

POSTMEMORY, PREMEMORY, PARAMEMORY: THE WRITING OF PATRICK MODIANO

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Contemporary French literature is often characterized as existing in a kind of self-centred bubble that leaves it playing a minor role on the world's cultural stage, as though it had somehow been left behind by the intellectual agenda of postmodernity. Against such a charge, it seems clear to me that this literature can claim to have retained a number of strong connections with other world literatures, and with contemporary intellectual endeavour in general. Among these connections, one of the most prominent is the autobiographical, retrospective, archaeographic turn taken by French and francophone literature since the mid-1970s, a turn that clearly coincided historically with the emergence in the *critical* field of a richly diverse and challenging literature of memory. Not that this autobiographical trend has itself escaped criticism, having been decried by numerous cultural commentators as a regressive move, a descent into melancholic narcissism. I myself prefer to side with the French critic Claude Burgelin when he argues that this trend represents less a going-back for its own sake, less a form of retreat from some virile mission of literature, than a work of mourning, an attempt to accomplish 'une sorte de perlaboration', a working-through of the past, whether personal, familial, cultural or historical.¹ Thus Burgelin seeks to promote the idea that, in the French and francophone field as elsewhere, contemporary literature offers the image of 'une mémoire devenue chantier de recherche, lieu d'élaboration de problématiques originales, moteur pour la création de formes neuves'.² In this view, 'memory' and 'innovation' are far from incompatible.

Among recent contributions to the critical literature of memory that either incorporate or solicit a literary response, Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' stands out as one that has struck a distinct chord, this judging by the increasing number of books, articles and photographic exhibitions whose titles have invoked the term since it first appeared in the title of Hirsch's book *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Post-memory* in 1997. Prefacing her introduction of the term with an admission that she proposes the word itself 'with some hesitation', she goes on to define it as follows:

¹ See Claude Burgelin, 'Voyages en arrière-pays: Littérature et mémoire aujourd'hui', *L'Inactuel*, 1 (1988: special no. entitled 'Etats de mémoire'), 55–74 (p. 56).

² 'Voyages en arrière-pays', p. 56.

In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is not unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of collective or cultural traumatic events and experiences.³

In following through on this definition, Hirsch's primary concern is with photography, for photographs, she asserts, are the 'fragmentary sources and building blocks' of the work of postmemory.⁴ Endorsing Barthes's take on photography in *La Chambre claire*, she sees photographs as certifications of a referent, so that, by connecting first- and second-generation modes of remembrance, they affirm the past's existence to the latecomer. At the same time, however, she underlines that, in their 'flat two-dimensionality', photographs signal that past's 'unbridgeable distance'.⁵ This said, although purely non-visual forms of representation take a back seat in Hirsch's analysis, her notion of postmemory clearly invites consideration as an innovative literary mode in so far as, anticipating Burgelin's comments on memory as a 'chantier de recherche', she describes its connection to the past as mediated 'through an imaginative investment and creation'.

The idea that 'imaginative investment' not only mediates but also empowers a memory that is belated rather than direct, and haunted rather than empty, is further echoed in Burgelin's characterization of 'la mémoire de l'autre' as '[ce qui] permet de métaphoriser la mienne ou de la nourrir de métaphores'.⁶ The parallel between 'imaginative investment' and 'metaphorization' further underlines the likelihood that postmemorial life-writing will lead its practitioner into a generically indeterminate zone lying somewhere between autobiography, biography and what we have come to know as 'autofiction'. Partly in order to demonstrate this drift, I shall focus initially on *Livret de famille* as a compelling example of the way one particular writer, Patrick Modiano, has engaged in this process of 'metaphorizing' his own memory via the memory of the other.

Consisting of a series of fragmentary narratives with no chronological order, *Livret de famille* may be read as combining the features of a novel, a book of short stories, an autobiography and a family biography.

³ *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 22.

⁴ *Family Frames*, p. 23.

⁵ *Family Frames*, p. 23.

