Kafka credits to Jesenská's miraculous intervention (see Kafka, *Briefe*, pp. 86-90). In his letter from 2 August 1920 Kafka returns to these bureaucratic issues: 'Der Gmünder Bahnhof ist nämlich tschechisch, die Stadt

unrelenting passing of time by way of its synaesthetic presence (sound, movement, and vibration), a ticking of the clock that not only gestures to the fleetingness of their love and that particular moment but also offers a prolepsis of the nearing end. Jesenská and Kafka's relationship enables the author to bring sex and death together in the reader's imagination. In this instance, the night is no longer promising the fulfilment of hidden desires as earlier but instead its darkness becomes figuratively foreboding: 'La gran noche de Europa está cruzada de largos trenes siniestros, de convoyes de vagones de mercancías o ganado' (*S*, p. 217) ('The great night of Europe is shot through with long, sinister trains, with convoys of cattle and freight cars [...]') (p. 29)). This very visual description seems to take inspiration from cinematic treatment of the concentration camps being serviced by a network of trains.<sup>61</sup>

In a subtler fashion, earlier in the same chapter Muñoz Molina had already proposed a comparison between trains and rivers:

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österreichisch' (Kafka, *Briefe*, p. 175) ('Although the train station in Gmünd is Czech, the town is Austrian' (Kafka, *Letters*, p. 129)).

<sup>61</sup> The most representative single image of the concentration camps is probably that of the train tracks leading up to the entrance of Auschwitz, which features on the cover of the Cátedra edition. Within the chapter this is evoked as follows: 'Cómo sería llegar a una estación alemana o polaca en un tren de ganado, escuchar en los altavoces órdenes gritadas en alemán y no comprender nada, ver a lo lejos luces, alambradas, chimeneas muy altas expulsando humo negro' (*S*, p. 214) ('What would it be like to arrive at a German or Polish station in a cattle car, to hear orders shouted in German over the loudspeakers and not understand a word, to see the distant lights, wire fences, and tall, tall chimneys expelling black smoke?' (p. 29)).

Ahora comprendo que en nuestra tierra seca e interior los trenes nocturnos eran el gran río que nos llevaba al mundo y nos traía luego de regreso, el gran caudal deslizándose en sombras en dirección al mar o a las hermosas ciudades donde estaría aguardándonos una nueva existencia, más luminosa y verdadera, más parecida a la que prometían los libros. (*S*, p. 212)

(Now I understand that in our dry inland country night trains are the great river that carries us to the world outside and then brings us back, the great waterway slipping through shadows toward the sea or the beautiful cities where a new life awaits us, luminous and true to what we were promised in books. (p. 28))

In so doing, the author is able to activate the metaphor of life as a river in flux and transfer it onto the rail network. The image of the river (or the train) that propels one forth into the world but also returns one to the origin is a thinly veiled allusion to birth and death, reminiscent of the third stanza of Jorge Manrique's *Coplas por la muerte de su padre* (*Stanzas on the Death of his Father*): 'Nuestras vidas son los ríos | que van a dar en la mar | qu'es el morir'<sup>62</sup> ('Our lives are rivers that flow into the sea which is death'). Before becoming too explicit then, the connection between the train's movement and life's progression towards death, or the interplay between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, is already established.

In his earlier article, Muñoz Molina had expressed the following regret:

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<sup>62</sup> Jorge Manrique, *Poesías* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2012), p. 149, my translation. The chapter 'Tan callando' most openly engages with Manrique's poem (*S*, pp. 268-81).

Milena Jesenka *ya no será nunca más* una figura recordada entre las mesas de un café, alejándose para siempre de nosotros y desapareciendo tras el final de la última carta que le escribió Franz Kafka.

(Milena Jesenska *will never again be* a figure remembered between the tables of a café, moving away from us forever and disappearing after the end of the final letter that Franz Kafka wrote to her).<sup>63</sup>

However, turning to photography and the railway within their texts enables both Semprún and Muñoz Molina to make visible the traces of traumatic loss by interweaving death and desire, ultimately preserving the fragmented vision of Milena.

The palimpsest of intertexts, from Baudelaire to Kafka, reveals the return of the repressed. Milena continues as a figure in motion by means of the uncanny double for Semprún and the spectre for Muñoz Molina, but she also remains suspended in that moment in time. Found at a temporal disjuncture, she disrupts the present of narration continuously, exposing '[r]epetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*'.<sup>64</sup> Her presence always also marks an absence as she comes to embody traumatic loss in the wake of the Holocaust. As Muñoz Molina's narrator remarks at the end of his journey the creative narrative impulse is initiated not only by involuntary memory but also by those acts which are not even remembered (*S*, p. 242). The repetition of rhetorical questions using the conditional tense (for example *S*, pp. 214, 222, 711) reveals this process of the imagination in the same way that Semprún's self-

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<sup>63</sup> Muñoz Molina, 'La sombra de las cartas', my emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p. 10, emphasis in the original.

conscious style accentuates the literariness of his text. In the end, the recourse to Milena is an effective way of bringing memory and the imagination together, putting these two authors into dialogue with wider European literature while demonstrating that ‘[e]l recuerdo inconsciente es la materia y la levadura de la imaginación’ (*S*, pp. 220-21) (‘[u]nconscious memory is the yeast of imagination’ (p. 32)).

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