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Solitude and the Restlessness of the Immemorial: Levinasian Traces in the Discourse of Patrick Modiano

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Emmanuel Levinas contested Western ontology's insistence on the importance of individual autonomy and systematized knowledge, developing a new description of how identity and intersubjectivity are constructed. In the early *De l'existence à l'existant* and *Le Temps et l'autre*, he explains how the effort of existing is assumed, creating a sense of mastery but also of solitude, for the ego and the self are tied to one another, but it is not until *Totalité et Infini* that he elaborates on the ethical encounter with the face as discourse. In his last major work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, he focuses on the consequences of this epiphany for the subject, and relates this to the trace, a special kind of sign that focuses not so much on the relationship between sign and referent as on the irreversible passing of those who left them.

The paired texts of Patrick Modiano's *Voyage de noces* and *Dora Bruder* most strikingly inscribe the simultaneous self-absorption and tedium of existing, but also depict how traces from the immemorial shatter the subject's autonomy. Modiano is haunted by the missing person ad's description of a runaway girl who disappeared in December 1941, was interned in Drancy the following summer and then deported to Auschwitz. He first wrote *Voyage de noces* to exorcise the spell the ad cast upon him, was eventually compelled to respond directly to the summons by composing *Dora Bruder*. Modiano tries to retrieve fragments of the adolescent Dora's past and rescue her from oblivion, but his efforts prove largely futile, for there is no memory to retrieve. His insistence on Dora's decision to remain in Drancy with her father makes it possible for him to forgive his own father's failings and acknowledge his admiration both for him and all those who defied Occupation hypocrisy. Lastly, Modiano's text calls upon us as readers to become the guardians of the pleas that French authorities ignored and thereby accept the summons of the immemorial ourselves.

From the Levinasian Hypostasis to the Challenge of the Immemorial

Throughout the more than sixty years of his career, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas contested Western ontology's valorization of systematized knowledge and self-contained Being. Even more importantly, he developed profoundly challenging new descriptions of identity construction and intersubjectivity based on an encounter with absolute alterity, with a stranger who summons us to accept responsibility for her/his welfare without any thought of compensation. In the early texts *De l'existence à l'existant* and *Le Temps et l'autre*, Levinas lays the foundation for his bold undertaking by describing the complicated process through which an individual, or more precisely an existent, assumes the task of existing. He emphasizes the importance of the hypostasis, the initial movement through which consciousness separates itself from the anonymity surrounding it and takes up a position with respect to existence itself (1974, 6, 23–34). As Levinas insists, 'L'hypostase … signifie la suspension de l' *il y a* anonyme, l'apparition d'un domaine privé … Sur le fond de l' *il y a* surgit un état … Quelqu'un existe qui assume l'être, désormais *son* être' (1974b, 141).

The sense of freedom and sovereignty experienced through this founding event is, however, accompanied by a corresponding solitude, for the subject is irrevocably bound to itself: 'Le *je* a toujours un pied pris dans sa propre existence' (1974b, 143). And the duality of identity construction is underscored by the fact that the hypostasis occurs in the time of the instant – 'la position est l'événement même de l'instant comme présent' (1974b, 124). Levinas further stresses that just as 'le moi retourne fatalement et irrémissiblement à soi' (1974b, 136), so also can the present refer only to itself. Time does not flow in an uninterrupted linear sequence, for each moment contains its own birth and death. But it must also be noted that the instant does not disappear completely. As Levinas states, 'L'insuffisance de cette évanescence se manifeste dans le regret qui l'accompagne … le présent contient un noeud que sa pâmoison ne dénoue pas …' (1974b, 133–34). The previous instant persists through an unspecified longing, whose oppressiveness the existent cannot herself/himself remove.

This generalized nostalgia manifests itself, in part at least, through the activity of memory, which incessantly recycles past instants in an attempt to possess them and thereby dispel their obsessiveness. But there is no escape because the present and the ego are haunted by their own shadows

(1974b, 151). The only way in which the circle of self-presence can be opened to the possibility of something else is from the outside. This fissure or rupture in the unity of Being occurs through an encounter with an Otherness that cannot be appropriated or mastered. It happens negatively through the approach of death, which is 'non pas inconnue, mais inconnaissable, réfractaire à toute lumière' (1974c, 63), and positively through the summons of an absolute Other, who offers not nostalgia for past instants but hope for the present itself. As Levinas so emphatically declares: 'La dialectique du temps est la dialectique même de la relation avec autrui . . .' (1974b, 160). In his early essays, Levinas proposes the category of the feminine as the embodiment of alterity and establishes eros as the original form of intersubjectivity. As he states in *Le Temps et l'autre*: 'Je pense que le contraire absolument contraire … la contrariété qui permet au terme de demeurer absolument autre, c'est le *féminin*' (1974c, 77). In this text he reaffirms what he also insists upon in *De l'existence à l'existant*, where he emphasizes that 'L'Intersubjectivité … est fournie par l'Eros, où, dans la proximité d'autrui, est intégralement maintenue la distance dont le pathétique est fait, à la fois, de cette proximité et de cette dualité des êtres' (1974b, 163). And he goes on to affirm that 'C'est dans l'eros que la transcendance peut être pensée d'une manière radicale, apporter au moi pris dans l'être, retournant fatalement à soi, autre chose que ce retour, le débarrasser de son ombre' (1974b, 164).