⁶ 'Voyages en arrière-pays', p. 61.

The best shorthand definition of the work might thus be that of an ‘auto-bio-fiction’. The blurb that serves as a preface to the book (and which presumably carries the author’s imprimatur, if not his signature) has this to say about its title:

Qu’est-ce qu’un ‘livret de famille’? C’est le document officiel rattachant tout être humain à la société dans laquelle il vient au monde. Y sont consignés avec la sécheresse administrative que l’on sait une série de dates et de noms: parents, mariages, enfants, et, s’il y a lieu, morts. Patrick Modiano fait éclater ce cadre administratif à travers un livre où l’autobiographie la plus précise se mêle aux souvenirs imaginaires.⁷

The final sentence of this blurb suggests that, in ‘exploding’ the administrative framework of the *livret de famille*, the author has simultaneously endeavoured to overspill the *generic* framework holding autobiography in a distinct category. And a reading of the book reveals that, as part of this twofold subversion, Modiano has also explored ways of breaking out of the cultural-psychological framework distinguishing one’s own memory from those of others.

As in many other of his works, Modiano focuses obsessively in this book on the figure of his father, a Jew who nevertheless managed to get by during the Occupation years in Paris by collaborating with the German — or German-dominated — authorities. Thus the man who was an enigmatic absentee for most of Modiano’s childhood and adolescence (he died in 1978 when his son was thirty-three years old) proves in Modiano’s writings to be a persistent if ever-ghostly presence. This ghostly persistence is nowhere more strikingly underlined than when, near the start of a chapter about a trip to Switzerland that was also an attempted escape from his obsession with his father’s past, Modiano’s narrator claims:

Je n’avais que vingt ans, mais ma mémoire précédait ma naissance. J’étais sûr, par exemple, d’avoir vécu dans le Paris de l’Occupation puisque je me souvenais de certains personnages de cette époque et de détails infimes et troublants, de ceux qu’aucun livre d’histoire ne mentionne.⁸

This assertion is not intended lightly. We are ‘perturbed’ precisely because the assertion falls short of irony and asks, as the expression of a conviction, to be taken at face value. Given the text’s generic instability, we may well question whether the *narrator* of this particular story is an accurate representation of the *author*. The author’s position is succinctly revealed in an interview given by Modiano in 1976, when he said of his fellow writer Emmanuel Berl: ‘Il m’encourage dans mon dessein: me créer un passé et une mémoire avec le passé et la mémoire des autres’.⁹ From this point of

⁷ *Livret de famille* (Paris, Gallimard/Folio, 1981 [1977]).

⁸ *Livret de famille*, p. 116.

⁹ Quoted in Alan Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (Oxford, Berg, 1996), p. 10.

view, we can understand Modiano, in this story from *Livret de famille*, to be prosthetically ‘metaphorizing’ his own memory through what Hirsch calls ‘an imaginative investment and creation’. On the other hand, within the terms of the story, we cannot question the narrator’s conviction as such, because convictions are incontrovertible. Here, the idea of a memory that goes back beyond one’s own birth embodies the aspirations of postmemory, but now in the form of a belief that, through what Hirsch calls a ‘deep personal connection’, one has somehow inherited or acquired a *prememory*. What both these forms of memory share is a belief in an extended capacity of memory, a belief that ‘personal’ memory is not just in and of the self but can also be in and of the other. To apply a geological metaphor, memory is not just ‘authigenic’ (a term used to describe minerals and other materials formed in their present position); it is also potentially ‘allogenic’ (a term describing a mineral or sediment transported to its present position from elsewhere). As with Hirsch, the allogenic memory to which Modiano’s narrator lays claim is tied up with, and possibly explained by, an experience of growing up dominated by family and historical narratives (if only very patchy ones) whose frame of reference precedes his birth. However, in a departure from Hirsch’s model, Modiano’s narrator claims access to a vicarious or allogenic dimension of memory that is said to be acquired less through a metaphorical or imaginative investment than through a paranormal form of mediation: ‘ma mémoire précédait ma naissance’.

