

Dora Bruder and the Longue Durée

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As Patrick Modiano moves from questions to certitudes in regard to the trajectory toward Auschwitz of an adolescent girl named Dora Bruder, one significant gap of time remains. For four months, between 14 December 1941 and 17 April 1942, Dora was a runaway. The only way not to “lose” her during this period, Modiano writes, is to account for changes in the weather. No need for a trip to the archives, special permissions, or testimonials. The weather report is readily available in daily newspapers like *Paris-Soir*, where Modiano first learned of Dora’s disappearance. The first snowfall, four weeks of intensifying cold, a tease of a sunny day. More snow, March sun, the first blossoms. A spring storm followed by a rainbow, twelve days before Dora would knock on her mother’s door.

What Modiano presents as research of the last resort recalls in fact the exacting methods of historians associated with the journal *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. At the center of a powerful institutional network, *Annales* was “the principal source of innovation in French historiography for more than six decades.”¹ First among *Annales’* innovations was the rejection of the history of events and their well-known makers. The key term of *Annales* historians was the “long duration”: patterns of repetition and variation between seasons and years, the relation of people with the environment.² The archives, data, and methods common to the social sciences, chief among them geography, demography, and economics, became the “territory of the historian.”³ With the event relegated to a tertiary level, the historian’s goals changed as well, as Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie

explained in regard to his *Histoire du climat depuis l'an mil* (1967):

The aim of climate history is not to explain human history, nor to offer simplistic accounts of this or that remarkable episode (. . .) [I]t is to produce a clear picture of the changing meteorological patterns of past ages . . . True, this “chronological cosmology,” modestly limited to a study of regional climates, may serve as a discipline for future reference of a quite different and more ambitious project, with human history as its object.⁴

Dora Bruder is a kind of climate history of this second degree. “The events”—the adolescent Dora’s months as a runaway, her deportation to Auschwitz—are noticeably absent. In their stead are the possible and probable movements of her mind and her brief life, as Modiano researches, imagines, and identifies with them. From the outset, Modiano’s sense of a history longer than Dora’s own life is a personal one. The street address of the missing person bulletin, 41 boulevard Ornano, is in a neighborhood of his own Parisian perambulations, at various times in his life. Modiano himself ran away from home in his adolescence. Other connections arise. The repetitions and variations between Dora Bruder and Modiano are only part of a long duration that reaches back to the eighteenth century, and forward to time present, from France to Germany and Austria. The long duration comprises fiction and films, both well-known and not, some historical names that are familiar, and others which, without Dora, would remain unknown. On every page, Modiano’s long duration yields an uncanniness of human connection to those who perished in the Shoah in which the reader herself is directly encouraged to take part. Through movements of the imagination not unlike those of the author, we approach these victims through their lives rather than their death. As such, the object of the long duration in *Dora Bruder* is not only human history, but human presence. *Dora Bruder* restores to Dora and to those who shared her unspeakable fate the everyday freedom of their thoughts and actions, alongside our own.

The first link between Modiano and Dora, his first sense of the long duration, is topographical: an eighteenth arrondissement street, the boulevard Ornano. Habitually, he accompanied his mother to

the nearby Clignancourt flea market when he was a child. More singularly, a visual memory of Ornano persists from the beginnings of the Algerian War: soldiers at every intersection, and no one else on the street. Habitually again over several years, Modiano spends time with a girlfriend who lives on Ornano:

In 1965, I knew nothing of Dora Bruder. But now, thirty years on, it seems to me that those long waits in the cafés at the Ornano crossroads, those unvarying itineraries [. . .] all that was not simply due to chance. Perhaps, though not yet fully aware of it, I was following the traces of Dora Bruder and her parents. Already, below the surface, they were there.⁵

The familiarity of the boulevard Ornano, its repetitions in Modiano's own life, give him the sense that he was meant to come across the missing person report for Dora Bruder. Time must pass, however, before more repetitions surface, uncannier ones. "Haunted" by the missing person posting, at a loss as to how to approach Dora other than as an Auschwitz statistic, Modiano does what a novelist should do: he fills the void of Dora's story with another:

At the time, the emptiness I felt prompted me to write a novel, *Voyage de nocces*, it being as good a way as any of continuing to fix my attention on Dora Bruder, and perhaps, I told myself, of elucidating or divining something about her [. . .] Today it occurs to me that I had had to write two hundred pages before I captured, unconsciously, a vague gleam of the truth. (43–44)⁶

Modiano goes on to relate that vague, unconscious reflection of Dora in *Voyage de nocces*. Ingrid and Rigaud miss their metro stop and get off at Nation instead. It is winter during the Occupation. Snow is on the ground; they go by sled through small streets nearby to reach the boulevard Soult. The streets of this fictional scene happen to be close to the rue de Picpus, the location of the boarding school for disadvantaged girls from which Dora ran away one December night. Only when Modiano has advanced enough in his research on Dora Bruder to write a book about her does he realize that the scene he created in *Voyage de nocces* is nothing less than a

variation, possibly down to the weather, of Dora's flight from Saint-Cœur-de-Marie. "That was the only moment in the book when, without knowing it, I came close to her in space and time" (44):⁷ Dora's Paris is uncannily present to Modiano even when he is not actively working to assemble her history.

Easily enough, Modiano locates "the event": Dora's name above her father's among those who would be deported to Auschwitz on September 18, 1942. But four more years would pass, then two, before Modiano discovered facts ostensibly ordinary: Dora's birthday, her birthplace. She and her parents remain vital, however, in the balance of what the author can know—his own variations of their neighborhood experiences—and what he cannot, the repetitive aspects of their daily life for which he can never account:

They are the sort of people who leave few traces. [...] Inseparable from those Paris streets [...] Often, what I know about them amounts to no more than a simple address. And such topographical precision contrasts with what we shall never know about their life [...] (20)⁸

The "forever unknown" is equally important in bringing Dora to life, if not more so. Again and again, Modiano's declarations are tempered by hypothesis: "j'ignore"; "sans doute"; "je suppose"; "je devine"; "il a dû"; "il est probable"; "certainement." Did a movie give Dora the idea of running away? Did the bureaucrat who signed the order sending Dora to the camp at Tourelles realize he was sending her toward her death? Modiano's questions and uncertainties make the reader wonder along with him; his hypotheses become our own. In the necessity of hypothesis, of the impossibility of ever really knowing lives and minds not our own, *Dora Bruder* renders dignity to Holocaust victims like Dora, in the elliptical fullness of their minimal traces.

When even the traces are gone, the counterpart to necessary hypothesis is Modiano's repeated address to the reader as "you." Replaced by new buildings, Saint-Cœur-de-Marie is now only visible as marks on an old map. The map also notes a common grave nearby containing over a thousand victims of the Terror. On the site today stands a Catholic hospital where Modiano once consulted a doctor: palimpsest for the mass grave of the late eighteenth century, the round-ups of Jews common in the neighborhood in

the 1940s, and Dora's surely unwilling presence behind the walls of the unforgivingly strict boarding school. Modiano muses about the paradox of names that ostensibly offer succor when the place itself is prison-like: "These institutions, where you were shut up, not knowing when or if you would be released, certainly rejoiced in some curious names" (34).⁹ Similarly, he observes the irony of placing a missing person report for a Jewish girl in France during the Occupation: "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).¹⁰ The "you" draws the reader back into the past, into Modiano's memories and Dora's story alike. But the "you" also brings the past forward, a quasi-somatic experience for the reader. The "you" embodies our imagination, linking us to the familiarity of fear, solitude, and momentary freedom.