In the much more extensive meditations of *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas elaborates his discussion of eros as neither knowledge nor possession. He likewise describes the 'trans-substantiation'(1961, 244) and the opening to the future that occurs through engendering an other and becoming parents or guardians, an experience whose implications he is also very careful to extend beyond the realm of the specifically biological (Robbins, 60–61)[1] However, for all his insistence on the absolute Otherness of the feminine and the founding relationship of eros, Levinas likewise underlines its ambiguity, which stems from its vacillating between need and desire, between enjoyment and the movement of transcendence, which by its nature can never be satisfied (1961, 3–5). Despite the fact that eros takes place across an unbridgeable distance and that the Other remains Other with no possibility of fusion, lovers approach one another on the same level with welcoming gestures of support and intimacy. The relationship that defies all efforts to enclose it is that of ethics, in which the face of a

stranger approaches from an asymmetrical position of height and calls upon an individual to accept responsibility for her/his well-being without considering the possibility of recompense (1961, 168–75). It is important to note that the face appears not as an object to be seen and appropriated but as what Levinas calls an *épiphanie* (1961, 177), that cuts across representation and presents itself concretely as speech or discourse. As Levinas insists, '[L]e visage me parle et par là m'invite à une relation sans commune mesure avec un pouvoir qui s'exerce, fût-il jouissance ou connaissance' (1961, 172). And he goes on to emphasize that 'Le visage ouvre le discours original dont le premier mot est obligation qu'aucune 'intériorité' ne permet d'éviter' (1961, 195). By responding to the vulnerability of the Other, the knot of solitude is undone and the obsessiveness of memory displaced.

In the last of his major philosophical works, Levinas shifts position somewhat, for instead of concentrating on the epiphany or revelation of the Other, he describes the process by which the subject is destabilized by the face-to-face encounter and held captive to the Other's destitution. It is in this work that he explores the complexity of the discourse through which the call to responsibility takes place, probing the paradoxical relationship between the performative Saying and the formalized language of the Said. Saying refers to the very movement through which the Other approaches. As Levinas emphasizes, '[I]l est proximité de l'un à l'autre, l'engagement de l'approche, l'un pour l'autre, la signifiance même de la signification' (1974a, 6–9). In slightly different terms, it could be said that Saying is the movement through which the subject is taken hostage before she/he is conscious of having been chosen or has had the opportunity to accept or reject the burden being imposed. As Adriaan Peperzak explains in his beautifully detailed reading of *Autrement qu'être*: 'Saying implies the disclosure that a subject is close to another through a proximity which has 'always already' made the subject responsible for the Other' (Peperzak, 92). The Saying precedes the Said. It is a pre-original or anarchic form of language that comes from an unreachable beyond, from what Levinas calls the 'immémorial' a place 'antérieur à tout souvenir'(1974a, 12). As such, it cannot be gathered up and recollected. The indebtedness of the ethical appeal surges from across 'la distance de la dia-chronie sans *présent commun* … où le présent n'est que la trace d'un passé immémorial' (1974a, 113; see also 10–19). By using the term 'trace' in conjunction with the

immemorial, Levinas once again underscores the non-representable quality of the face, which disrupts the subject's autonomy. Even more importantly, he indicates how those who are physically absent or who have disappeared can nevertheless lay claim to us. As Peperzak further notes in his discussion of this enigmatic Levinasian term, 'A trace signals a certain past but contains no present: the past it indicates is absolutely gone' (Peperzak, 106). And he goes on to affirm that the trace is 'a special kind of sign insofar as a detective, a hunter, or a historian examine it for clues to the reconstruction and the character of those who left it behind' (Peperzak, 105). However, the trace focuses not so much on the meaning or the relationship between sign and referent as on the irreversible passing of the those who left them. Yet despite their disappearance, we are held accountable for whatever their fate might have been. And by bearing the burden of this responsibility, we are able to embrace the elsewhere of Being, that is, of solitude itself.