Thus we are brought beyond both Burgelin’s notion of a ‘metaphorized’ memory and Hirsch’s notion of ‘postmemory’ into something that might more accurately be dubbed ‘paranormal memory’ or simply ‘*paramemory*’, that is, a form of memory that, like other paranormal phenomena or events, lies beyond the scope of normal scientific understanding and is often condemned as superstition. What Modiano points up, then, through his narrator’s belief, is a preoccupation with forms of memory that are no longer invested by what Burgelin calls ‘l’imaginaire de la preuve’,¹⁰ the image-system of proof, the requirement of a truth-value based on proof. And, in this respect, Modiano is also, perhaps, indicating something about *postmemory*: namely, that it too is always mediated in such a way that its testimony can never be advanced as reliable proof. Such is the *enjeu* that sets it apart from historical memory, and, if I can put it this way, ‘legal’ memory. For, as William Maxwell contends in his superb autofiction *So Long See You Tomorrow*: ‘The unsupported word of a witness who was not present except in imagination would not be acceptable in a court of law’.¹¹ The underlying issue here for Maxwell and Modiano, however, as for many other contemporary writers, is to demonstrate that this

¹⁰ ‘Voyages en arrière-pays’, p. 60.

¹¹ *So Long See You Tomorrow* (London, Harvill Press, 1988 [1980]), p. 56.

‘unsupported word’, which is nevertheless an ethically motivated ‘giving’ of one’s word, does have a rightful place amid the *chantiers de la mémoire* constructed at the edges of historiography, in that space of writing we continue to designate, however problematically, as that of ‘literature’.

I suggested earlier that Modiano’s convictions might not necessarily be those of his narrator. The scenario here would be that the author is creatively metaphorizing personal memory via the memory of the other, precisely by positing an alter ego who himself believes he literally has access to his father’s memory. But this distinction is called into question by one of Modiano’s more recent works, his biography *Dora Bruder*. In this text, we have much less reason to suspect that there is any significant gap between author and narrator. The book narrates the painstaking research Modiano carried out in order to establish at least some basic facts about the short life of Dora, a Jewish teenager who ran away from her home in Paris in the middle of the Occupation years and was subsequently arrested, deported and, like her parents, sent to her death in a German concentration camp. At the same time, however, partly because Dora’s circumstances remind him of both his father’s past and his own youth, Modiano also engages in another, far more speculative, mode of research in his quest to reconstitute something of the absent memory of Dora. Alongside his visits to various archives, themselves allegorized as protected from prying eyes by ‘[les] sentinelles de l’oubli chargées de garder un secret honteux’,¹² he walks the streets of the areas of Paris where Dora lived and went to school, seeking out further traces and clues by making himself a receptor of what he calls ‘impressions’ or ‘sensations’, surreal intuitions that briefly convince him he is walking in Dora’s footsteps. Like the memories that beset the narrator of *Livret de famille*, these surreal intuitions are *paramemories*. In both works, their ethical justification lies in the fact that, until very recently, the Occupation years held only a small place, and a highly doctored one at that, in France’s collective memory. Faced with such grim silence, faced with the ‘sentinels of oblivion’ who still stand at the gates of the archive, the writer must find unorthodox, *innovative* ways of accessing that past and smuggling back memories of it into the present. As in *Livret de famille*, his chosen strategy is to invoke an *anachronie*, defined by Jacques Rancière as ‘un mot, un événement, une séquence signifiante sortis de “leur” temps, doués du même coup de la capacité de définir des aiguillages temporels inédits, d’assurer le saut ou la connexion d’une ligne de temporalité à une autre’. Rancière concludes: ‘c’est par ces aiguillages [...] qu’existe un pouvoir de “faire” l’histoire’.¹³

¹² *Dora Bruder* (Paris, Gallimard, 1997), p. 18.

¹³ Quoted in Régine Robin, *La Mémoire saturée* (Paris, Stock, 2003), p. 53.