Only once, somatically and enigmatically, does Modiano use the familiar "tu" form: at the end of his telescoped weather report for the six months Dora was on the run:

On 22 February it snowed again. On 25 February, there was a fresh, much heavier snowfall. On 3 March, just after 9 P.M., the first bombs fell on the suburbs. [. . .] On 4 April, the buds on the chestnut trees burst open. [. . .] Don't forget [N'oubliez pas]; rendezvous tomorrow afternoon, on the terrace of the Café des Gobelins. (74)¹¹

To follow the weather somewhere else—usually another location, in *Dora Bruder* another time—is a means to create a sympathetic link with that "somewhere else" and those who inhabit it, often loved ones. As present-day readers of the weather report for Paris in 1942, we have crossed space and time without even noticing. From history we pass to presence, to Dora Bruder's life. We should even be there in time to celebrate spring's arrival at an outdoor cafe. Modiano leaves us there, momentarily and elliptically, in the near future of a promised encounter.

The weather also draws the reader into a different presence: the time of Modiano's research. It is rainy at the end of November 1996, he tells us, when he has just finished writing about a series of raids in the neighborhood of Saint-Cœur-de-Marie. He can patiently wait for hours in the rain, he tells us, to consult the archives in search of

Dora. The time of research and writing thus take its place as well in the melancholy of the long duration. "I feel as though I am alone in making the link between Paris then and Paris now," Modiano confides (41).¹² But the text itself is a cure for that isolation, drawing us into Modiano's relationship with the environment alongside the relationship with her surroundings he imagines for Dora.

As Modiano carries out his solitary research in the archives, prowls streets Dora "surely" frequented, collects photos from Dora's living relatives, and recalls the stories of elderly Jewish women he has known who lived through the war, spatial and incidental repetitions and variations amass. What Modiano learns and senses of Dora comes to resonate with his own past and present, particularly in relationship to his long-estranged father: unlike Dora, a survivor. The story of paternal wartime wiles was told to Modiano only once, the setting itself a variation of that story. Whether or not he deliberately chose the restaurant on the Champs-Élysées is unclear. In any case, their dinner "almost facing" the site of the father's 1942 arrest is only the first of a series of repetitions between the troubles of his wartime Paris and those of Modiano's adolescent relationship with his father. Over the course of a meal singular yet not, the father recounts his arrest, transport by paddy wagon to the headquarters of the Police des questions juives, and escape in a momentarily darkened staircase. Not long after, father passes on to son a banal but no less indelible variation of the survival story he has told, even accompanying Modiano in the paddy wagon as his accuser, over a question of child support:

Yet I was surprised that, after all he had been through during the Occupation, my father should have offered not the slightest objection to my being taken away in a [paddy wagon]. Sitting there, opposite me, impassive, with an air of faint disgust . . . (57)

I was tempted to remind him of that night in February 1942 when he too had been taken away in a [paddy wagon], to ask him whether he had been thinking of that, just now. But perhaps it meant less to him than it did to me. (58–59)¹³

As a cure for his own father's inapproachability, as a cure for

the little Modiano knows of the man and his experiences, emotions, and motivations, Modiano restores fullness to Dora Bruder and to those who shared her fate through hypothesis, research, imagination. Sometimes he takes a turn that is wrong: the girl in the paddy wagon with his father in 1942 was not Dora; nor was she one of two Polish Jews sent to the women's camp at Tourelles on days corresponding to his father's arrest. Modiano names them, but not their fate: Syma Berger and Fredel Traister, twenty and twenty-one years old. And the girl in the paddy wagon? All of the records of the Police des questions juives have been destroyed: "Were I not there to record it, there would be no trace of this unidentified girl's presence, nor that of my father's, in a [paddy wagon] on the Champs-Élysées in February 1942. Nothing but those individuals—living or dead—officially classed as 'person unknown'" (53).¹⁴ In the long duration of *Dora Bruder*, however, alongside the named but little-known, there is even a place for the unidentified.