Throughout the intricate and often dizzying meditations of *Autrement qu'être*, Levinas repeatedly emphasizes the gravity, the weight of ethical responsibility, which as indicated earlier, selects us before we are aware of being chosen and makes us responsible for those who came before and those who will come after us. However, it is extremely important to note that he likewise insists upon the everyday contexts in which this summons to goodness plays out. Although some responses may indeed be extraordinary, Levinas seeks to valorize 'the most common and elementary facts and events, such as eating and drinking, having a body and enjoying it, being born and suffering . . .' (Peperzak, 77–78). And we respond to the ethical appeal each time we put the other's welfare or comfort above our own – whether literally giving the food from our own mouths (1974a, 86–94) or just opening a door for someone and saying, 'Après vous, Monsieur' (Robbins, 191; see aso 1974a, 150). Levinas goes on to affirm in this interview that 'The priority of the other person begins with this self-effacing gesture, in our ceding our place' (Robbins, 191). And this initial recognition of the pre-eminence of the Other can likewise be expressed even through an everyday greeting. As Levinas notes in another interview in this collection: 'Is not the first word 'bonjour''? … Bonjour as benediction and my being available to the other man. It doesn't mean what a beautiful day. Rather: I wish you peace … expression of one who worries for the other. It underlies all the rest of communication, underlines all discourse' (Robbins, 47; see

also 48–50; see also 1974a, 179). What is important is the encounter with an Other that precludes all thought of reciprocity.

The Levinasian Trace and the Repertoire of Patrick Modiano

Of all contemporary French writers, there is perhaps no one whose texts concretize the tedium of existing and the lure of a past never experienced more poignantly than those of Patrick Modiano. Exploring his works in the framework of key Levinasian preoccupations will enable us to discern more clearly the subtlety of Modiano's literary undertaking and to confront more lucidly the challenges he extends to us as readers. In his extensive repertoire, which spans a forty-year time frame, Modiano continually revisits the conflicted years of the Occupation in an obsessive effort to gather fragments of lost memory and reassemble them to fill the void of the present. He is weighed down by the shadows of those whom the French betrayed and sent to Nazi extermination camps as well as by his Jewish father's ambiguous connections with notorious black market collaborators. His largely autobiographically inspired protagonists endlessly roam the streets of Paris and scour long-forgotten archives to retrieve bits of information that expose the details of French hypocrisy during *les années noires*. In the process, they seek to compensate for what they perceive to be the pointlessness of their own lives. Although not old, they are profoundly weary of existing, and they keep trying to possess the past because they can no longer believe in the possibility of a future that could surprise them. They are always on the move, always fleeing in a vain attempt to escape from themselves, without realizing the impossibility of doing so on their own, for as Levinas emphasizes, 'Le moi retourne fatalement à soi …' (1974b, 134).

The works of Modiano which most strikingly inscribe the simultaneous self-absorption and fatigue of existing, but which also depict how traces from the immemorial shatter the subject's autonomy are the paired texts of *Voyage de noces* and *Dora Bruder*. When in December 1988, Modiano came across a missing persons ad from *Paris Soir* dated 31 December 1941, he embarked on a quest that would both transform him and alter the focus of his literary enterprise to project it elsewhere. Haunted by the short description of a runaway girl, he would first write *Voyage de noces*, a fictional biography that doubles as the narrator's memoirs, to exorcise the

spell that the ad cast upon him. But Modiano would eventually realize that the writing of this work only deepened the wound to his own being without changing the nature of his quest, thus compelling him to respond directly to the summons the ad extended by composing *Dora Bruder*. Let us now examine these works to pinpoint the key moments in the displacement process.

Jean B, the narrator of *Voyage de noces*, is a disillusioned middle-aged producer of geographical documentaries, who believes that 'Il n'y avait plus de terre vierge à explorer.' He feels constricted both by his professional duties and by his relationship with his wife Annette. So instead of flying to Rio de Janeiro for a filming expedition, he stops in Milan and returns immediately to Paris to disappear in a cheap hotel near the former Colonial Museum at the entrance to the Bois de Vincennes, where he had spent much time as an adolescent. As he admits, 'le besoin de fuir. Je le sentais en moi, plus violent que jamais …' (1990, 19). He comes back to escape the boredom of the present and to explore the mystery surrounding the suicide of Ingrid Teyrsen Rigaud, whom he met when he was on the threshold of adulthood and it seemed as if authentic adventures were still possible. Preoccupied by Ingrid's suicide, he decides to play dead himself in order to descend into the distant past and retrieve the memory of the privileged moment when he met Ingrid and her husband and, for the first time in his life, encountered spontaneous gestures of consideration and kindness. Returning from Vienna by train, a twenty-year-old Jean stops in Saint-Raphaël to get a bus for Saint-Tropez, only to discover that all his money has been stolen. As he hitchhikes along the coastal road, he is picked up by a couple who welcome him with no questions asked. They invite him to spend the night and the next day provide him with a first-class train ticket and pocket money for the return journey to Paris. Jean is struck by the nonchalance of their generosity and also by the comfort they offer. When he and Ingrid drive into town to run some errands, she leans on him to steady her step along a steep incline, but strangely, it is Jean who feels supported: 'Le contact de son bras et de son épaule me donnait une impression que je n'avais jamais ressentie encore, celle de me trouver sous la protection de quelqu'un. Elle serait la première personne qui pourrait m'aider' (1990, 39). In Levinasian terms, Ingrid and Rigaud seem to respond unhesitatingly to Jean's vulnerability—indeed to his destitution—and seek nothing in return. And their compassion dispels the weight

