

Modiano and Sebald: Walking in Another's Footsteps

Steven Ungar
University of Iowa

For Walter and Nancy Strauss



Fig. 1 Ornano 43 movie theater

“I probably place too much importance on
topography.”

—Patrick Modiano
Accident nocturne (2003)

A primary sense of the noun “diaspora” (from the Greek *dias-peirein*, “to scatter” or “to sow”) refers to the dispersion of the Jews

following their exile from Israel to Babylonia in the sixth century BC. Over the past century, the term has come to designate the movement—often under coercion—of ethnic, religious, and other populations away from what they consider to be their homeland. Current usage includes from reference to the 1962 mass departures of *pieds noirs* and *harkis* from a newly autonomous Algeria to the *Kindertransporten* of the 1930s that placed Jewish children in European countries threatened by Nazi Germany with foster families in England and the United States. By extension, the term denotes a change of identity—often understood in terms of loss—even on the part of those for whom the geographic movement in question is voluntary.

This paper studies Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* in conjunction with a contemporary literature of diaspora grounded in the extended aftermath of World War II. Both texts are classified as fiction and both are recent—*Dora Bruder* was published in 1997 and *Austerlitz* in 2001—and thus at a temporal remove of fifty to sixty years from events they recount in the format of the first-person *récit* (Modiano) and its German equivalent, *Erzählung* (Sebald). Because both narratives invoke real individuals, places, and events linked to a period of major upheaval, they contribute to ongoing debate concerned with the writing of history related to a recent past that remains contested. These invocations of events in a real past are not merely rhetorical enhancements. To the contrary, they cast both narratives as supplements to recorded aspects of the recent past with which traditional historians seldom contend, even when they group these aspects under the category of memory. What understanding of the recent past might these two narratives promote? What do they imply—individually or taken as a set—concerning the nature and function of the historical subjectivity that literature can convey?

Each in its own way, *Dora Bruder* and *Austerlitz* override conventions of literary genre by mixing elements of novel, autobiography, and essay. Accordingly, language becomes a prime point of inquiry in conjunction with the double question most likely to be raised in terms of the historical record: who is writing and to what end or purpose? These questions, in turn, direct my scope of inquiry to include concerns with enunciation and point of view that many historical accounts seldom consider pertinent.

Topography as Trace and Palimpsest

Dora Bruder recounts attempts on the part of a first-person narrator—presumably the nominal author, Patrick Modiano—to learn the fate of a teenage girl whose name he comes across while leafing through a December 31, 1941, copy of a daily newspaper, *Paris-Soir*. Because the narrator never states outright why he is leafing through old issues of *Paris-Soir*, his reader may infer only that the narrator is someone who peruses newspapers of the Occupation period. Those acquainted with Modiano's writings are likely to note parallels between the setting and character-types portrayed in *Dora Bruder* and earlier narratives such as *La Place de l'étoile* (1968) and *Voyage de nocces* (1990). As I argue below, the persistence of these elements in two more recent books by Modiano supports the notion of a deep or primary model—let's call it "the Modiano narrative"—that continually defers the full disclosure it seemingly approaches.

Bruder's name first appears in a notice for assistance under a column heading, "D'Hier à aujourd'hui" (From Yesterday to Today): "PARIS: Missing, a young girl, Dora Bruder, age 15, height 1m 55, oval-shaped face, gray-brown eyes, gray sports jacket, maroon pull-over, navy blue skirt and hat, brown gym shoes. Address all information to M. and Mme. Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano."¹ Modiano is drawn to the street name "Ornano," which he recalls from childhood visits with his mother to the Saint-Ouen flea market just outside the city limits, immediately to the north of the Porte de Clignancourt metro stop. This reference to a Parisian street and its surrounding neighborhood is the first in a series of passages containing detailed information about streets and street numbers. This topography of Paris is a composite and of various kinds. Some instances derive from the narrator's personal sense of the city in which he grew up and continues to live. Others derive from documents obtained at hospitals, schools, police stations, and similar institutions. Yet others—such as passages from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*—derive from parallel readings that generate extended associations.

As with the question raised above concerning the narrator's reasons for perusing *Paris-Soir*, Modiano's reader may well wonder to what extent his archival efforts are motivated by concerns for a fuller historical record and/or perhaps by something more personal. To what degree and to what ends might a literary writer adopt methods

of archival research seemingly more suited to historical inquiry? At what point do such methods bear on the nature and status of the resulting narrative in conjunction with a literature of detection linked to events in a real past? Might these elements of Modiano's writings intersect with the new-style detective fiction (*néo-polar*) of Didier Daeninckx in which the solution of a crime often leads back to the Algerian war and Occupation?² In another context, how might such archival activity overlap with ongoing efforts by Simon Wiesenthal, Serge Klarsfeld, and others to document the fates of individuals deported from France to concentration and death camps between the late 1930s until 1945?

A final topography in *Dora Bruder* is figurative, occurring in the explicit form of conjecture and invention, as when Modiano writes about the hotel at 17 rue Lamarck where Dora's parents lived in 1924 following their marriage. After he notes that the hotel has been razed and replaced by a larger structure marked only by the number 15, Modiano adds, concerning Dora's parents:

They are the sort of people who leave few traces. Virtually anonymous. Inseparable from those Paris streets, those suburban landscapes where, by chance, I discovered that they had lived. Often what I know about them amounts to no more than a simple address. And such topographic precisions contrast with what we shall never know about their life—this blank, this mute lock of the unknown (Modiano-Kilmartin 20)³

Documents and maps provide a degree of objective understanding. (How does Modiano learn about the history of streets and buildings? Does he interview people who live there? Perhaps he checks records of property transactions in a local city hall. Perhaps he consults compendia such as Jacques Hillairet's *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris*. Perhaps, like Jorge-Luis Borges, he invents more than he seems to.) While it may go against the grain of historical inquiry grounded in hard evidence such as a document, physical object, or testimony, the narrator's efforts to track Dora increasingly builds on conjecture and invention because he recognizes that no mass of documentation is likely on its own to prove adequate for what he wants to know.

