

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 31
Issue 2 *Patrick Modiano's Dora Bruder*

Article 7

6-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Golsan, Richard J. (2007) "Modiano Historien," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 31: Iss. 2, Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1660>

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Modiano Historien

Abstract

Beginning with the "Trilogy" (*La place de l'étoile*, *Ronde de nuit*, and *Les boulevards de ceinture*) of his first three novels published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the work of Patrick Modiano has been indissociably linked with the history and memory of the Occupation. *Dora Bruder* is of course no exception along these lines. What makes Modiano's Occupation novels distinctive is their combination of the "historian's" knowledge of the historical realities of the period and the novelist's or "poet's" talent for powerfully evoking the feel and ambiance of "les années noires." While Modiano's practice as novelist has been widely discussed, his practice and especially his vision as "historian" deserves greater attention. This essay seeks to assess the novelist's historical vision through a reading of *Dora Bruder*, including the "Trilogy" and the more recent *Un pedigree*.

Keywords

La place de l'étoile, Ronde de nuit, Les boulevards de ceinture, Patrick Modiano, Occupation, Dora Bruder, Holocaust, history, un pedigree

Modiano *Historien*

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In *Le Fleuve Combelle*, Pierre Assouline's fascinating account of his postwar friendship with the collaborationist writer and editor Lucien Combelle, Assouline describes a 1980 conversation with Combelle in which the latter offered an admiring assessment of the works of the young novelist Patrick Modiano:

[Modiano's] books overwhelmed him. His novelistic ethic fascinated him, because he detected therein a despairing attempt [*tentative désespérée*] to escape a traditional system composed of procedures and regulations. And in this novelistic universe he, Combelle, valued the nebulosity, the uncertainty [*le flou*], above all else. Along with [Modiano's] entirely unique capacity for surveying all territories using memory as his only compass. [Moreover], few writers had mastered as he had the ability to restore the exact odor of [the Dark Years]. For the others, the proofs, the facts. For [Modiano] the traces. The former were historians. He remained a poet. (49)¹

Combelle's assessment is astute in almost every particular, not only with regard to Modiano's pre-1980 fiction, but to his subsequent *œuvre* as well. The writer's "despairing attempt" to escape conventions and institutions of all kinds, coupled with his taste for the nebulous, the uncertain, is reflected in his penchant for creating socially (and legally) marginal characters with mysterious or dubious pasts and few, if any, personal or professional attachments. These characters are for the most part denizens of an ambiguous urban and nocturnal landscape—Modiano's Paris—which remains

somehow alien, mysterious and even menacing despite the constant and even obsessive invocation of familiar street names and monuments. And memory, as Combelle also rightly observes, is the instrument of choice for Modiano as well as his protagonists in their efforts to explore and investigate the past so as to provide coherence and meaning to the present. Finally, Combelle is certainly on the mark in underscoring Modiano's unique and extraordinary talent for representing—for recreating—the climate and ambiance of the Occupation down to its smallest details. Given Combelle's own background, he was, of course, in a very good position to know.

But Combelle's assessment of Modiano goes off track in his insistence that the writer is not a "historian" but rather a "poet." In the first place, this assertion seems to contradict Combelle's previous claim concerning Modiano's unique ability to evoke the Dark Years with extraordinary authenticity. How can one achieve such authenticity without infusing one's work with a rich *historical* knowledge and understanding of the period? More broadly, Combelle's implicit distinction between poetry and history poses a false dichotomy where Modiano's writing is concerned, in that all the writer's texts point precisely to the inseparability of the two in his work. Indeed, it seems difficult if not impossible to conceive of Modiano the "poet" without at the same time recognizing in him the "historian" Combelle claims he is not.

Combelle's distinction between "poet" and "historian" in Modiano's case is of course meant as a compliment, suggesting that the writer is no mere chronicler or rag picker of the past but rather a kind of "poetic" seer or clairvoyant blessed with special skills for deciphering and evoking History (and not merely history). And in *Dora Bruder* especially, the role of "poetic" seer or visionary is precisely the role Modiano assigns to himself on a number of occasions. For example, he speaks of the "novelist's gift for clairvoyance" and states that the "tension," the "cerebral exercise" required of the novelist as he focuses his mind obsessively on "points of detail" results occasionally in "flashes of intuition concerning events past and future" (*Dora* 42–43). It takes "a great deal of time," Modiano writes, "for what has been erased to resurface," But given the writer's privileged gaze, he is able to "see" what reemerges, and all that is required of him, finally, is "a little patience" (*Dora* 9).