of his own fatigue, for as he declares, 'Une sensation de légèrté m'envahissait … j'ignorais que de telles choses pouvaient se produire dans la vie' (1990, 39).

However, beneath the surface, Jean also detects a strange reticence, an emptiness, and an inexplicable apprehension. He notices from the passport he glimpsed in the glove compartment that Ingrid's maiden name was Teyrsen and that she was born in Vienna. But when he mentions the city where he himself had just spent several months, she registers no reaction whatsoever. Similarly, although Ingrid's words and manner are both playful and welcoming, her gaze is disquieting. As Jean notes, 'Ses yeux pâles me fixaient toujours de leur expression absente qui m'intimidait' (1990, 39). Even more disturbing is the latent fear that moves both her and Rigaud to shrink from any other human contact. When the inhabitants of the main house party late into the night, Ingrid and Rigaud turn out all the lights and speak only in whispers. As they insist, 'Nous n'avons qu'à faire semblant d'être morts … Il y a des moments où l'on est incapable d'échanger le moindre mot avec des gens … C'est au-dessus de nos forces' (1990, 42). By revealing their subterfuge, it seems to Jean that 'ils cherchaient à se justifier' (1990, 41), although he has no idea yet why they might feel they need to do so. Offering Jean food and shelter, as sincere as these gestures may be, becomes then a way to compensate for the kind of carefree youth Ingrid and Rigaud themselves never experienced or for some missed opportunity or missed encounter that cannot be put aside. In Levinasian terms, the two seem caught in the web of their own solitude and are paralyzed by regrets for an instant whose knot of tension has not been loosened and whose weight has not disappeared. And this combined impression of melancholy and alienation is further underscored by suggestions of tension between Ingrid and Rigaud themselves. When they are driving Jean to the train station the following morning with Rigaud at the wheel, Ingrid expresses her concern: 'J'espère que vous n'avez pas peur … Il conduit encore plus mal que moi' (1990, 44). And when Rigaud brakes wildly around a curve, Ingrid grips Jean's wrist and blurts out, 'Il va nous tuer' (1990, 44), to which Rigaud replies, 'Non, non. Ne vous inquiétez pas. Ce ne sera pas encore pour cette fois-ci' (1990, 44), implying a context that extends far beyond undisciplined driving habits.

Over the course of the next two decades, during 'Des jours de doute et de cafard' (1990, 55), Jean will himself return to his initial encounter with

Ingrid and Rigaud to relive the euphoria of that single day. He will likewise gather together the fragmentary traces discovered at various times during that twenty-year time frame to construct her life story and pinpoint the source of the void evident in her gaze. He concentrates on the time of the Occupation, when Ingrid and Rigaud, aged sixteen and twenty-one respectively, sought refuge from the Nazis along the same Mediterranean coast where they would pick up Jean twenty years later. In his narration, Jean emphasizes the precariousness of their situation when they arrive in Juan-les-Pins in the spring of 1942, and the fragility of Ingrid's mental state, for she often bursts into tears as if lamenting some inexplicable loss. As the Gestapo gradually closes in on the area, the young couple is protected by an elderly hotel concierge who knew Rigaud's mother from the time she and her friends frequented the resort town. And the two spend the remaining Occupation years in an abandoned villa the old man offers as refuge where 'Les jours, les mois, les saisons, les années passaient, monotones, dans une sorte d'éternitè' (1990, 85). They exist in a state of self-absorption that is disturbed only by the distant rumbling of German troops which, as with Jean many years later, forces them to 'éteindre les lumières et faire semblant d'être morts' (1990, 85).