Modiano's account of his efforts to reconstruct Dora's activities between December 1941 and her departure by train from Drancy to Auschwitz on September 18, 1942 recall the opening sentences of another first-person narrative set in the capital, André Breton's 1928 *Nadja*, in which a first-person narrator asks: "Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I 'haunt'?"⁴ The ambiguity of Breton's first sentence in French, "Qui suis-je?" plays on identical forms of the first-person singular present indicative of the verbs "to be" (*être*) and "to follow" (*suivre*), which can be translated, respectively, as "Who am I?" and "Whom do I follow?" The ambiguity is enhanced by Breton's invocation of the verb *hanter* and his recognition that the term establishes "between certain beings and myself relations that are stranger, inescapable, more disturbing than I intended" (Breton-Howard 11).⁵

Nadja is at a clear temporal remove from the 1940–44 Occupation, which it predates by more than a decade. Yet its opening sentences provide a narrative format within which Breton's invocation of a "ghost" is a viable measure of what drives him to write: Perhaps, he ponders, "my life is nothing but an image of this kind; perhaps I am doomed to *retrace my steps* under the illusion that I am exploring, doomed to try and learn what I should simply recognize, learning a mere fraction of what I have forgotten" (12; my emphasis).⁶ Much like Breton's narrator, Modiano is compelled to write by the force exerted on him by a phantom presence whose fate holds a promise of the self-understanding he seeks. Breton first writes some eighteen months after the fact. Significantly, the period and his account of them remain so important to him that he revises his first account some thirty-five years later.⁷ By contrast, Modiano writes at a remove of some fifty years about someone he never knew in person and about events that occurred three to four years before he was born.

Additional passages of *Dora Bruder* disclose the extent to which Modiano's inquiry is inflected by his efforts to learn more about the wartime activities of his father, who escaped from custody after being arrested in 1942, once again some three years before Modiano was born. In this sense, *Dora Bruder* recounts an attempt by its narrator to approach his father through the intermediary of Dora

on the basis of an assumption that they walked the same streets in the northern part of the 18th arrondissement. The figure of Dora thus holds a promise of indirect access to Modiano's father, as when the narrator writes that perhaps he wanted to imagine their paths crossing in the winter of 1941–42, an admittedly invented encounter whose fleeting traces he nonetheless seeks out in the city of yesterday behind or within the city of the present.

Dora Bruder openly links urban topography to the genesis and fashioning of narrative. After stating that he writes on a rainy day in November 1996 and that the next month will mark fifty-five years since Dora's disappearance, Modiano adds that he can hardly believe this is the city where Dora lived with her parents and where his father lived when he was twenty years younger than Modiano himself is at the moment: "I feel as though I am alone in making the link between Paris then and Paris now, alone in remembering all these 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" (Modiano-Kilmartin 41).⁸

Two pages later, Modiano abruptly changes tone in what amounts to a passage cast as a profession of faith:

Like many writers before me, I believe in coincidence and, sometimes, in the novelist's gift for clairvoyance—the word "gift" not being the exact term, for it implies a kind of superiority. No, it simply comes with the profession: the imaginary leaps this requires, the need to fix your mind on points of detail—to the point of obsession, in fact—so as not to lose the thread and give in to natural laziness—all this tension, this cerebral exercise may well lead in the long run to "flashes of intuition concerning past and future," as the Larousse dictionary puts it, under the heading "clairvoyance." (42–43)⁹

Taken together, these passages set Modiano's perceived isolation against what intuition and clairvoyance might make possible. They also substantiate the compulsion to which Modiano alludes when he states that in writing this book, he sends out signals: "Like a lighthouse beacon in whose power to illuminate the darkness, alas, I have no faith. But I live in hope" (35).¹⁰

Intuition, clairvoyance, and signals thus overlay empirical as-

pects of the narrator's inquiry into the fate of Dora Bruder with the kind of sensibility that Breton's *Nadja* brings to bear on the city of Paris. But where Breton takes his urban encounter with Nadja as a means of access to the marvelous, Modiano's textual encounter with Dora serves—at least initially—as a means of indirect access to his father and thus as a potential compensation for a personal loss that the narrator continues to mourn. When he concludes by acknowledging that he shall “never know how she spent her days, where she hid, in whose company she passed the winter months of her first escape, or the few weeks of spring when she escaped for the second,” his acceptance of the secret that no one or nothing is able to take away from her measures the emotion that drives him to tell as much of her story as he possibly can (119).¹¹ This conclusion once again recalls a passage in *Nadja* in which Breton writes that in trying to be close to *Nadja*, he remained close to everything that surrounded her.



Fig. 2 Entrance to 41 Blvd. Ornano

Another's Paris

W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* was published in late 2001, less than a month before he died in a car crash in England at the age of 57. It

is the fourth in a series of books by this German-born writer who lived in England for more than three decades and who, at the time of his death, was Professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia. *Austerlitz* recounts attempts by a first-person narrator to reconstruct events in the life of an individual, with emphasis on the period from 1939 to 1945. Unlike Modiano's narrator who is driven to explore the fate of an unknown third party in conjunction with unanswered questions surrounding the wartime activities of his own father, Sebald's narrator relates conversations with a man whom he first meets in 1967 in a waiting room at the central train station in Antwerp and who, in extended monologues over the next thirty years, discloses his efforts to learn details concerning his childhood and the fate of his parents.