Where the Dark Years themselves are concerned, Modiano claims for himself not simply a privileged, but in fact a *unique* status as visionary. He is able, he writes, to “see” Occupied Paris in the city of today: “I feel as though I am alone in making the link between Paris then and Paris now, alone in remembering all the details. There are moments when the link is strained and in danger of snapping, and other evenings when the city of yesterday appears to me in fleeting gleams behind that of today” (*Dora* 41). In a curious and indeed powerfully evocative passage discussing the 1941 movie *Premier rendez-vous*, Modiano also claims to be able to detect the very presence of the film’s wartime viewers while watching it himself. He re-imagines, indeed *re-experiences* these viewers’ sentiments as well as their state of mind:

Suddenly, I realized that this film was impregnated with the gaze of movie goers from the time of the Occupation—people from all walks of life, most of whom would not have survived the war. They had been taken out of themselves after having seen this film one Saturday night, their night out. While it lasted, you forgot the war and the menacing world outside. Huddled together in the dark cinema, you were caught up in the flow of images on the screen, and nothing more could happen to you. And, by some kind of chemical process, this combined gaze had materially altered the actual film, the lighting, the voices of the actors. (*Dora* 66)

Similarly, near the end of *Dora Bruder*, the writer approaches the Tourelles barracks where Dora had been briefly interned during the war. Behind the wall surrounding the barracks, Modiano describes a “no-man’s-land, a zone of emptiness and oblivion.” And yet, “beneath this thick layer of amnesia, you can certainly sense something, an echo, distant, muted, but of what, precisely, it is impossible to say.” It is, he continues, like “finding yourself on the edge of a magnetic field, with no pendulum to pick up the radiation” (*Dora* 109).

In each of the last two passages described, the use of “you” is telling. In the first passage, the writer seems to be communicating with and indeed sharing directly in the experience of men and women most of whom are long dead. In the second, he seeks to share with the reader his own heightened perception and awareness

of a hidden presence and reality.

All of these passages from *Dora Bruder* tend to confirm that Modiano shares Combelle's view that he is a "poet," which is to say a kind of seer or clairvoyant who, through his writing, recaptures the past and brings it to light, and to life. It is important to stress, however, that in *Dora Bruder*, and in many if not all of the writer's other works as well, Modiano's "visionary" access to the past is in fact predicated on years of scrutiny of books and documents, of archival research, in short, of *historical* exploration. And in *Dora Bruder*, it is essentially the painstaking retrieval of the details of lives shattered and indeed annihilated by the Nazi Holocaust, along with the reconstruction of their tragic individual destinies by Modiano the "historian," that give the book its power and make possible the exalted moments when the writer appears to actually "see" into the past or sense its "presence" in tangible form. If this is the case, then in order to fully appreciate the writer's aims in *Dora Bruder*, the historical implications of the book itself, and, more broadly, the scope and inspiration of Modiano's work as a whole, it is necessary to ask what kind of "historian" Modiano is, what "vision" of History he possesses and, finally, how his work inscribes itself in recent historical events and debates.

For anyone familiar with even the broad outlines of Modiano's career as a novelist, it is well known that from the outset the writer's works have not only inscribed themselves in the ongoing debates and controversies surrounding the memory of Vichy, they have on occasion also helped to shape those debates as well. In his discussion in *The Vichy Syndrome* of the *mode rétro*, the early 1970s fascination in France primarily with collaborationism and Nazism, Henry Rousso asserts that through novels such as *La Place de l'Étoile* and *La ronde de nuit*, Modiano both contributed to the revival of interest in these difficult subjects and helped to promote the *mode rétro*'s troubling and politically dubious fascination with the period's ambiguities and uncertainties. This he did, according to Rousso, by playing with "the ambiguity of commitment," by reacting "strongly, almost too strongly, against any notion of ideological determinism and [by] portraying his characters as stooges without conscience or morality" (Rousso 129). Moreover, if all this was true of Modiano's novels, it was also, certainly true of the film script he co-wrote with

the *cinéaste* Louis Malle for Malle's 1974 film *Lacombe Lucien*. *Lacombe Lucien* is, of course, one of the *mode rétro's* most emblematic works and celebrated—and controversial—achievements.