This same sensation of suspended animation and timelessness affects the narrator himself and moves him to probe yet further into the void of Ingrid's gaze. As Jean reconstructs the fragmented notes he has gathered over the years in the apartment at the eastern edge of Paris where Ingrid and Rigaud lived briefly before fleeing to the south, it seems to him that 'Il n'existe plus de frontière entre les saisons, entre le passé et le présent' (1990, 125). He rejects a young colleague's pleas to re-establish contact with his wife and further warns that Annette not seek him out for, as he insists, 'Elle ne me trouverait pas . . .' (1990, 94). Enclosed in his own lassitude, Jean descends into the darkness of the evening when Ingrid decided her fate. She and her Jewish physician father sought refuge in Paris before the War and, in early autumn 1941, rented rooms in a hotel at 41 boulevard Ornano near the Porte de Clignancourt. As the six o'clock curfew deadline approaches one late November day, Ingrid leaves the metro station at Barbès-Rochechouart and confronts the dilemma of whether to flee or to return to the hotel. As the minutes tick away, she walks resolutely westward on the south side of the boulevard Rochechouart: 'elle tourne enfin le dos au 18^{e}

arrondissement … Elle ne veut pas penser à son père … Elle, elle s'est sauvée de justesse' (1990, 128).

It is later that evening in a tearoom near the Arc de Triomphe that Ingrid meets Rigaud, '[qui] la met soudain en confiance' (1990, 133), and offers her the support that enables her to elude the authorities. Ingrid explains that she didn't return home that November evening because the curfew hour had passed and admits that she and her father have 'des ennuis' (1990, 135), but she reveals nothing more about her flight. As Jean is careful to note in his narration of Ingrid's experience: 'Elle ne lui [à Rigaud] a pas dit la vérité … Elle n'a pas abordé le fond du problème … Elle ne lui a pas avoué, non plus, qu'elle a laissé volontairement passer l'heure du couvre-feu pour ne pas rentrer boulevard Ornano' (1990, 136). When Rigaud encourages Ingrid to phone her father, she leaves a minimal message with the desk clerk: 'Dites-lui que tout va bien' (1990, 132). The following day Ingrid phones again, but when the clerk tells her that her father has been waiting for her call and that he will go and get him, 'elle a raccroché' (1990, 137). And as the days pass and the boulevard Ornano seems further and further away, 'elle ne téléphone plus' (1990, 137). It is only months later that Ingrid returns to the *18^e^ arrondissement* 'pour parler à son père et lui annoncer qu'elle voulait se marier avec Rigaud' (1990, 154). Unfortunately, however, she is too late, for the desk clerk informs her that '[D]es agents de police un matin très tôt, vers le milieu du mois de décembre, étaient montés chercher son père … et l'avaient emmené pour une destination inconnue' (1990, 155).

Although supported by Rigaud, Ingrid is unable to face her father's vulnerability and answer the summons he silently extends as he waits for her call. She remains forever enclosed in the solitude of her own being, endlessly fleeing the realization of her father's need and her own failure to try and offer him the kind of protection she herself is receiving. But there is no escape, for as noted earlier, the melancholic 'jamais plus' that Levinas so eloquently describes haunts every new instant and prevents her from recognizing the possibility of a future (1974b, 133). Just as the ego is bound to the self, so too is Ingrid bound to the memory of those winter days when she ignored her father's appeal, which is concretized in a newspaper ad seeking traces of her whereabouts. The second and last time that Ingrid and Jean meet by chance in the lonely boulevards around the École Militaire three years after their first encounter in the south, Ingrid appears

more forlorn than ever and her gaze simultaneously more distant and more anguished (1990, 113, 117). Although she tries to seem nonchalant, it is painfully evident to Jean throughout the evening that 'elle cherchait un appui' (1990, 119). Before entering her solitary apartment, she makes one last attempt to reach beyond her solitude: 'Elle a levé doucement le bras et a frôlé ma tempe et ma joue … comme si elle cherchait une dernière fois un contact. Puis elle a baissé le bras et la porte s'est refermée sur elle' (1990, 120). Three years later she commits suicide in an equally solitary hotel room in Milan, an act which ironically does shatter the autonomy of her being, for as noted earlier, '[la] solitude n'est pas confirmée par la mort, mais brisée par la mort' (1974c, 63). Unfortunately Ingrid is unable to recognize that, as Levinas emphasizes: 'Il y a avant la mort toujours une dernière chance … il y a espoir' (1974c, 61). And her gesture to caress Jean's face falls irrevocably back on itself. As the narrator admits, 'Ce bras qui tombe brusquement … et le bruit métallique de la porte qui se ferme m'ont fait pressentir qu'il arrive un moment dans la vie où le coeur n'y est plus' (1990, 120).