As a creative writer, Modiano clearly feels a strong urge to ‘do’ or ‘make’ history by exploring the possibilities of ‘anachrony’ — hence his refusal in *Dora Bruder* to dismiss or disdain his intuitions as pure illusions. Indeed, it would seem that he finds them all the more valuable for being exempt from the onus of proof: unacceptable, therefore, not only in a court of law but in a historical document, or, come to that, in a conventional biography. This refusal to forego a certain kind of subjective experience that borders on the paranormal is crucially underlined in a passage from *Dora Bruder* where Modiano connects his work as a writer to the activity of *voyance*:

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 — [...], toute cette tension, cette gymnastique cérébrale peut sans doute provoquer à la longue de brèves intuitions ‘concernant des événements passés ou futurs’, comme l’écrit le dictionnaire Larousse à la rubrique ‘Voyance’.¹⁴

Here, Modiano asserts his belief in *voyance* while seeking at the same time to demystify this paranormal activity by insisting that it is part of the novelist’s stock-in-trade, an upshot of his or her imaginative efforts. Thus the most fascinating aspect of the passage lies in the way it strikes a delicate balance between a never total faith and a never disempowering scepticism. I take this balance between dream and wakefulness, between a literal and a metaphorical understanding of *voyance*, to represent Modiano’s overall position as a writer of the past. In other words, just as his belief in *voyance* restores a continuity between the figures of author and narrator, so his simultaneous demystification of it restores a continuity between the notion of *postmemory*, based on imaginative ‘effort’ (Modiano) or ‘investment’ (Hirsch), and that of *prememory* (or surreal intuition), which invokes a more paranormal frame of reference.

To conclude, I think it is clear that both *postmemory* and *prememory* are motivated by a strong testimonial urge that is itself fired by a sense of guilt on the part of the latecomer, and this by very virtue of his or her historical belatedness. I am struck in this respect by a connection between the approaches of Hirsch and Modiano and that of Giorgio Agamben, whose own view of testimony is summarized in his book *Ce qui reste d’Auschwitz* when he writes: ‘témoigner revient à se placer, au sein de sa propre langue, dans la position de ceux qui l’ont perdue [...], hors de l’archive et du corpus du déjà dit’.¹⁵ The resources of both *postmemory* and *prememory* are deployed precisely in order to place oneself in the position of those whose language is lost and whose memory, therefore, is

¹⁴ *Dora Bruder*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ce qui reste d’Auschwitz*, trans. by Pierre Alferi (Paris, Bibliothèque Rivages, 1999 [1998]), p. 212.

absent. That such testimony should be situated outside the archive is to suggest that it cannot be rendered historiographically. That it should be situated outside the corpus of the *déjà-dit* is to suggest that it may not prove acceptable in a court of law, or even in a referentially ordained mode of writing such as mainstream biography. Such testimony, Agamben goes on to declare, can only be performed by the poet, the ‘*auctor par excellence*’.¹⁶ I take it that Agamben’s *auctor*, derived from the Latin verb *augere*, meaning to increase, promote or, most crucially of all, to originate, designates the writer as a creator or innovator rather than a recorder (which is not to say that these two roles cannot co-exist, or even overlap, given that they do just this, for example, in Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*). I further take it that this innovator steps into writing as the author of a language that, despite its ethical impulse, can offer no proof or guarantee, and that the same *auctor* thereby takes a step into literature, understood as what Burgelin calls a *chantier de la mémoire*, not just an archive or depository of memory. Thus literature understood as a building site of memory offers the possibility of housing or upholding that which comes to memory allogically, with no firm underpinning, no prior language, no referential passport — hence my earlier metaphor of ‘smuggling’ the past into the present. Literature thus understood would appear to offer the only space hospitable to an act of witness that seeks to uphold its status, its value, and its very will to embodiment, in the tenuous (and, for some, tendentious) form of an ‘unsupported word’.

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¹⁶ Agamben, p. 212.