But if Modiano helped “make history” in the early 1970s by offering in his novels and screenplay what Rouso considers to be a distorted version of it, the fact remains that it was the young writer's prodigious knowledge of the Dark Years and of shady collaborationist *milieus* in particular that made these works possible in the first place. And in the case of *Lacombe Lucien*, it was in fact precisely the novelist's *compétence* and “feel” (Billard 338) for the Dark Years as displayed in his fiction that led Malle to contact him in the first place. According to Malle's biographer Pierre Billard, Modiano's contribution to the screen play was crucial on at least two fronts. First, Modiano was responsible for convincing Malle to abandon his conception of *Lucien* as a young *milicien*. In Modiano's view, the *Milice*, Vichy's fascistic and paramilitary police force, was far too structured and ideologically rigid an organization to allow for the kind of ambiguities *Lucien* was intended to embody. The appropriate milieu for *Lucien* to fall into, Modiano stressed, was one of the more loosely structured German auxiliary police forces composed, historically speaking, largely of French outcasts and petty criminals. Modiano's primary model was of course the infamous Bonny-Lafont gang of the Rue Lauriston in Paris, which the writer had earlier fictionalized in *La ronde de nuit*.

Modiano's second contribution to the film concerned the Jewish family, the Horns. Whereas Malle imagined only a “vaguely caricatural,” ill-defined, and numerous family, Modiano conceived of a more specific configuration, composed of three members: a father, a daughter, and a grandmother. As Billard describes it, Modiano's aim in suggesting such a family unit was to have the film explore not simply the painful but general circumstances of an ill-defined Jewish family during the Occupation, but rather to focus more precisely on the ways in which three generations represented by Horn, his mother, and his daughter, France, confronted their cruel destinies in very different ways (Billard 340).

In his contributions to *Lacombe Lucien*, then, Modiano added not only greater historical authenticity to the film, but greater historical precision as well. And while one may agree with Rouso

(among others) that the overall historical understanding of the period as articulated in the works that typified the *mode rétro* was slanted and even perverted by its fascination with collaborationism and the seductive power of Nazism, *within* that distorted and distorting context Modiano *also* contributed to a fuller historical understanding of the period in certain specific ways. Moreover, to the degree that the fate of the Horn family portrayed in *Lacombe Lucien* impacted contemporary debates about the Occupation and focused increasing attention on the fate of the Jews during the period, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to argue that in creating the fictional Horn family Modiano helped steer the memory of Vichy toward what Rousso describes as its more “Judeocentric” incarnation of the 1980s and 1990s.

If Modiano’s early fiction as well as the co-authored screen play of *Lacombe Lucien* contributed to historical debates and helped shape the perception of Vichy and Nazism during the *mode rétro*, what of the writer’s subsequent works, and *Dora Bruder* in particular? Especially where the latter work is concerned, the question is particularly pertinent because the book is not a “novel” but rather a kind of historical “investigation” into the life and circumstances of a Holocaust victim and her family.² The title itself, simply the name of a real adolescent girl caught in the Nazi killing machine, underscores the book’s stark historical focus and indeed its commemorative function.

Already, in seeking to commemorate through its title and content the fate of a young Holocaust victim, *Dora Bruder* aligns itself with the broader commemorative projects in France during the 1990s to remember the victims of Vichy’s complicity in the Nazi Final Solution. As other essays in this issue point out, Modiano in fact relied for information concerning *Dora Bruder* from the lawyer Serge Klarsfeld, whose own comprehensive and long term efforts to commemorate Vichy France’s Holocaust victims are widely known. But the publication of *Dora Bruder* in 1997 also coincided with, or followed close on the heels of, other extraordinary events or scandals related to Vichy and the Holocaust, events and scandals to which *Dora Bruder* responded indirectly or obliquely, but responded to nevertheless.

ism—the denial of the Holocaust—in French public life, this time precipitated by the publication of a book by Roger Garaudy in early 1996 entitled *Les Mythes fondateurs de la politique israélienne*. Publicized by Pierre Guillaume, director of the Vieille Taupe publishing house which had earlier championed the negationist views of Robert Faurisson, Garaudy's book would probably not have received the attention it did had its author, Roger Garaudy, a former Stalinist intellectual with little credibility, not gained the support in this affair of his old friend, Abbé Pierre. Protector of the homeless, founder of Emaus, Abbé Pierre was according to a poll taken at the time perhaps the most respected and "saintliest" man in France.

There was nothing really new or revealing in Garaudy's book where the denial of the Holocaust was concerned. In *Les mythes fondateurs de la politique israélienne* Garaudy recited a familiar litany of untruths and historical distortions: the gas chambers were for delousing, not killing; the number of Jews murdered was exaggerated; the Allies were at least as murderous and intent on the genocide of the Germans as the Nazis were of Jews; Nuremberg was a show trial reflecting a "victor's justice," and so on. Garaudy's only (relatively) new twist was the bald assertion that America had killed more black Africans during the slave trade than the Nazis had Jews. Many of these charges had been aired in the past, most recently in the deliberate provocations of Klaus Barbie's defense lawyer, Jacques Vergès.