In the absence of identification, Modiano looks for repetition. He imagines the rhythm of Dora's weekly Sunday metro ride from 62 rue de Picpus to her parents' hotel room at 41 boulevard Ornano. He reconstructs to the best of his abilities the details of Saint-Cœur-de-Marie, inside and outside, "such as Dora Bruder would have seen them, day in, day out, for a year and a half" (34).¹⁵ Of minor interest to him are testimonies of Dora given by others. As he says of the convent's Mother Superior, who died three years before he encountered Dora's name in *Paris-Soir*:

But, after all, what could she have told me? A few humdrum facts of daily existence? Warm-hearted or not, she certainly failed to divine what was going through Dora Bruder's head, neither how the girl was coping with boarding-school life nor how she reacted to chapel morning and evening, the fake grotto in the courtyard, the garden wall, the dormitory with its rows of beds. (35)¹⁶

The singular individuals whose presence Modiano does revive as a means to approach Dora's story are those whom Dora might have encountered at the Tourelles internment camp. Along with their names, Modiano lists their traces: a set of identity papers; a letter thrown from the window of a train; notes from a trial for break-in and theft; the well-documented crimes of wearing the French flag

over the star of David, of the intention of intermarriage—to a philosophy student whose posthumous book bears a title that uncannily recalls Modiano's own process of accounting for Dora in the long duration: *Un homme marche dans la ville*.

Repetition rather than singularity is what resonates as well for Modiano in the archives of the Occupation that remain. He shares some of the hundreds of unanswered letters addressed to the chief of police, inquiries as to the whereabouts of children, aged parents, a daughter arrested along with her father because she was crying. These are model letters, straight out of *Le guide du courrier facile*, all bearing variations on the same opening line: "I venture to ask you;" "I would be infinitely grateful;" "I humbly draw your attention to my request" (70–71).¹⁷ Modiano has no need to offer commentary: these variations on French formulae of politeness contain their own pathos, as do the letters' repeated pleas for the intervention of the state when it is a question of the arrest of a relative who is "French" ["de nationalité française"].

Along with his own imagination and experiences, Modiano finds in film and fiction other uncanny variations of Dora's daily life and her runaway episode. He sees, and not for the first time, a minor 1941 comedy about a girl who escapes from a Catholic boarding school. He rereads volumes five and six of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, where Cosette and Jean Valjean flee through the streets of Paris, a topography part real, part fictive. They hide in the garden of a convent at 62 rue du Petit-Picpus—an invented counterpart to the address of Saint-Cœur-de-Marie. In Hugo's imagination, the garden also encompasses an adjoining school for girls. In 1862, however, date of the publication of *Les Misérables*, Saint-Cœur-de Marie did not yet exist as such, but functioned as a residence for workers' daughters. Where Hugo's characters find repose from their flight are the very walls from which Dora Bruder flees in 1941. Novelists are seers, Modiano offers in the way of matter-of-fact explanation upon consulting the entry for "voyance" in the Larousse encyclopedia; the constant tension of necessary attention to detail can make them intuitive, "concerning events past and future" (43):¹⁸ a description that fits Hugo and Modiano alike.

The visitor to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC receives upon entry a paper bearing the name of a Jewish

individual alive in Europe during World War II. Only after passing through the museum's chronologically and thematically organized multimedia displays is the fate of that individual revealed. The intention is pedagogical: a trajectory through the museum fills in the gaps between name and fate with exhaustive historical information, including the workings of the death camps. In contrast, *Dora Bruder* leaves in place the gaps:

I 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 time. That is her secret. A poor and precious secret that not even the executioners, the decrees, the occupying authorities, the Dépôt, the barracks, the camps, History, time—everything that defiles and destroys you—have been able to take away from her. (119)

In the final paragraph, Modiano leaves Dora standing outside of history, outside of testimony and bureaucratic archives, even outside of time. His long duration does not leave Dora outside the Holocaust, but rather leaves the Holocaust outside of Dora Bruder. In the movements of the imagination required of writer and reader alike, Modiano's version of the long duration instead keeps alive Dora's freedom of self-invention, in the finality of its inaccessibility to eyes and minds both past and present. As such, *Dora Bruder* favors the human in its human history of repetition and variation, of relations with the environment, infusing the precious secrets that persist with the fullness of our own imagination, and making a place for those secrets alongside our own.