However, it is also important to note that although Ingrid's solitude is shattered only by her suicide, she does offer Jean the possibility of something else when she entrusts him with the missing persons add her father had placed in a Paris newspaper, the sole trace of his anguish and appeal for support. As Jean emphasizes in his description of his final encounter with Ingrid, it was as if 'elle voulait me transmettre un fardeau qui lui avait pesé depuis longtemps …' (1990, 153), in the hope that he would respond to the need expressed. Although Jean's situation is decidedly ordinary when compared to Ingrid's, he is careful to point out the similarities between their attitudes (1990, 114). He is forced to admit that, like Ingrid, 'ma vie n'avait été qu'une fuite' (1990, 95). And he too refuses to respond to the appeal a relative extends. Enclosed in the site that Ingrid and Rigaud once shared, Jean too dials his home number, but when Annette answers anxiously—'Allô? … C'est toi, Jean?' (1990, 155), he remains silent and admits: 'J'ai raccroché' (1990, 155). He also reveals that the writing project in which he is engaged, which was ostensibly Ingrid's biography, has become his own memoirs (1990, 151), further underscoring his desire to retrieve his past. And he once again acknowledges the similarities between the fatigue and melancholy both he and Ingrid experience: 'Ce sentiment de vide et de remords vous submerge un jour …

elle ne pouvait pas s'en débarrasser. Moi non plus' (1990, 158). As the text closes with these words, it remains uncertain whether Jean will return from playing dead, whether, in Levinasian terms, he will be able to recognize that 'Au moment même où tout est perdu, tout est possible' (1974b, 158), that the instant 'recommence comme autre' (1974b, 159). It is likewise uncertain whether he will be able to recognize that, as noted earlier: 'La dialectique du temps est la dialectique même de la relation avec autrui' (1974b, 160). But in contrast to Ingrid, the narrator still has the chance to respond to the appeal transmitted through her absent gaze and through the paper trace she committed to his care.

It is this challenge that Modiano himself accepts in the writing of *Dora Bruder*, a narration that problematizes the process of remembering and concretizes the restlessness of Levinas's immemorial, which cannot reach the source of the disturbance it pursues and possess its secret. As indicated earlier, the immemorial disrupts the solitude of a subject across 'la distance de la dia-chronie sans *présent commun*' (1974a, 113), and confers in advance a responsibility for something that never directly involved the individual subject. As Levinas commentator Jeffrey Bloechl further emphasizes, '[T]he immemorial explodes the unity of individual consciousness from beneath its inevitable movement to close with itself … .'[7] and makes one responsible for those whom she/he never knew.

This is the burden Modiano confronted when he first read the missing persons notice that opens *Dora Bruder*: '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.' The writing of *Voyage de noces* was both prelude to and, as revealed by both Ingrid's and Jean's behavior, flight from the terrible sense of responsibility transmitted in this notice. It acts as a Levinasian face, as discourse, as a Saying, exposing Dora in all her vulnerability as a Jew despite her French nationality and, in a sense, commands Modiano to find her and rescue her from oblivion. For nearly a decade he patiently but relentlessly follows the fragmented paper trail of her life and that of her parents and combines the bits of information gathered with his own speculations and reflections. In many ways, Modiano pursues his quest as another of the detective investigations that figure significantly in many of his earlier writings. He makes every effort possible to elucidate the mystery

of Dora's disappearance from the Saint-Coeur de Marie boarding school and weave together the disparate threads of her existence in the lost months that preceded her internment in the holding facility of Tourelles on 19 June 1942, and her definitive transfer to Drancy nearly a month later on 13 August. He determinedly catalogues every stage of his investigation, insisting that 'Des traces subsistent dans des registres … Il suffit d'un peu de patience' (1997, 13).

In this respect, the leads Modiano pursues correspond to commentator Adriaan Peperzak's initial description of the Levinasian trace, which, as noted earlier, 'can be seen as a special kind of sign, insofar as a detective or hunter, or a historian examines it for clues …' (Peperzak, 105). He goes on to note that 'in this sense, the trace is a common phenomenon. All signs, all words or gestures are also traces: they are delivered by someone who passed' (Peperzak, 106). However, as Modiano continues his investigation, he is forced to acknowledge the overall futility of his retrieval efforts. Dora and her parents 'sont des personnes qui laissent peu de traces derrière elles. Presque des anonymes' (1997, 28). Despite his affirmation, 'j'avais l'impression de marcher sur les traces de quelqu'un' (1997, 49), and despite his persistent questions, 'Je me demandais s'il existait un document, une trace qui m'aurait fourni une réponse,' (1997, 61), he repeatedly comes up empty handed.

It is at this point that the truly radical significance of the Levinasian trace comes into play, for as Peperzak notes in his commentary, 'A trace signals a certain past but contains no presence: the past it indicates is absolutely gone' (Peperzak, 106). As Modiano stalks the Clignancourt quarter in the hope that the places Dora and her parents frequented have preserved a relief imprint of their existence, he is forced to admit: 'J'ai ressenti une impression d'absence et de vide, chaque fois que je me suis trouvé dans un endroit où ils avaient vécu' (1997, 29). This same emptiness pervades the boarding school site near the Rothschild Hospital: 'Les bâtiments du Saint-Coeur de Marie n'existent plus … Je n'ai aucune photo de ce pensionnat disparu' (1997, 40). He will never know what Dora did during the nineteen months she lived at Saint-Coeur de Marie from May 1940 to December 1941, and he will never know how she spent her time as an adolescent runaway during the winter and spring of 1942 before her internment. The void cannot be filled. There is no memory to retrieve. But, strangely, it is this very absence, what Levinas calls the absoluteness of

Dora's passing, that literally holds Modiano hostage and makes him feel responsible both for her and the thousands of others arrested, imprisoned, and deported to 'une destination inconnue' (1997, 117). The paradoxical presence of her absence will not let him rest.