In lending his support to Garaudy's claims, Abbé Pierre gave to them a very real legitimacy in some quarters, so much so that on the cover of its 27 June–3 July 1996 issue the magazine *L'Événement du jeudi* labeled the entire affair "the Victory of the Revisionists." And while the claim may well have been overstated, the fact remained that the discussion over the reality and existence of the death camps had once again been sadly re-opened. Indeed, banners appeared on overpasses on the *périphérique* surrounding Paris asking "And what if Abbé Pierre is right?"³

Although at the outset of *Dora Bruder*, it is clear that Modiano's interest in the adolescent victim of the Holocaust as well as her family predates the Roger Garaudy-Abbé Pierre Affair by several years, it is hard not to see in the work at least an indirect response to and refutation of negationist theses and the kinds of lies and distortions that subtend them. Early on, the writer emphasizes the fact that his

effort to rescue Dora from oblivion and commemorate her tragic destiny in writing a book about her is undertaken in opposition to “those sentinels of oblivion whose role is to guard a shameful secret and deny access to anybody seeking to uncover the least trace of a person’s existence” (Modiano 11). Garaudy, and other negationists before him, are certainly, in a manner of speaking, “sentinels of oblivion” on a large scale.

But it is in the meticulousness and care with which Modiano investigates and *documents* in *Dora Bruder* not only the fate of Dora, her family, and other victims of the Final Solution, but the actions of the persecutors as well, that the writer challenges the conclusions along with the approach of Garaudy and his ilk. Modiano records precise details as to when Dora, her father and her mother were deported. He also follows traces of other victims of the Holocaust, including the Jewish girl Hena, arrested and deported for a burglary she was forced to commit in order to survive. Modiano also discusses a letter from a certain Robert Tartakovsky which he had discovered at a Parisian bookstall two years before the writing of *Dora Bruder*. The letter, to Tartakovsky’s family, is reproduced in its entirety in *Dora Bruder* because, as Modiano clearly surmises, it testifies eloquently to the uncertainty, anguish, and humble day-to-day courage of its author, and by extension, other victims of the Final Solution.

Modiano’s careful, if necessarily fragmentary documentation in *Dora Bruder* concerning the deportations also includes damning information about the perpetrators, those who represented the abusive authority of the so-called French State and its complicity with Nazism. In merely exercising their authority and carrying out the criminal policies associated with the implementation of the Final Solution in France, these individuals were responsible for terrible human suffering. In order to document this suffering—and to put human faces on the victims—Modiano cites numerous letters to the Paris Prefect of Police requesting information from distraught relatives concerning those who had disappeared during round-ups by French police. Modiano stresses that these letters all went unanswered. He adds that other evidence of the deportations was destroyed in order to protect the perpetrators, including “tens of thousands of signed transcripts of interviews by policemen of

<https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol31/iss2/7>
DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1660

those they arrested for deportation. Finally, discussing Dora's father's final, despairing attempt to find his daughter by going to the police, Modiano underscores the tragic irony of the situation: "The very people whose job it is to search for you are themselves compiling dossiers, the better to ensure that, once found, you will disappear again—this time for good" (68).

None of Modiano's evidence, of course, directly challenges or refutes the negationists' claims. But, at least indirectly, it puts the lie to the negationists' methods while exposing the immorality and deliberately misleading and extreme historical relativism of their approach. Modiano's insistence on the *very real* suffering and destruction of individual victims of the Final Solution not only makes highly "technical" arguments about gas chambers and exaggerated and impersonal statistics concerning global "genocides" seem both irrelevant and obscene, it restores a real measure of human dignity to the victims that denying their deaths repudiates. Moreover, in sharply distinguishing between the essential innocence of the victims and the brutality and indifference of the perpetrators—the representatives of Vichy and thus of Nazi authority—Modiano restores, in "micro-historical" form, a moral dimension to the history and politics of the period negationists like Garaudy seek to undermine. The very existence of this *moral* dimension calls into doubt, of course, any effort to establish a basic equivalency of Nazi crimes and the so-called crimes of the Allies, for example.

If *Dora Bruder's* status as an "anti-negationist" text links it directly to one "eruption" of the troubled memory of Vichy in 1990s France, through its evocation of the deportations of Jews and of those French authorities who carried them out Modiano's text can also be linked, of course, to other, more central events associated with that memory, along with belated efforts to come to terms with it. I am referring here to the trials for crimes against humanity involving former Vichy officials Maurice Papon and Paul Touvier.