Where Modiano is driven to reconstitute what happened to Dora Bruder during a period before he was alive, Sebald constructs his narrative of diaspora on the basis of an eyewitness account he reproduces in painstaking (and often painful) detail. For Jacques Austerlitz learns only as a teenager that his real name is not Dafydd Elias and that the people with whom he had lived as a child in Wales were adoptive parents. Only some hundred pages later in the book does Austerlitz learn that the name of the mother whose fate he had begun to trace under the name Agáta Austerlitzová was, in fact, Agáta Aychenwald and that she likely died at the camp known in German as Theresienstadt established in the fortified village of Teresín, near Prague.

Austerlitz was the name chosen by Jacques' father, Maximilien Aychenwald, after he left Prague for Paris where, Jacques learns, his last known address was on the rue Barrault, in the 13th arrondissement. When, following the war, the adult Jacques moves to Paris to search for his father, he moves to the same Left Bank arrondissement because, as he tells Sebald, he half-expected to see his father appear out of nowhere. Austerlitz adds that he sat for hours in a bar near the Glacière metro station, wondering if his father had been interned in 1942 at Drancy and imagining that he saw windowless police cars racing through a city:

Such ideas infallibly come to me in places which have more of the past
about them than the present. For instance, if I am walking through the

city and look into one of those quiet courtyards where nothing has changed for decades, I feel, almost physically, the current of time slowing down in the gravitational field of oblivion. It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last. [. . .] And might it not be, continued Austerlitz, that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before us and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak? (W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* 257–58)¹²

The compression of time invoked above recalls numerous passages in Marcel Proust's *Recherche*. But where Proust's novel redeems the life of its narrator through aesthetic creation, Sebald and Modiano make remembrance instead a measure of upheaval and loss.¹³ Nowhere is this loss more evident than in the black and white photographs reproduced in Sebald's narrative and the English translation of *Dora Bruder*. (Why are there no photos in Gallimard's French edition? Where did the photos in the English version come from? How do the photos in the two books compare in function to the black and white photos in Breton's *Nadja*?)

All three photos in the English translation of *Dora Bruder* are family portraits. But rather than documenting her life and grounding Modiano's account in reality, they seem instead to heighten the aura associated with images registers loss that Roland Barthes describes in *La Chambre Claire* as a confirmation of what has been . . . and is no more.¹⁴ The numerous photos in *Austerlitz*—about 60 in all—serve several functions. Some show architectural details of sites described in the narrative such as the Palace of Justice in Brussels or fortified military complexes such as those at Saarlouis and Breendonk. Others—of animals the narrator sees in the Nocturama in Antwerp—are described as recalling the inquiring gaze of “certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking” (Sebald-Bell 5).¹⁵ A third set of photographs show reading sites such as Austerlitz's study in London and the Bibliothèque Nationale on the rue de Richelieu in Paris.

A fourth set of photos consists of portraits of individuals in-

volved with moments in the life of Austerlitz. It includes a photo that Austerlitz grabs digitally from a propaganda film produced by the Germans during World War II in conjunction with a tidying-up effort (*Verschönerungsaktion*) intended to dissimulate the true nature of the Teresín fortress as a death camp. The photo, which Austerlitz captures by slowing down a video copy of the film to a quarter of its normal running speed, shows a woman whose features are partially obscured by numbers marking the video's date and running time. Austerlitz adds: "She looks, so I tell myself as I watch, just as I imagined the singer Agáta from my faint memories and the few other clues to her appearance that I now have, and I gaze and gaze again at that face, which seems to me both strange and familiar" (251).¹⁶ This photo leads, in turn, to the Prague theatrical archives where Austerlitz comes upon the photo of "an anonymous actress who seemed to resemble my dim memory of my mother" (253).¹⁷

The most curious photograph in *Austerlitz* is of a boy dressed in a caped white costume and holding a hat while he stands on grass. An unsmiling face looks directly into the camera. The photo is given to Austerlitz by Vera Rysanová, a neighbor of his parents in Prague and his one-time nursemaid whom he manages to locate there some fifty years after last seeing her. It is, according to Vera, a photo of Austerlitz at age five or six, taken on the occasion of a costume ball he attended in the role of a page to his mother's Rose Queen several months before he was to leave Prague. For Austerlitz, the sight of this image of himself as child exudes the mysterious qualities of photographs when they surface from oblivion. And while, as he tells the narrator, the adult Austerlitz studies the photograph many times and recognizes the unusual hairline, he fails to recollect the episode, retaining only the intent gaze of the child cavalier who was "waiting for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead for him" (184).¹⁸

"Je est un autre." *Austerlitz's* account of the photo of him as a child in the costume of a page illustrates Lacan's mirror phase in which an image objectifies the effects of incommensurate difference against a desire to stabilize identity. Sebald writes, "As far back as I can remember, said, Austerlitz. I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all, and I never had this impression

more strongly than on that evening in the Sporkova when the eyes of the Rose Queen's page looked through me" (185).¹⁹

Taken together, the narratives by Modiano and Sebald confront the limits of what can be learned objectively about the respective fates of Dora Bruder and Agáta Aychenwald. What remains, then, is the possibility of additional encounters inscribing both narratives within encompassing phenomena of war, displacement, and diaspora. One such encounter concerns Dora's mother Cécile, who was arrested on July 16, 1942, during a large-scale roundup of Jews in Paris and interned at Drancy before being released nine days later. Arrested again on January 9, 1943, Cécile Bruder was sent by train to Auschwitz on February 11, 1943, five months after her husband and daughter. According to David Bellos and Serge Klarsfeld, the February 11 convoy no. 47 of cattle-cars left Drancy at 10:15 a.m. Its 998 passengers included another Cécile, who had changed her name from the Polish Cyrla (Tzirele) Szulewicz, and whose married name was Perec.²⁰ Because this second Cécile was the mother of the future writer, Georges Perec, many of whose narratives link the urban topography of Paris with various kinds and degrees of loss, I cannot help but follow in the figurative footsteps of Modiano by wondering if Dora's mother might have crossed paths with George's mother. That would, I think, be the start of another story.

