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**"Oneself as Another:" Identification and Mourning
in Writing about Victims of the Holocaust**

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The one unbearable dimension of possible
human experience is not the experience of
one's own death, which no one has, but the
experience of the death of another

Jacques Lacan

These reflections take as their starting point a book by Paul Ricoeur, whose title is echoed in mine: *Soi-même comme un autre, Oneself as Another*. Ricoeur explains in his Preface that he takes the conjunction "similar to another" ("semblable à que...autre"--Ricoeur 1990:14).¹ This is a difficult book, and some of the questions Ricoeur treats are quite technical, involving his disagreements with analytic philosophers on the one hand, and phenomenologists and metaphysicians on the other. But what

interests me is his thinking about human subjectivity. In the first instance, he deals with the problem of action: who is responsible for accomplishing an act (whether a speech act or a physical action), and more generally who is the subject of a life story (whether real or fictional)? Here Ricoeur very interestingly posits a dialectic between two kinds of identity: identity as sameness, and identity as the continuity of a self over time. When we speak of somebody's "character," whether in life or in a narrative, we usually mean a sum of permanent traits--these constitute sameness, or what Ricoeur calls the self as *idem*. We know that people also change, not necessarily remaining the "same." Yet, a certain continuity of the self exists, he argues, and it is that continuity which allows an individual to engage himself or herself toward the future--to make promises, to enter into contracts, and so on. This continuous, potentially changing self is the self as *ipse*. One of the many functions of the *ipse* is to guarantee the possibility of attestation, or of testimony: while I may change in various ways over time, the continuity of my self guarantees the truthfulness (not to be conflated with factual accuracy) of my testimony. Although Ricoeur does not dwell on it here, it is obvious that the self as *ipse* is involved in any act of remembering or recounting past events the self has lived through.

After the dialectic of *ipse* and *idem*, continuity and sameness, which is linked to action, Ricoeur approaches what he calls a more difficult question: the dialectic of self (*ipse*) and other. "How can we account for the work of alterity at the heart of ipseity"? he asks (368). Using a phenomenological frame, he posits that the experience of alterity always involves passivity (vs. action), and he proposes three dimensions of the experience of passivity: first, the *ipse* in relation to its own body, and hence to its being in the world; second, the *ipse* in relation to another self, hence in its intersubjective

dimension; and finally, the *ipse* in relation to itself, which he calls the dimension of conscience, as opposed to consciousness: *Gewissen* rather than *Bewusstsein* (p. 368-9).

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not (or not only) acting but is acted upon, and therefore experiences itself as in some way. It is not clear why Ricoeur eliminates consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) in his discussion of the self's relation to itself, since in the phenomenon of self-consciousness the self does become a kind of object for itself. Possibly, he concentrates on conscience over consciousness because he is trying to come to terms here, at the end of his book, with the question of ethics; and against both Levinas (for whom the ethical injunction comes from a totally external Other, Ricoeur says) and Heidegger (whose paradigm of estrangement is independent of ethical concerns), he posits a "third modality of otherness, that is, *being-enjoined as a structure of ipseity*" (

l'être-enjoint en tant que structure de l'ipséité --409,

Ricoeur's emphasis). I take this to mean that, according to Ricoeur, the injunction to ethical awareness, awareness of responsibility toward others, is part of the very structure of selfhood.

What does all this have to do with identification and mourning, and with victims of the Holocaust? I will try to answer this question by looking closely at a work br

1997:29), barely more than names on a police blotter or an identity card. He himself happened to stumble on her name by chance, while looking through an old newspaper. His book is an attempt to reconstruct the image of Dora Bruder and her family, using the combined resources of the historical archive, of his novelistic imagination, and of his autobiographical memories. His book is thus a mixture of biography, fiction, and autobiography, weaving between the categories of memory and history. I will suggest that Modiano's exploration is based on a complex dialectic between identification and differentiation, or what Ricoeur calls "oneself as similar" and "oneself as other". This dialectic allows Modiano to raise, in a compelling and original way, the ethical question of responsibility and its relation to mourning.

Anonymous Persons

It is striking how strong is the appeal, to both historians and novelists, of unknown people who really existed. A year after Modiano published *Dora Bruder*, the noted historian Alain Corbin published a book subtitled "On the traces of an unknown man" ("Sur les traces d'un inconnu"). Its protagonist was an individual named Louis-François Pinagot, who lived from 1798 to 1876, and whose name Corbin found in a provincial archive purely by chance. Or rather, he happened to fall on his name after he had decided to undertake, as a historian, a rather unusual project: to write a historical study about someone who had made no mark on his time, who had completely disappeared from memory, even on the level of his family, in order to "bring to existence for a second time a being whose memory is abolished and to whom I have no affective ties..." (Corbin 1998:8). Corbin chose Louis-François Pinagot because of his anonymity,

because he was no more than "a name, a shadow thrown on documents in which he appeared simply as part of a group [*ensemble*] or a series" (12). To reconstitute the world of this man, he writes, would require a "history turned inside out" ("une histoire en creux"), a history of "what is revealed by silence" and absence rather than plenitude (13).