The publication of *Dora Bruder* preceded by only a few months the opening of Maurice Papon's trial in October 1997 in Bordeaux. Papon was charged with crimes against humanity for his role in the round-up and deportation of Jews from the Garonne region between 1942 and 1944. For those who read Modiano's text in light of the proceedings and controversies in Bordeaux, there are some

predictable as well as some surprising, and even eerie connections. Most obviously, Modiano's fragmentary accounts of the deportations from Paris, and his incorporation in the text of moving details concerning the victims, not only echo the testimony of survivors and witnesses of the deportations from Bordeaux Papon was accused of organizing, they in effect amplify that testimony by underscoring the extent and range of the Final Solution in France. Moreover, in stressing the apparent bureaucratic efficiency and cold indifference of French authorities, as well as their efforts to cover up their crimes by making police documents disappear, Modiano's text serves as a kind of oblique commentary on and condemnation of the person of the accused. Papon was in fact the precise embodiment of the efficient and indifferent Vichy official who, among other things, carried out the arrests and deportations of Jews with no apparent qualms (even fifty years after the fact, Papon refused to apologize for his actions in Bordeaux during the Occupation). He also knew how to make damning evidence vanish, although, ironically, less in relation to the Vichy past than in the context of abuses committed while he was Prefect of Paris police in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In October 1961, Papon ordered the brutal suppression of Algerian protesters in the streets of the French capital. No precise figures as to the number of protestors killed or wounded have ever been established, in large part because large sections of crucial archives have mysteriously disappeared. During Papon's 1997–98 trial the fact that the total number of victims in 1961 was never determined, and that many of those arrested and interned at the time were held in the same locations as formerly held Jews arrested by French police and awaiting deportation, suggested not only disturbing parallels between 1961 Paris and Vichy France, they underscored the extent to which *la guerre sans nom* had come to serve as a kind of prism through which the Occupation was viewed in the 1990s. Here as well, Modiano's text is "timely" and echoes or, more accurately, prefigures the Papon trial in that, for the writer also, as he intimates at the outset of *Dora Bruder*, access to the disturbing past of the Dark Years is filtered through the troubling memory of the Algerian conflict. The 1941 announcement in *Paris-Soir* of Dora's disappearance and of her parents' request for help in locating her, the announcement that opens the book and in fact launches Modiano's search for

her, leads first to the Rue Ornano, where Dora's parents resided. But for Modiano, the street itself is first associated with memories from his childhood in May 1958, when "[t]here were groups of riot police at each crossroads, because of the situation in Algeria" (4). Barracks located there also apparently housed "colonial troops," but of this the writer is apparently unsure. Under any circumstances, the sense of danger, of imminent threat, coupled with the omnipresence of the "forces of order" in 1958, serves as a kind historical and psychological palimpsest out of which the Occupation and the story of Dora will emerge.

If through its evocations of Vichy's bureaucratic complicity with the Nazi Final Solution and its allusions to *la guerre sans nom Dora Bruder* can be said to connect with the trial of Maurice Papon in significant ways, then through the writer's discussion in the text of the odious police inspector Jacques Schweblin it can also be linked with an earlier trial for crimes against humanity, the 1994 trial of Paul Touvier. As described in Modiano's text, Schweblin was a Superintendent for the *Police de Questions Juives*, and thus directly responsible for Vichy's criminal persecution of Jews. But as a document from the Pithiviers internment camp dating from 1943 and quoted directly by Modiano reveals, Schweblin was a criminal in other ways as well. In the morning Schweblin would accompany his aides to the detention camp at Drancy. He would leave these aides—plainclothes policemen—at the camp, where they brutalized and robbed their Jewish victims before the latter were deported to Auschwitz. In the evening Schweblin would return to collect the booty. In 1943, Schweblin disappeared, but Modiano reports that his own father, who had been interrogated by Schweblin during the Occupation, had recognized him at the Porte Maillot on a Sunday after the war.

For those who recall Paul Touvier's wartime activities and background, the comparisons with Schweblin are striking. Touvier was not a government functionary like Papon, but rather, like Schweblin, a policeman and a member of Vichy's overtly pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic paramilitary police force, the *Milice*. As an intelligence officer in the *Milice*, Touvier was known for his brutality. He was implicated in the murders of Jews and Resistance members on many occasions, and was tried for crimes against humanity for ordering

the execution of eleven Jewish hostages in summer 1944 in reprisal for the assassination by the Resistance of Vichy's Minister of Propaganda, Philippe Henriot.