Brief Encounters

My tandem reading of texts by Modiano and Sebald derives from my sense that their respective ways of recounting experiences of loss and upheaval add significantly to a contemporary literature of diaspora concerned with the extended aftermath of World War II. Initial considerations posit a generational practice. Born within a year of each other—Modiano in 1945 and Sebald in 1944—both writers adopt first-person narration as a mode straddling fiction and non-fiction. Because Modiano never states anything to the contrary, his reader is free to assume that the narrator of *Dora Bruder* is the Patrick Modiano whose name is listed as author. While a similar assumption holds in the case of *Austerlitz*, the frequency of longer digressions—as a transcription of what Austerlitz relates to Sebald—tempers elements of autobiography with those of fiction and essay. The authority of both narrators foregrounds the act of writ-

ing or telling in conjunction with the target characters Dora Bruder and Jacques Austerlitz. Where the former is a construct built on the basis of archival documents, the latter is purportedly a composite of several individuals whose paths Sebald claimed to have crossed.

The topography of Paris in *Dora Bruder* is likewise a composite, of streets—mainly in the 12th and 18th arrondissements—evoked at moments ranging from the December of 1941–September 1942 to Modiano's sense of the same streets some thirteen to twenty years later, during his childhood and young adulthood. These streets are real and can be located on maps. Many of the buildings in the 18th arrondissement such as the public schools and the Ornano 43 movie theater still existed when I first sought them out during walks of my own in the summer of 1999. A third perspective on this topography occurs during 1996 when Modiano thinks about the same streets while writing the story of Dora Bruder. In sum, the personal topography constructed by Modiano narrative superimposes multiple moments over a single site or area, much as one might plot individual itineraries on transparent sheets stacked over an underlying map. A similar superposition holds for jumps in time, which often move between decades within a single paragraph.

Sebald's sense of Paris draws on a number of photos, presumably taken by him. Those of 6, rue des Cinq Diamants, a museum of veterinary medicine at Maisons-Alfort, and the Montparnasse cemetery illustrate passages related to Austerlitz's account of his stays in the city. Others of the Bibliothèque Nationale on the rue Richelieu (henceforth BN) and the new Bibliothèque Nationale de France (henceforth BNF) in the 13th arrondissement recapitulate how urban topography generates the respective accounts of Modiano and Sebald. Sixteen pages before a photo of the BN's main reading room set across the upper sections of two facing pages, Sebald writes:

Some years later, said Austerlitz, when I was watching a short black and white film about the Bibliothèque Nationale and saw messages racing by pneumatic post from the reading rooms to the stacks, along what might be described as the library's nervous system, it struck me that the scholars, together with the whole apparatus of the library, formed an immense complex and constantly evolving creature which

ads of words in its own turn. I think that this film, which I saw only once but which assumed ever more monstrous and fantastic dimensions in my imagination, was entitled *Tout la mémoire du monde* and was made by Alain Resnais. (261)²¹

This explicit reference to this 1956 short is startling not only because it is the single mention of a film in the entire book, but because Resnais' twenty-two minute film extends an engagement with memory of World War II that he had addressed a year earlier in *Nuit et brouillard*, which he had filmed on the abandoned grounds of the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Majdanek. Austerlitz may never have seen or known about *Nuit et brouillard*. But his invocation of Resnais' film about this prime institution of national memory simultaneously approaches and skirts the more direct confrontation with the past that *Nuit et brouillard* had engaged a year earlier. This is possibly nothing more or other than a coincidence. Yet the reference to *Toute la mémoire du monde* points by a logic of metonymy to the gap (*écart*) between the BN as a prime site of French national identity and instances of counter-memory to which *Austerlitz*, *Dora Bruder*, and *Nuit et brouillard* contribute as critical supplements to received accounts of World War II. Citing Resnais' 1956 film on institutional memory thus figures his 1955 film on Auschwitz and Majdanek as the absent "thing" or event itself whose ever-deferred origin motivates narration.²²

Working at the BNF in the mid-1990s, Austerlitz meditates on what the new building represents both as an addition to Parisian topography and as an archive. He notes at one point the frequency with which birds fly into the mirror images of trees reflected in the reading room windows before falling lifeless to the ground, before adding:

I thought at length about the way in which such unforeseen accidents, the fall of a single creature to its death when diverted from its natural path, or the recurrent symptoms of paralysis affecting the electronic data retrieval system, relate to the Cartesian overall plan of the Bibliothèque Nationale, and I came to the conclusion that in any project we design and develop, the size and degree of complexity of the information and control systems inscribed in it are the crucial factors, so that the all-embracing and absolute perfection of the concept can in

tion and constitutional instability. (281)²³

The passage is especially chilling because it posits entropy and stasis as results of forces that invariably overwhelm human reason. The pathos conveyed by “the fall of a single creature to its death when diverted from its natural path” is heightened by its designation as an unforeseen accident on a par with the breakdown of electronic retrieval systems at the figurative heart of the giant library. All turns on questions of scale and topography. The all-embracing and absolute perfection of the BNF as a concept of reason and understanding falters on the dysfunction and instability to which it becomes more vulnerable as it grows in size.