Corbin, accomplished historian that he is, proceeds to describe the landscape, both geographical and social, in which Pinagot spent his long life, and to reconstitute its major events in relation to the epochal historical events (Revolution, Restoration, more revolutions, Empire, Republic) that Pinagot lived through anonymously, or more exactly, as Corbin explains, as "part of a series." Whatever documents exist about Pinagot also exist about innumerable others--that is what Corbin means by series. Thus, although very little is known about the uniquely individual aspects of Pinagot's life, much can be known about those aspects he shared with others--profession, religion, marriage and parenthood, contractual commitments, geographical and historical location. Making use of archival documents as well as of contextual information, Corbin is able to write the 300-page life story of an unknown man. As he makes clear, it was the very absence of individualizing information about Louis-François Pinagot, combined with the documented fact that Pinagot had existed and had lived a long life, that triggered his investigation.

Patrick Modiano is a novelist, not a historian

year old Jewish girl deported from Norway in December 1942. Søybye, a Norwegian linguist, came upon the name of Kathe Lasnik while doing archival research on the

have toward other human beings, whether in life or in art. *I am like the other, I want to be like the other, I could have been the other*

allusion to his childhood and his mother, to his girlfriend in later years, to his loneliness, suggest other points of identification with Dora as well. The ad he had run across was a missing persons ad: Dora had disappeared, run away from a boarding school, and her parents were searching for her. Modiano will tell us quite soon that he too had "disappeared" when he was a young boy, running away for a day from the boarding school he hated, where his parents had put him to get him out of the way. He also recounts some painful episodes from his adolescence, including one where his father called the police and had him taken to the station in a "panier à salade," a paddy wagon (70-73). By means of the autobiographical discourse that results from his appropriative identifications with the adolescent Dora, Modiano explores his own difficult and unhappy relations with his parents, especially his father.

While he is unnamed here, Modiano's father appears under his full name in the autobiographical book that Modiano published in 2005, *Un pedigree*--his first piece of explicit, straightforward autobiography.

unwanted child who was constantly being "sent away" by his parents: to the countryside to be taken care of by others, to boarding schools he hated-- but the most painful event of his childhood, he implies, was the death of his brother in 1957, when Modiano was twelve years old.

Some of the life-story he recounts in *Un pedigree* is already present in the autobiographical discourse of *Dora Bruder*, especially his conflicted but passionate relation to his father. We could say, then, that his appropriative identification with Dora--she too had run away from school, she too had been a "rebellious" adolescent--allowed Modiano to engage in a form of self-narration and self-reflection about his own disturbed adolescence that would find its full-blown version -10(own dist)-2(ur)3(be) 330.660.75 Tm[()t6raphic

witnesses misfortunes that befall another person, who did not "merit" them by willful wrongdoing (Nussbaum 1996:31-33). From Aristotle onward, theorists have recognized that "identification with the sufferer" is an essential component of pity or compassion. However, Nussbaum emphasizes that the identification in question--which she calls empathetic identification--involves both a recognition of kinship and an awareness of difference: "in the temporary act of identification [that characterizes compassion], one is always aware of one's own *separateness* from the sufferer--it is for *another*, and not oneself, that one feels" (35). Nussbaum is interested in the social and political possibilities of empathetic identification, arguing that it offers an "education in social justice" (40), and that "the ability to imagine the experiences of others and to participate in their sufferings [is] central to political life" (50).

story," but "That person resembles (or could resemble) me, and therefore what happens to that person concerns me." Whereas appropriative identification can lead to pathological forms where all distance is abolished between self and other (corresponding to Freud's notion of melancholia, where the lost object is "incorporated" by the melancholic subject), empathic identification maintains both similarity and difference. It can lead to historical investigation and speculation; or, as Nussbaum claims, to better social policies

consults police archives, talks to a surviving niece of Dora's father, obtains photographs from her and others, tries to locate the boarding school from which Dora ran away (he speculates that her parents had put her there to keep her safe, not to get rid of her, like his parents--but the feeling of imprisonment, he thinks, was the same), consults histories about the detention center where she was held before being deported, gets the names of other women who were taken there around the same time as Dora, walks the streets of Paris to try and find the places where she had walked, speculates about where she was and when. This quest is recounted in the first-person, but the effect is quite different from the autobiographical discourse I discussed earlier. In fact, this is not autobiographical discourse in the personal sense; rather, it is metahistorical and investigative, as the author tells us how he came to find out certain things, or how he failed to find them.