It is also important to note that Dora and her father were sent to Auschwitz together on the convoy that left Drancy on 18 September 1942. In contrast to the fictional Ingrid, who could not respond to her father's appeal, Dora 'retrouva son père, interné depuis mars' (1997, 142), and remained with him in Drancy, even when she could have gotten an at least temporary reprieve. Throughout the terrible summer of 1942, Drancy became more and more unbearably crowded with prisoners from the Vélodrome d'Hiver round up and also from those taking place in the unoccupied zone. Consequently, the camp authorities 'décidèrent d'envoyer de Drancy au camp de Pithiviers les juifs de nationalité française le 2 et le 5 septembre' (1997, 143). The four girls who were interned in Tourelles the same July day as Dora were among the 1500 French Jews transferred on those days. As Modiano emphasizes, 'Dora, qui était française, aurait pu elle aussi quitter Drancy avec eux' (1997, 143).[2] And he emphasizes the reason why she did not leave: 'Elle ne le fit pas pour une raison qu'il est facile de deviner: elle préféra rester avec son père' (1997, 143). Although Ernest Bruder could do nothing to protect his family from the network of Occupation betrayal, at least he and Dora would be together.[3]

The text's insistence on the reason why Dora stayed at Drancy is significant in itself but also because of the light it sheds on Modiano's own situation, namely the tension between him and his father, who had abandoned him as an adolescent. At each stage in his journey through the void of Dora's passing, Modiano repeatedly refers to the precariousness of his own father's status during the Occupation as a foreign Jew engaged in illegal dealings, at times with notorious collaborators. He describes in particular the time his father was captured in a round up on the Champs Elysées and thrown into a police van on 12 February 1942 (1997, 89), during the months Dora herself was a runaway, and he notes the similarities between their two situations. Dora's father had not registered her in the Jewish census of October 1940, and Modiano's father likewise did not identify himself with the authorities: 'Ainsi n'avait-il plus aucune existence légale et avait-il coupé toutes les amarres avec un monde où il fallait que chacun justifie … d'une famille, d'une nationalité … Désormais

il était ailleurs. Un peu comme Dora après sa fugue' (1997, 63). But in contrast to the adolescent Dora, who had no resources and no street survivor skills, Modiano's thirty-year old father was both able to escape from police headquarters the very night of his arrest and to 'vivre d'expédients à Paris … se perdre dans les marécages du marché noir' (1997, 65).[4]

It is also important to note that Modiano superimposes his own adolescent experience in a police van onto his father's and what he imagines to have been Dora's own. When Modiano was eighteen, his parents were separated but were still occupying the same apartment building. Modiano's mother, with whom he was living, sent him to his father's apartment to collect the modest child support payment they so desperately needed. But when Modiano rang the bell, his father slammed the door in his face, and the woman with whom his father was living summoned the police (1997, 69). As father and son rode together in the van to police headquarters, Modiano indicates that his father pretended not to notice him, 'il m'ignorait comme si jétais un pestiféré' (1997, 69–70). And when the two appeared before the local magistrate, who promised detention for any future complaints, Modiano admits that 'Jai bien senti que mon père n'aurait pas levé le petit doigt si ce commisaire avait exécuté sa menace et m'avait envoyé au Dépôt' (1997, 71). The following year he had another unpleasant experience when his father stole his identity papers and tried to have him forcibly inducted into the military—but then only silence. As Modiano acknowledges, 'Ensuite je ne l'ai plus jamais revu' (1997, 72).