Such differences of scale also appear in a full-page photo (p. 279) looking down from one of the BNF towers onto the promenade level of grooved hardwood boards and below to a central wooded area (*espace vert*) of stone pines planted on the ground level. (Is this where Austerlitz sees the “suicidal” birds?) Visible in the top corner of the photo is an area of the 13th arrondissement for which the BNF is claimed—for better or worse—as heralding a revival akin to that promoted by the completion of the national museum of modern art, known as the Centre Pompidou in the mid-1970s. For Austerlitz (and presumably for Sebald), the verticality of the overhead perspective belies the prospect of projected neighborhood revival as hollow, by contrasting it with the growth of urban Paris over the millennia from the earth beneath its foundations. In such terms, Austerlitz describes the urban topography of Paris as “a kind of excrescence extending well beyond the concentric spread of its incrustations” far beyond the ring of boulevards marking the city limits” (286).²⁴

The historian in Austerlitz sets the known past against the vagaries of the present and the future when he tells Sebald that the city seen from above reminds him of various layers whose superimposition has formed the carapace of the city. (On another scale, one might also think here of the concentric growth rings used by scientists to determine the life span of longstanding trees.) Accordingly, he notes that the waste land between the Gare d’Austerlitz and the Pont de Tolbiac on which the BNF stands was the World War II site of an extensive warehousing complex, known as Les Galeries d’Austerlitz, where the Germans stored furniture and other property of “the prisoners of war, the Jews, the Gypsies, the homosexuals, the

apartments belonging to Parisian Jews. The proximity of the former warehouse complex to one of the major urban projects (*grands travaux*) on which Paris and France asserted a postwar identity is thus a final lesson in urban topography that Sebald's Austerlitz conveys from the eighteenth floor of one of the BNF's four towers.

Flash Memory Drive

For Modiano, the initial encounter with Dora Bruder precipitated by the notice in *Paris-Soir* is both happenstance and a product of his obsession with the Occupation period and the personal pre-history embodied by his parents. Two subsequent texts by Modiano—*Accident nocturne* (2003) and *Un pedigree* (2005)—illustrate the extent to which the treatment of urban topography in *Dora Bruder* continues to evolve in conjunction with a structure of progressive disclosure leading back to the period in question.

Accident nocturne recounts attempts by an anonymous first-person narrator to locate a woman whose car had struck him as he was crossing the Place des Pyramides late one night. Thinking back on this incident, which he describes as having occurred in the distant past during his late adolescence, he tries to recall people and places encountered and barely engaged (“croisés et à peine entrevus”) by listing their names with approximate dates before he realizes that he is at an age when his life is beginning to close in on itself.²⁵ As in *Dora Bruder*, these encounters moves from literal crossings of individuals on the streets to figurative crossings whose meaning thought and narration disclose only after the fact. The result once again sets specific streets and addresses within a highly personalized sense of urban space. When Modiano writes that he probably places too much importance on topography (*Accident nocturne* 50), the assertion recalls the mythic dimensions of Paris evoked throughout Breton's *Nadja*.

The personalized topography of Paris in *Accident nocturne* is grounded on Modiano's ongoing attempts to retrace his father's movements by mastering his sense of different parts of the city where his father had lived. But even as he hopes to find Jacqueline Beausergent, the woman whose FIAT COULEUR VERT D'EAU (aquamarine colored Fiat) had knocked him down, he is aware that addresses and phone numbers are of no use: “I was conducting a

search across streets where everything was an optical illusion. My undertaking seemed to me as fruitless as that of a surveyor who wanted to take measurements in a vacuum.”²⁶

A hundred pages earlier, Modiano recalls how an evening ride on one of the elevated metro lines of the RATP system precipitated a memory flash concerning another woman, Hélène Navachine, whom he had accompanied on the same line years before. More pointedly, the sensation of passing above-ground over streets and buildings on the Left Bank makes him wish that he could abolish the passage of time and that he might find himself once again sitting alongside Hélène. Much as Sebald’s *Austerlitz* notes in a passage cited earlier (see page 63), might not Modiano also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished? And might this abolition make it more possible for him to go there in search of places and people who have some connection with him on the far side of time?

Modiano’s latest variation on the core narrative of detection linked to World War II diaspora and its aftermaths is *Un pedigree*, whose mode of explicit autobiography extends the composite self-portrait disclosed in earlier books. Unlike *Dora Bruder* and *Accident nocturne* in which a quest for identity involves another character, Modiano here asserts that he composes and writes for the record, as a kind of *Curriculum Vitae* that would allow him to be done with a life that does not belong to him. Accordingly, he explains his choice of title early in his account when he states that because he is a dog (mutt?) who pretends to have a pedigree, he feels obliged to locate some markers and beacons to guide him as though through his quicksand of a life “as one makes an effort to fill out a registry form or an administrative survey with partially erased lettering.”²⁷

As in *Dora Bruder*, the acts of writing and narration that hold promise of understanding and stable identity are tempered by an uncertainty that takes the form of dislocation. Invoking a memory-flash of September 1959 when he had accompanied his mother and a friend of hers to a restaurant, le Koutoubia, in the Latin Quarter, he recalls that sense that Paris and Algiers were extensions of each other and this to a point that he no longer knew if that evening he was in Paris or Algiers. What remains for Modiano, then, is a self-made identity constructed through writing and narration. Even if

he accepts the project as open-ended, each act of recall, writing, and narration has the potential to fill in a personal record in ways that an identity card or administrative questionnaire only approximates. Accordingly, Modiano concludes *Un pedigree* with a sense of the unique co-ordinates of space and time that these memory flashes drive him to construct:

Perhaps all these people, encountered during the 1960s, and whom I never had the opportunity to see again, continue to live in a parallel world, sheltered from time, with their faces of the past. I was thinking about this, as I walked along the deserted street, under the sun. You are in Paris, in front of the examining magistrate, as Apollinaire wrote in his poem. And the magistrate confronts me with photos, documents, evidence. And yet, my life was not quite all this.²⁸

The willful disorientation of the adolescent Modiano who imagines himself simultaneously in Paris and Algiers contrasts with the above passage. Who is Apollinaire for Modiano, if not a precursor for the diasporic figure who narrates "Zone" and whose search for a stable identity drives the act of writing? Tellingly, the use of first and second-person address underscores the ambivalence of the poem's narrator whose shout of anguish—"Cri," or "Shout" was an early title—fails to resolve an identity crisis that ends in an image of possible suicide. Such ambivalence is absent from *Dora Bruder* and Modiano's other narratives whose sobriety is broken only by occasional passages of self-scrutiny. *Dora Bruder* ends with irresolution and an acceptance of defeat; *Accident nocturne* and *Un pedigree* replace stable closure with nothing more than anticipation and a hint that matters may yet be resolved at a later point. The reader who cares to continue reading awaits the next installment with a promise of additional disclosure.

Such irresolution is by now so integral to Modiano's writings that it may seem arrogant to see it less as a result of introspection driven by his meditations on personal and collective pasts than as a ploy to defer resolution indefinitely. As a result, I retain a lingering sense that his distance from his material is perhaps more uncertain than I would prefer. Far from an expression of disrespect, I see this question as fully in line with the self-critique that *Dora Bruder*, *Accident nocturne*, and *Un pedigree* develop.

Epilogue: Playback

It is often the fate of those who survive events that are fatal to others never to know with certainty why they are alive while others are not. This uncertainty is a matter of scale and intimacy. Many who lose a parent, child, life-partner, or friend experience a life-long disorientation. The passing of a public figure can likewise prompt a sense of loss, less intense and less personal, but nonetheless a palpable measure of one's mortality to come. The deaths of individuals or of those in groups whom we do not know—such as those caused by accident or by violence of various kinds reported by newspapers, the radio, or television—mark yet another loss for which there is often no distinct or adequate response. As technologies accelerate the quantity of information as well as the speed with which it circulates, the frequency of encounters with death—personal and anonymous, individual and multiple, local and distant—asserts the incontrovertible presence of death as an everyday phenomenon.

Let me put a critical edge on this brief set of thoughts by asking one more time how *Dora Bruder* and *Austerlitz* might contribute to a literature of diaspora marked by loss and disorientation in the extended wake of World War II? What might they provide to historical inquiry into aspects of the recent past that remain objects of debate and even controversy? I am thinking here of how the images function in both books. The function of images in the Kilmartin translation of *Dora Bruder* is additive, grounded first in the pathos of knowing that the photographs are of people no longer alive and secondly in the jolt among readers who come across the family photos knowing that the novel's original version in French contains none at all. This difference is largely what allows the photos in *Dora Bruder* to exude an understated otherworldliness similar to that of the photos in Breton's *Nadja*.

The photos in *Austerlitz* invert understatement through an excess that clutters Austerlitz' convoluted prose, as recounted at one remove by Sebald. Images of Austerlitz, such as the portrait of him as a child in the page costume, compete with other images . . . of animals or of places such as the rue des Cinq-Diamants or the BNF. As a set, these images transform points of passage into markers along a personal itinerary. The result approximates what the photos

and other illustrations in Breton's *Nadja* simulate as another Paris haunted by the figure of Nadja. The narratives by Modiano and Sebald likewise plot personal itineraries onto Paris as the site of disappearance and potential recovery in the form of understanding. They do so by tempering Breton's narrative model of revelation and self-understanding with a historic specificity such as that embodied by Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the judge-penitent, child of the mid-century, and first-person narrator of Albert Camus' 1956 novel, *The Fall* (*La Chute*) who confronts his interlocutor by asking, "Ah, *mon ami*, do you know what the solitary creature is like as he wanders in big cities?"²⁹ *Dora Bruder* and *Austerlitz* never invoke the Camus novel but both respond—each in its own way—to this question surrounding the aftermath of World War II, a question that remains as current and worthy of consideration today as it was when Camus' Clamence first raised it 50 years ago.

Notes

1 Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder*, trans. J. Kilmartin, 3. Future references will cite this translation as Modiano-Kilmartin. "PARIS: On recherche une jeune fille, Dora Bruder, 15 ans, 1m55, Visage ovale, yeux gris-marron, manteau sport gris, pull-over Bordeaux, jupe et chapeau bleu marine, chaussures sport marron. Adresser toutes indications à M. et Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano Paris" (Modiano, *Dora Bruder* [Paris: Gallimard "Folio," 1999] 7).

2 See, for example, Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire*.

3 "Ce sont des personnes qui laissent peu de traces derrière elles. Presque des anonymes. Elles ne se détachent pas de certaines rues de Paris, de certains paysages de banlieue, où j'ai découvert, par hasard, qu'elles avaient habité. Ce que l'on sait d'elles se résume souvent à une simple adresse. Et cette précision topographique contraste avec ce que l'on ignorera pour toujours de leur vie—ce blanc, ce bloc d'inconnu et de silence" (*Dora* 28).

4 *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard, 11. Future references will cite this translation as Breton-Howard. "Qui suis-je? Si par exception je m'en rapportais à un adage: en effet pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je 'hante'?

5 “Entre certains êtres et moi des rapports plus singuliers, moins “évitable, plus troublants, que je ne pensais” (*Nadja* 9).