He also speculates, not unlike a historian, on what may have happened to Dora and her family, and why. Thus, in first discussing Dora's "fugue" from the boarding school, he writes that he found her name on the school registry, with the notation that she had left the school on December 14, 1941, with the "cause of departure" listed as "consequence of running away" ("suite de fugue"). This is immediately followed by a piece of historical-biographical speculation: "It was a Sunday. I suppose she had taken advantage of that free day to go and see her parents on Boulevard Ornano. In the evening, she had not returned to the boarding school". This kind of speculation can easily shade into fictional narrative, as is suggested by the last sentence, which seems to state a fact instead of remaining on the level of speculation. Occasionally, Modiano shifts into a whole paragraph of novelistic description or narration: "It was like returning

to prison. The days were getting shorter. It was already night when she crossed the courtyard...a lightbulb was lit on the front stoop, above the entryway." But it is surprising how *little* of this there is in *Dora Bruder*: it is as if Modiano the historical investigator purposely kept the imagination of the novelist under control. By emphasizing the speculative/metahistorical discourse ("I suppose she..."), Modiano affirms his separateness from Dora. But his occasional "slips" into quasi-fictional narration indicate that no discourse is totally stable in this text: discourses jostle each other. Similarly, the difference between what I am calling appropriative identification (where it is Modiano's story that dominates) and empathetic identification (where Dora's story is the focus) is not always totally clear--one can shade into the other, even on a single page. Analytically, however, they are distinct--or more exactly, it is useful to distinguish them.

Consider, for example, Modiano's reflections on the reasons for Dora's running away, her *fugue*. He comes back to this question more than once, partly because it is Dora's *fugue* that eventually led to her arrest and deportation (her parents had not registered her as a Jew, but by going to the police to try and find her, her father gave her away) and partly no doubt because his own *fugue* when he was around her age constitutes a strong bond with the young girl. His first reflection begins with a question: "What makes us decide to run away?"--note the first person plural, to which I'll return. This is followed by what looks like a typical piece of appropriative identification, in the form of an autobiographical statement: "I remember when I ran away on January 18, 1960"--but almost immediately after this, he swerves away from the autobiographical discourse, as if, in this instance, his personal story were offered simply as a way to understand Dora's

better. Furthermore, he emphasizes the *difference* between his *fugue* and Dora's; he ran away in winter, but it was a winter in peacetime, not at all like her winter:

Sur la route où je m'enfuyais,... le seul point commun avec la fugue de Dora, c'était la saison: l'hiver. Hiver paisible, hiver de routine, sans commune mesure avec celui d'il y avait dix-huit ans. Mais il semble que ce qui vous pousse brusquement à la fugue, c'est un jour de froid et de grisaille qui vous rend encore plus vive la solitude et vous fait sentir encore plus fort qu'un étau se resserre. (59)

On the road where I was fleeing, along the hangars of the Villacoubley airport, the only point in common with Dora's flight was the season: winter. A peaceful, ordinary winter, in no way comparable to the winter of eighteen years earlier. But it seems to me that what impels you suddenly to run away is a day of cold and greyness that makes you feel even more alone and makes you feel even more strongly that a vise is being tightened.

In the final sentence above, he uses his own feelings to try and answer the general question posed in the beginning: running away has multiple motivations--the cold and the dark, your feeling of being alone, your feeling of being caught in a tightening vise. Whose feelings and thoughts are described here? On one level, they are the adolescent Modiano's, and by extension Dora's--but they are also about "us" ("What makes us decide to run away?"), about "you."

Here we have a moment, then, where the autobiographical discourse leads not to the self but to the other. Here we have a moment, then, where the autobiographical discourse leads not to the self but to the other.

Drancy, the camp from which he and Dora were eventually deported (on September 18, 1942). The chapter ends with a "vous":

Un père essaye de retrouver sa fille, signale sa disparition dans un commissariat, et un avis de recherche est publié dans un journal du soir. Mais ce père est lui-même 'recherché.'.... Ceux-là même qui sont chargés de vous chercher et de vous retrouver établissent des fiches pour mieux vous faire disparaître ensuite--définitivement . (84)

A father tries to find his daughter, reports that she is missing to the police, and a missing-person notice is published in an evening newspaper. But that father is himself "missed," looked for... The very people who are supposed to look for you and find you set up files so that they can make you disappear later--once and for all.