Like Schweblin as well, Touvier, was corrupt, using his position for personal gain. He lived for a while with a prostitute, for whom he also pimped, and drove cars and lived in apartments he stole from his victims, the majority of them Jewish. But, perhaps unlike Schweblin, he also maintained a veneer of decency, and even religiosity. Through family connections as well as his own devices he remained close to the Catholic Church. He cultivated important and influential clergy members. These individuals helped Touvier elude capture and punishment at the Liberation, and—once again, like Schweblin—he remained free—or more precisely, at large, after the war. He was finally arrested at a monastery in Nice in 1989. Modiano does not say what finally happened to Schweblin.⁴

To the extent that *Dora Bruder* comments, at least obliquely, on the trials of Maurice Papon and Paul Touvier as well as the Garaudy Affair and “triangulates” between the people, events, and issues involved, it offers a coherent and comprehensive snapshot both of the memory of Vichy in the mid 1990s and of the dominant historical understanding of the period at that moment as well. And while it did not help *shape* that memory and historical understanding in the same way that Modiano's earlier work influenced the *mode rétro*, *Dora Bruder* is equally “paradigmatic” of the Vichy Syndrome to the extent that it powerfully reflects the nation's malaise over its past while underscoring literature's continuing role in making the memory of the Dark Years part of *l'actualité*. Under any circumstances, *Dora Bruder*'s status as yet another work in which Modiano focuses on the troubled memory of the Dark Years and more broadly, History itself, raises the question as to what, precisely, is the link between the two and what comprises the writer's vision and understanding of History itself.

It is a commonplace of Modiano criticism that although the writer did not experience the Occupation and World War II directly, the war and its attendant horrors—most specifically, the Nazi genocide of the Jews—nevertheless marked the beginning—as well as

the end—of History for him. As Gerald Prince observed as early as 1986 in summing up the writer's historical vision: “Something

happened. That's the story. The Occupation. Drancy. Auschwitz" (Prince 37). Modiano has himself, of course, seemed to echo this view on a number of occasions, most recently in his 2004 autobiography (of sorts), *Un pedigree*. In that work the writer intimates that, after the premature death of his brother, Rudy, the experience which marked his youth most profoundly was seeing, at age thirteen, a documentary on Nuremberg. Through this documentary Modiano first discovered the existence of the Nazi death camps. Of that discovery, he writes: "Something changed for me, on that day" (57).

But does the apparently life-altering experience of discovering History *through* Nuremberg and the death camps mean that History *begins*, so to speak, with Nazi criminality and Auschwitz? Another passage in *Un pedigree* would seem to confirm this perspective, at least where Nazi criminality is concerned. A second formative experience of the writer's youth was hearing of the Nazi massacre of the inhabitants of the village of Oradour in 1944. Hundreds of villagers were brutally murdered, supposedly for their support of the Resistance, and the village itself was burned to the ground. For Modiano, and for many of his compatriots, Oradour remains an *haut lieu de mémoire* whose horror reverberates even today: "the MASSACRE OF ORADOUR' [Modiano's caps]. The sonorities of these words freeze my heart today as they did then [in his youth], when I really didn't understand very well what they meant" (*Pedegree* 37).

But in invoking Oradour, does Modiano not open up broader historical issues, contexts, and perspectives that suggest, ultimately, that for the writer, World War II, Nazism, and Auschwitz do not ultimately embody the alpha and omega of History? Do the "origins" of History as he understands it in fact precede the Dark Years? In his compelling Introduction to the American translation of Jean-Jacques Fouché's *Massacre at Oradour: France 1944*, Jay Winter stresses that Oradour has become an important case study for proponents of the concept of "war culture," which "encompasses the signifying practices, norms of behavior, and attitudes toward violence that emerge in the course of industrialized military conflict . . . Men become brutal, societies become brutalized" (Winter viii). Winter adds that the brutalization and atrocities associated with "industrialized military conflict" found their origins not in World War II but in 1914. He writes:

It is not that atrocity was born in 1914—on the contrary. Anyone looking at Goya's drawings of the French wars in early nineteenth-century Spain will conclude otherwise. It is that, since 1914, atrocity has become industrialized: the killing machines are more effective, the propaganda machines grinding out hatred more ubiquitous, and, as a consequence, the boundaries that separate war from murder have been blurred almost to the vanishing point. (ix)