6 “Il se peut que ma vie ne soit qu’une image de ce genre, et que je sois condamné à *revenir sur mes pas* tout en croyant que j’explore, à essayer de connaître ce que je devrais fort bien reconnaître, à apprendre une faible partie de ce que j’ai oublié” (*Nadja* 10).

7 See Claude Martin, “Nadja et le mieux-dire.”

8 “J’ai l’impression d’être tout seul à faire le lien entre le Paris de ce temps-là et celui d’aujourd’hui, le seul à me souvenir de tous ces détails. Par moments, le lien s’amenuise et risque de se rompre, d’autres soirs la ville d’hier m’apparaît en reflets furtifs derrière celle d’aujourd’hui” (*Dora* 50–51).

9 “Comme beaucoup d’autres avant moi, je crois aux coïncidences et quelquefois à un don de voyance chez les romanciers—le mot “don” n’étant pas le terme exact, parce qu’il suggère une sorte de supériorité. Non, cela fait simplement partie du métier: les efforts d’imagination, nécessaires à ce métier, le besoin de fixer son esprit sur des points de détail—et cela de manière obsessionnelle—pour ne pas perdre le fil et se laisser à aller à sa paresse—, toute cette tension, cette gymnastique cérébrale peut sans doute provoquer à la longue des brèves intuitions “concernant des événements passés ou futurs,” comme l’écrit le dictionnaire Larousse à la rubrique “Voyance”” (*Dora* 52–53).

10 “En écrivant ce livre, je lance des appels, comme des signaux de phare dont je doute malheureusement qu’ils puissent éclairer la nuit. Mais j’espère toujours” (*Dora* 42).

11 “J’ignorerai toujours à quoi elle passait ses journées, où elle se cachait, en compagnie de qui elle se trouvait pendant les mois d’hiver et sa première fugue et au cours des quelques semaines de printemps où elle s’est échappée à nouveau” (*Dora* 144–45).

Empfindungen regen sich in mir unfehlbar an Orten, die eher zur Vergangenheit als in dies Gegen wart gehören. Wenn ich beispielweise irgendwo auf meinen Wegen durch sie Stadt in einer jener stillen Höfe hineinblicke, in denen sich über Jahrzehnte nichts verändert hat, spüre ich beinahe körperlich, wie sich die Strömung der Zeit im Gravitationsfeld der vergessenen Dinge verlangsamt. Alle Momente unseres Lebens scheinen mir dann in einem einzigen Raum beisammen, ganz als existierten die zukünftigen Ereignisse bereits und harrten nur darauf, dass wir uns endlich in ihnen einfinden [...] Und ware es nicht denkbar, für Austerlitz fort, dass wir auch in der Vergangenheit, in dem, was schon gewesen und grösstenteils ausgelöscht ist, Verabredungen haben und dort Orte und Personen aufsuchen müssen, die, quasi jenseits der Zeit, in einem Zusammenhang stehen mit uns?" (W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* 367). Future references will cite the German edition as Sebald.

13 Benjamin Kunkel, "The Emigrant."

14 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire: note sur la photographie*.

15 "Bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittle der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denken versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt" (Sebald 11).

16 "Gerade so wie ich nach meinen Erinnerungen und den wenigen übrigen Anhaltspunkten, die ich habe, die Schauspieler in Agáta mir vorstellte, gerade so, denke ich, sieht sie aus, und ich schaue wieder und wieder in dieses mir gleichermassen fremde und vertraute Gesicht" (Sebald 358–59).

17 ("Einer Schauspieler in gestossen, die mit meiner verdunkelten Erinnerung an die Mutter übereinzustimmen schien" (Sebald 360).

18 "Nun im Morgengrauen auf dem leeren Feld darauf wartete, dass ich den Handschuh aufheben und das ihm bevorstehende Unglück abwenden würde" (Sebald 268).

19 "Soweit ich zurückblicken kann, sagte Austerlitz, habe ich mich immer
Published by New Prairie Press

gefühlt, als hätte ich keinen Platz in der Wirklichkeit, als sei ich gar nicht vorhanden, und nie ist dieses Gefühl stärker in mir gewesen also an jenem Abend in der Sporkova, als mich der Blick des Pagen der Rosenkönigin durchdang" (Sebald 269).

20 David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* 61. The data on the February 11, 1943, convoy no. 47 is from Serge Klarsfeld's *Memorial of the Deportation*.

21 "Irgendwann später, sagte Austerlitz, habe ich einmal in einem kurzen Schwarzweissfilm über das Innenleben der Bibliothèque Nationale gesehen, wie die Rohrpostnachrichten aus den Lesesälen in die Magazine sausten, entlang der Nervenbahnen sozusagen, und wie die in ihrer Gesamtheit mit dem Bibliotheksapparat verbundenen Forscher ein höchst kompliziertes, ständig sich fortentwickelndes Wesen bilden, das als Futter Myriaden von Wörtern braucht, um seinerseits Myriaden von Wörtern hervorbringen zu können. Ich glaube, dass dieser von mir nur ein einziges Mal gesehene, in meiner Vorstellung aber immer phantastischer und ungeheuerlicher gewordene Film den Tittel *Toute la mémoire du monde* trug und dass er gemacht war von Alain Resnais" (Sebald 371–72).