I would suggest that this is not only an invitation to empathetic identification on the part of the reader, but is also a way of opening up and directing Modiano's own discourse toward what I earlier called ethical consciousness and mourning.

Ethics and Mourning

Of what does ethical consciousness consist? Of the realization that one has an obligation to others. In *Dora Bruder*, however, I think it consists first of all in the realization that many "others" suffered the same fate as Dora Bruder and her parents. After the short chapter about Ernest Bruder's arrest, Modiano gives us an avalanche of documents bearing the names of others who were arrested, others who were deported, or

In the final chapters, he describes his walks in some neighborhoods in Paris where the poorest Jews had lived

They built a highway, razed houses, overturned the landscape of that north-eastern suburb to make it...as neutral and grey as possible. But on the way to the airport, some blue signs still bear the old names: DRANCY or ROMAINVILLE. And on the very edge of the highway, near the porte de Bagnolet, there lies a

mourning for a lost object has an end, eventually allowing the subject to "move on" and form attachments to other objects, while melancholia (in which the subject "incorporates" the object in an extreme form of identification) is potentially endless and debilitating (Freud 1957 [1917]). But if Lacan is right that the work of mourning takes place in the register of the signifier, then for a writer, an endless mourning is not necessarily debilitating: it can be an endless source of creativity. Modiano's works are almost all "melancholy," famously so; in that regard, *Dora Bruder* is not an exception. But the very act of writing, of symbolization, introduces a necessary distance; and because of that distance, the melancholy tone of Modiano's works is not (or not only) a sign of pathology but the result of artistic shaping. And insofar as he is able to complete each book and "move on" to the next one, his writing corresponds to both Lacan's and Freud's definition of mourning.

Is Modiano endlessly mourning the Jews killed in the Holocaust, before he was born? That would be putting it too baldly, and too simply. One could, however, say that his obsession with the period of the war, and more generally with solitary, often inarticulate protagonists who drift through an emotional landscape suffused with devastation and loss (notably in the works that preceded and followed *Dora Bruder*, including *Fleurs de ruine*, *Chien de printemps*, *Des inconnues*, *La Petite Bijou*) has a repetitive quality that suggests both mourning *and* melancholia. Furthermore, paradoxically, this very combination seems to be a perfect machine for producing more texts--something not to be deplored, in a writer; at least, not if the texts are as moving as most of Modiano's have been.

There is more, however. After I had spent much time thinking about *Dora Bruder*, it suddenly occurred to me: *Bruder* in German (a language Modiano knows at least somewhat, since he lived in Vienna for an extended period when he was a teenager) means "brother." In *Un pedigree*, Modiano writes that apart from the death of his brother Rudy, when Rudy was ten years old (he died of leukemia, though Modiano doesn't tell us that--see Laurent 1997), nothing in his unhappy childhood and adolescence really marked him deeply, "en profondeur" (Modiano 2005:44). Rudy is never mentioned, either by name or allusion, in *Dora Bruder*. Yet, one can wonder whether the linguistic coincidence inscribed in Dora's name does not produce yet one more element of identification: in mourning for Dora, Modiano may also be mourning, or continuing to mourn, for his brother lost in childhood.¹²

Thierry Laurent, who has studied the autobiographical elements in Modiano's work up to 1997 (just before *Dora Bruder*

² The most thorough study of the autobiographical elements in Modiano's novels up to 1997 is Thierry Laurent's *L'oeuvre de Patrick Modiano: Une autofiction* (1997). Baptiste

Dora Bruder, focusing specifically on works that take place during the Occupation.

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doesn't mean that Modiano "tells all" and distorts nothing in this book--but that is true of all autobiographies.

⁷ See, for example, Khalifa 2001:109, 110, and Hartman 2001:111, 112. The fact that sophisticated

widespread tendency to call any highly crafted literary work by that name: Marguerite

L'Amant (The Lover)

Holocaust memoir, *La nuit (Night)* a treatment to which Wiesel has strenuously objected, reiterating most recently that despite its literary qualities, his book should *not* be called a novel: "I object angrily if someone mentions it as a novel" (quoted in Wyatt 2006:B8). I feel quite strongly that it is also a significant distortion to call *Dora Bruder* a novel. While there are a few "novelistic" moments in it, as I discuss below, the book is powerful--and ethically compelling-- precisely because it is not a novel but a work that combines historical documentation with imaginative reflection and self-reflection. The generic status of memoirs versus novels received extensive renewed commentary

, *A Million Little Pieces*. It is true

that I would not call

Dora Bruder (Nettelbeck 1998:246). He also notes that in addition to the meaning of