In effect, “there is overwhelming evidence that there has been a degradation of war in the twentieth century, in such a way as to make it inevitable that atrocities of staggering proportions are built into the very structure of armed conflict” (Winter ix). And of Oradour itself, Winter writes:

Oradour-sur Glane is one instance of this important deformation of the institutions and practices of war. It was therefore not an isolated incident. Rather, it was a symptom of something terrifying that occurred in many different parts of the world between 1914 and 1945. (ix)

The war crimes committed in the Limousin village, like all war crimes, “never come out of thin air.” The atrocities committed there by the Waffen SS troops cannot be separated from their prior military history and specifically the experience of waging “total war” on the Eastern Front. And that experience finds its origins in terrible industrialized and mechanized conflicts dating back to 1914.

To the best of my knowledge the only reference to Oradour in Modiano's work occurs in *Un pedigree*. But it is clear from that reference that the disaster itself—and what it entails in historical terms—has continued to *resonate* for since him his adolescence and throughout his writing career. At the end of *Dora Bruder*, Modiano asserts that it is not only “the executioners, the decrees, the occupying authorities, the Dépôt, the barracks the camps,” that is, those people and things associated in the book with the Occupation and specifically the Final Solution, but also “History” and “time” itself that “defile and destroy you” (*Dora* 119). And in *Dora Bruder* the processes of dislocation and dehumanization that culminate in the

Final Solution (and, also, one would assume, horrors like Oradour) begin before the Occupation, originating, so to speak, in the destruction and trauma brought about by World War I. Modiano devotes a good deal of attention at the outset of *Dora Bruder* to Dora's father, who is described as a Jewish refugee from Vienna whose own difficult and impoverished life ends, like his daughter's and wife's, in Auschwitz. But Ernest Bruder's odyssey across Europe and through the French Foreign Legion is undertaken as a consequence of the financial and other hardships the Great War had imposed on his native Vienna, making it a "city adrift, cut off from an empire that had ceased to exist" (17). Ernest Bruder must himself have been, as the writer describes him, "indistinguishable from those bands of unemployed roaming the streets of shuttered shops" (17).

As I have argued elsewhere,⁵ in Modiano's "Occupation Trilogy" consisting of the writer's first three novels, the widely accepted notion that the "disaster" begins in 1940 is challenged, symbolically and historically, in a number of ways, and most directly in the last of the three works, *Les boulevards de ceinture*. In that novel the experience of loss, of existential and historical dislocation, is associated with the disappearance of the figure of the narrator's father. And that disappearance, and the void it creates, is ultimately traceable not to the Occupation but to the mid-thirties and the Stavisky Affair, itself a symbol of the decline and corruption of the Third Republic in the interwar years. And in Modiano's first novel, *La Place de l'Étoile* as he reveals in *Dora Bruder*, his aim was to "silence . . . once and for all" those anti-Semitic writers "of the 1940s" whose offensive and phantasmagoric portrayals of Jews had "wounded" him by "insulting" his father (58). But as the bitter and sarcastic portraits of France's anti-Semitic and nationalistic figures from Barrès to Céline and Brasillach confirm, the excesses of the forties and the Occupation have their roots in events and traditions leading back for decades. And for many of the figures Modiano mocks and excoriates in *La Place de l'Étoile*—Drieu la Rochelle and Céline foremost among them—the obsession with "decadence," the exacerbation of racist hatreds, and the taste for apocalyptic forms of violence cannot be divorced from the traumatic experience of World War I.

It would of course be inaccurate to claim that in *Dora Bruder* or in Modiano's other work the writer explicitly acknowledges that his

vision of History in all of its destructive and dehumanizing power finds its origins in the terrible and brutalizing processes that began with World War I. On the other hand, both the subject matter and themes treated in *Dora Bruder* and the majority of Modiano's other texts suggest that he would share the view recently expressed by Alain Finkielkraut: "The twentieth century is a historical monster that resists any effort to be incorporated into the succession human epochs" (Finkielkraut 192). And the twentieth century for Modiano (as well as for Finkielkraut) finds its fullest and most "monstrous" expression in the period delimited by the events that shaped and crushed the lives of Dora Bruder and her family. Even if the terrible dislocations and losses continue to make their effects felt, to "reverberate," so to speak, in the "post-history" of the postwar world, Modiano makes it clear in *Dora Bruder* that there remains a profound difference between human existence and experience before the Liberation, the fall of Vichy and the defeat of Nazism, and afterwards. Speaking of his father's friend, Maurice Sachs, the writer acknowledges: "Just before I was born, he and others like him had taken all the punishments meted out to them in order that we should suffer no more than pinpricks." And he continues:

I had worked this out at the age of eighteen while on that journey with my father in the police van, a journey that was a harmless repetition, a parody, of other such journeys—in the same police van and to the same police stations—but from which nobody ever returned home, on foot, as I had, on that occasion. (82)

As for what preceded History in Modiano's terms—the pre-war, "pre-Historical" world of Europe before World War I—this, too, remains alien to Modiano's vision, and for all intents and purposes, outside or beyond the scope of his writing. According to Alain Finkielkraut, pre-World War I Europe was indeed a world which existed "before the monstrous invasion of life by History," one which, with the mobilization of 1914, was still capable of experiencing an extraordinary and profound feeling of fraternity, of unanimity, of solidarity. Finkielkraut quotes Stefan Zweig's descriptions of that experience in Vienna:

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DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415-1660

in the streets, people who had avoided
years shook hands and everywhere one saw animated 16

faces. Every single individual experienced the sense of the expansion of the self, (s)he was not an isolated person of the recent past, (s)he was incorporated into the masses, and his person, insignificant up until now, had found a meaning. (218)

It is precisely this kind of solidarity, this capacity for unanimity, that the Great War destroyed forever. And it is the resulting isolation, alienation, and rootlessness that Modiano's characters—all ultimately the victims of History—experience directly in their own lives.

It is perhaps because History has destroyed the possibility of community, of solidarity, and reduced human existence to a fragmentary and profoundly solitary experience—even in the postwar, “post-Historical” world—that the individual, and more precisely, the individual victim of History, becomes all the more precious, unique, and indeed irreplaceable for the writer. This is clear in Modiano's scrupulous attention to the fates of Dora, her family, and all the other victims of the nightmare of the Occupation and the Holocaust whose traces the writer encounters in trying to rescue Dora from the “sentinels of oblivion.” But it is most evident, and expressed most touchingly, in the final passage of the book, in which Modiano acknowledges his ultimate inability to know Dora's entire history during all the terrible months and years of the Occupation. Dora's “poor and precious secret,” consisting of those moments of her existence that remain hers alone, that no one else knows, confer on her a dignity and even a form of immortality that History itself is “unable to take away from her” (119).

As expressed here, Modiano's sense of the preciousness and uniqueness of the individual outside or beyond History, so to speak, provides a final insight into his historical vision, linking it not to “modern” nor “postmodern” visions but, perhaps surprisingly, to that of the great Romantic historian Jules Michelet. In *Nous autres, modernes* Alain Finkielkraut quotes Michelet's reflections on the 1407 assassination of Louis d'Orléans, in which the same sense of the uniqueness and irreplaceability of a single human life is evident:

Every man is a humanity, a universal history. And yet this being, which expresses an infinite generality, [is] at the same time a special individual, a unique creature, irreparable, that nothing can replace. Nothing like him before, or afterwards. God will not begin again. Undoubtedly

others will follow; the world, which does not grow tired, will bring forth the lives of other persons, perhaps even better ones, but never, never the same ones. (46)

In a very real sense, the conclusion of *Dora Bruder*, as well as the linkage it suggests between Modiano's vision of History and Jules Michelet's, bring us full circle. That is to say, it brings us back to Lucien Combelle's appreciation of Modiano, quoted at the outset of this essay. The perception of the individual as *unique* and *uniquely valuable* in the strongest senses of the words is, of course, not an *historical* perception or understanding, strictly speaking. It is rather an *intuition* more appropriate to a "poet" than to an "historian." So, too, is the view, intimated in Modiano's final comment on Dora, that her value, uniqueness, as well as her dignity derive, ultimately, not from the *known, historical* facts of her life but rather from what remains *unknown*, and even mysterious. As is the case for other figures from the past Modiano alludes to in *Un pedigree*, in the end Dora's name detaches itself from "the poor mortal" that she was in order to shine in the writer's imagination like "a distant star" (21). In the final analysis, it is the power of the name, of the *word* itself, that makes possible all the rest. For Modiano, it is the "*poète*" that engenders the "*historien*."

Notes

1 All English translations, except those taken from *Dora Bruder*, are my own.

2 While *Dora Bruder* is not, strictly speaking, a novel, it certainly possesses "novelistic" elements and features, as discussed in other essays in the issue. See Suleiman in particular.

3 For a detailed discussion of the Garaudy-Abbé Pierre Affair, see Golsan *Vichy's*.

4 For a more detailed account of Paul Touvier's life and 1994 trial, see Golsan *Memory*.

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