22 The notion of the absent Thing (*la Chose absente*) appears in Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, 41–43. *Nuit et brouillard* and *Toute la mémoire du monde* are Resnais' initial attempts to engage aspects of collective memory that receive extended treatment in his feature films, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour* (1963). Often seen as polar opposites, the two short films of the mid-1950s posit a number of unsettling parallels. *Nuit et brouillard* uses photos and films of the period along with color footage shot a decade later on the site of former concentration camps to evoke the Nazis program to carry out the 1941 "Night and Fog Decree" (*Nacht un Nebel Erlass*) conceived by Hitler and his Chief of High Command by making civilians arrested for offenses against the Third Reich seemingly "vanish into thin air" (Richard Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard*, 15). In so doing, the film shows the complexity of the concentration camp phenomenon as an assembly line organized to receive, classify, destroy, and dispose of those deported from countries occupied by the Nazis throughout Europe.

Toute la mémoire du monde likewise evokes the complex structure and operation of the Bibliothèque Nationale as an institution in which words are imprisoned and from which no book will escape those who seek it. Exterior shots along the roof and catwalk of the BN's large dome eerily resemble those of the concentration camp watch towers Resnais had filmed a year earlier. Traveling shots follow a book being catalogued and shelved as though it were being placed in a prison cell. An unsettling shot near the film's end shows the shadowy figure of a guard looking out from a dark corner in the BN's main reading room. Dressed in uniform and kepi, the guard recalls the French military officer seen in *Nuit et brouillard* in a 1941 photograph taken at the Pithiviers concentration camp for foreign-born Jews arrested in France.

The detail might be coincidental if it were not for the fact that French censors initially insisted that the image of the French soldier at Pithiviers (*Nuit et brouillard*, shot no. 39) be cut before they approved the film for release. Resnais refused to cut the image but agreed to doctor it by superimposing a black band (wooden beam?) over part of the soldier's kepi. Moreover, it is hard not to believe that Resnais included the shadowy figure of the BN guard in *Toute la mémoire* as a further provocation to show that this model memory and store-house of everything printed in France indeed integrated elements of surveillance and control that it preferred to keep as much out of sight as possible.

23 "Ich habe an meinem Platz in dem Lesesaal viel über das Verhältnis nachgedacht, sagte Austerlitz, in welchem solche, von niemandem vorhergesehene Unfälle, der Todessturz eines einzigen aus seiner natürlichen Bahn geratenen Wesens ebenso wie die in dem elektronischen Informationsapparat immer wider auftretenden Lähmungserscheinungen, zu dem cartesischen Gesamtplan der Nationalbibliothek stehen, un bin zu dem Schluss Gekommen, dass in jedem von uns entworfenen und Entwickelten Projekt die Grössendimensionierung und der Grad der Komplexität der ihm einbeschriebenen Informations- und Steuersysteme die ausschlaggebenden Faktoren sind und dass demzufolge die allumfassende, absolute Perfektion des Konzepts in der Praxis durchaus zusammenfallen kann, ja letztlich zusammenfallen muss mit einer chronischen Dysfunktion und mit konstitutioneller Labilität" (Sebald 398–99).

24 “Eine Art von Exkreszenz, die mit ihren konzentrisch sich ausbreitenden Verkrustungen” (Sebald 404).

25 Modiano, *Accident nocturne* 37. (Translations from *Accident nocturne* and *Un pedigree* are mine.)

26 “Je poursuivais une recherche à travers des rues où tout était en trompe l’oeil. Mon entreprise m’avait paru aussi vaine que celle d’un géomètre qui aurait voulu établir un cadastre sur du vide” (*Accident nocturne* 151).

27 “Comme on s’efforce de remplir avec des lettres à moitié effacés une fiche d’état civil ou un questionnaire administratif” (Modiano, *Un pedigree* 13). Modiano’s preoccupation with identity is also conveyed by titles of his other books, such as *Livret de famille*, *Une jeunesse*, and *Vestiaire de l’enfance*.

28 “Peut-être tous ces gens, croisés au cours des années soixante, et que je n’ai plus jamais eu l’occasion de revoir, continuent-ils à vivre dans une sorte de monde parallèle, à l’abri du temps, avec leurs visages d’autrefois. J’y pensais tout à l’heure, le long de la rue déserte, sous le soleil. Tu es à Paris, chez le juge d’instruction, comme le disait Apollinaire dans son poème. Et le juge me présente des photos, des documents, des pièces à conviction. Et pourtant, ce n’était pas tout à fait cela, ma vie” (Modiano, *Un pedigree* 121–22).

29 Albert Camus, *The Fall*, Trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1956), 118. “Ah! Mon ami, savez-vous ce qu’est la créature solitaire, errant dans les grandes villes?” (Camus, *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* 1536).

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *La Chambre Claire: note sur la photographie*. Paris: Seuil, 1980.

Bellos, David. *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*. 1928. Boston: Godine, 1993.

Breton, André. *Nadja*. Paris: Gallimard “Folio,” 1964.

<https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol31/iss2/5>

DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1658

———. *Nadja*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Grove, 1960.

Camus, Albert. *The Fall*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage, 1956.

———. *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1962.

Daeninckx, Didier. *Meurtres pour mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres de Marx*. Paris: Galilée, 1993.

Klarsfeld, Serge. *Le Mémorial des enfants juifs déportés de France*. Paris: Fayard, 2001.

Kunkel, Benjamin. "The Emigrant." *The Nation* (1 April 2002): 42–44.

Modiano, Patrick. *Accident nocturne*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003.

———. *Dora Bruder*. Paris: Gallimard "Folio," 1999.

———. *Dora Bruder*. Trans. J. Kilmartin. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.

———. *Un pedigree*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005.

Martin, Claude. "Nadja et le mieux-dire." *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* (1972): 72

Raskin, Richard. *Nuit et brouillard*. Aarhus: Aarhus UP, 1987.

Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 2003.

———. *Austerlitz*. Trans. Anthea Bell. New York: Random House, 2001.