Notes

1 Jacques Revel, "Introduction," *Histories: French Constructions of the Past 2*.

2 The term was coined by Fernand Braudel.

3 Leroy Ladurie, *Territory*.

4 See Leroy Ladurie, "The History of Rain and Fine Weather," in Revel and Hunt 425.

5 Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder*, trans. Joanna Kilmartin 6. Further page references to the translation will appear in the text. Modifications in the translation are indicated by brackets. [“En 1965, je ne savais rien de Dora Bruder. Mais aujourd’hui, trente ans après, il me semble que ces longues attentes dans les cafés du carrefour Ornano, ces itinéraires, toujours les mêmes . . . tout cela n’était pas dû simplement au hasard. Peut-être, sans que j’en éprouve une claire conscience, étais-je sur la trace de Dora Bruder et de ses parents. Ils étaient là, déjà, en filigrane.” *Dora* 10–11. Further page references to the original are from this edition.]

6 “Ce sont des personnes qui laissent peu de traces derrière elles . . . Elles ne se détachent pas de certaines rues de Paris . . . 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 . . .” (28).

7 “Voilà le seul moment du livre où, sans le savoir, je me suis rapproché d’elle, dans l’espace et le temps” (54).

8 “Ce sont des personnes qui laissent peu de traces derrière elles. . . . Elles ne se détachent pas de certaines rues de Paris 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” (28).

9 “ces endroits, où l’on vous enfermait sans que vous sachiez très bien si vous en sortirez un jour, portaient décidément de drôles de noms” (41).

10 “ceux-là même qui sont chargés de vous chercher et de vous retrouver établissent des fiches pour mieux vous faire disparaître ensuite—définitivement” (82).

11 “Le 22 février, la neige était tombé de nouveau. Le 25 février, la neige tombait encore, plus abondante. Le 3 mars, après neuf heures du soir, le premier bombardement de la banlieue . . . Le 4 avril, les bourgeons avaient éclaté aux branches des marronniers . . . N’oubliez pas: demain après-midi, rendez-vous à la terrasse des Gobelins” (89–90).

12 “J’ai l’impression à être tout seul à faire le lien entre le Paris de ce temps-là et celui d’aujourd’hui (50–51).”

13 “Pourtant, j’étais étonné que mon père, qui avait vécu pendant l’Occupation ce qu’il avait vécu, n’eût pas manifesté la moindre réticence à me laisser emmener dans un panier à salade. Il était là, assis devant moi, impassible, l’air vaguement dégoûté . . .

J’ai failli évoquer la nuit du février 1942 où on l’avait aussi embarqué en panier à salade et lui demander s’il y avait pensé tout à l’heure. Mais peut-être cela avait-il moins d’importance pour lui que pour moi” (70–72).

14 “Si je n’étais pas là pour l’écrire, il n’y aurait plus aucune trace de la présence de cette inconnue et de celle de mon père dans un panier à salade en février 1942, sur les Champs-Élysées. Rien que des personnes—mortes ou vivantes—que l’on range dans la catégorie des ‘individus non identifiés’” (65).

15 “tels que Dora Bruder les a vus chaque jour pendant près d’un an et demi” (41).

16 “Mais, après tout, qu’aurait-elle pu m’apprendre? Quelques détails, quelques petits faits quotidiens? Si généreuse qu’elle fût, elle n’a certainement pas deviné ce qui se passait dans la tête de Dora Bruder, ni comment celle-ci vivait sa vie de pensionnaire ni la manière dont elle voyait chaque matin et chaque soir la chapelle, les faux rochers de la cour, le mur du jardin, la rangée des lits du dortoir” (43).

17 “Je me permets de solliciter”; “Je vous serais infiniment obligé”; “J’ai l’honneur d’attirer votre attention” (84–85).

18 “concernant des événements passés ou futurs” (53):

19 “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 de sa première fugue et au cours des quelques semaines de printemps où elle s’est échappée à nouveau. C’est là son secret. Un pauvre et précieux secret que les bourreaux, les ordonnances, les autorités dites d’occupation, le Dépôt,

les casernes, les camps, l'Histoire, le temps—tout ce qui vous souille et vous détruit—n'auront pas pu lui voler" (144–45).

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