Although Modiano claims that he bears his father no grudge for the way in which he was treated (1997, 71), the anguish of his abandonment by both parents nevertheless haunts his literary undertaking in many different forms.[5] I would suggest that through his response to the absoluteness of Dora's passing and through his insistence on her remaining with her father, Modiano both reverses Ingrid's failure to respond to her father's appeal and soothes the pain of his own abandonment as well. This writing project assumes the status of what Levinas calls 'La caresse du consolateur' (1974b, 156), which does not put an end to suffering, but transfers its immobilizing force elsewhere so the subject can begin anew (1974b, 156–57). By exploring a past that cannot be recollected and possessed, the knot of Modiano's own solitude loosens and the force of the void itself is

displaced. He is able to definitively pardon his father's failings. In the process, Modiano himself experiences what Levinas so eloquently describes as 'le bonheur étrange de la réconciliation, la *felix culpa* … pardon comme constituant le temps lui-même' (1961, 259). This makes it possible for him to go one step further and acknowledge his admiration both for his father's defiance and that of the countless others who refused to submit to Occupation hypocrisy: 'Les ordonnances allemandes, les lois de Vichy, les articles de journaux ne leur accordaient qu'un statut de pestiférés … alors il était légitime qu'ils se conduisent comme des hors-la-loi afin de survivre. C'est leur honneur. Et je les aime pour ça' (1997, 117).

The same holds true for the rebellious Dora, whose months as a runaway remain 'son secret [, u]n pauvre et précieux secret que les bourreaux, les ordonnances, les autorités d'occupation, le Dépôt, les casernes, les camps, l'Histoire, le temps—tout ce qui vous souille et vous détruit—n'aurait pas pu lui voler' (1997, 145). Across the unbridgeable distance of a past that had never been his present, Modiano's text also summons us, his readers. As he declares, 'En écrivant ce livre, je lance des appels …' (1997, 42). Unlike the desperate request letters he found in Occupation archives to which no one replied, we are called to respond with the Levinasian 'Me voici'(1974a, 181) and accept responsibility for individuals whom we never knew, whether it be, for example, sixteen-year-old Albert Graudien, eight-year-old Jean Lévy, three-year-old Michaël Rubin, fourteen-year-old Paulette Gothelf, or their parents and grandparents (1997, 84–86). As Modiano insists: 'C'est nous, qui n'étions pas encore nés à cette époque, qui en sommes les destinaires et les gardiens' (1997, 84). And our acceptance of what this charge implies in even the most ordinary of contexts will open the knot of our own self-presence, our own solitude and enable us to recognize that 'le définitif n'est pas définitif …' (1961, 258).

In closing, I would suggest that, as far as Modiano's developing repertoire is concerned, this ongoing challenge is concretized most strikingly in *La Petite Bijou*. This recent work brings the vulnerability of a Dora into the banal anonymity and indifference of new millennium Paris. Modiano relinquishes his own narrative control and allows his young female protagonist to narrate her own tale of abandonment, immobilizing fear, but also of the possibility of a re-commencement through the support of an Other, who saves her from attempted suicide. As Petite Bijou, whose

real name is Thérèse, awakens from an overdose of sleeping pills in the premature infant ward where she was taken because the hospital was full, she listens to the sounds of life coming from the incubators and realizes that she too has another chance. As she acknowledges, they are 'un signe que pour moi aussi, à partir de ce jour-là, c'ètait le début de la vie.'[13] The text ends with these words that open onto a future for the young protagonist. Hopefully the same holds true for the author as well.

NOTES

1. In other interviews in this collection, Levinas discusses how his conception of the feminine and the relationship between eros and ethics, eros and agape have developed from the 1940s to the 1990s. He likewise acknowledges the importance of the father-daughter relationship; see 115, 144, 152, 173–174.
2. For an analysis of the situation of French and foreign Jews during the Occupation, see, for example, Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 354–381; Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, The French, and the Jews* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Jeremy Josephs, *Swastika over Paris: The Fate of the French Jews* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989); Jacques Adler, *The Jews of Paris and the Final Solution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For the most comprehensive treatment, see *Serge Klarsfeld's two-volume compendium Vichy-Auschwitz: Le Rôle de Vichy dans la solution finale de la question juive en France*, *1942 (*Paris: Fayard, 1983) and *Vichy-Auschwitz: Le Rôle de Vichy dans la solution finale de la question juive en France 1943–1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1985).
3. As far as Dora's mother is concerned, she was arrested on 16 July 1942, as part of the 'Operation Spring Wind' round-up and also interned in Drancy. But since she was from Budapest, she was freed on 23 July because, as Modiano notes, 'les autorités n'avaient pas encore donné l'ordre de déporter les juifs d'originaires de Hongrie' (1997, 144). Unfortunately, her reprieve was short-lived for she was once again interned in Drancy on 9 January 1943, and deported to Auschwitz in the convoy of 11 February 1943, five months after Dora and her father.
4. Modiano first transposes this incident from his father's life in *Livret de famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977). Fourteen years later in *Fleurs de ruine* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), he returns to the same scene, albeit in more general terms. It is also important to note that in both *Fleurs de ruine* and the slightly earlier *Remise de peine* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) he refers to another time his father was arrested and actually held in a Drancy annex until he was freed by a 'libérateur' in *Remise de peine* (116–17) and more specifically in *Fleurs de ruine* by Eddy Pagnon, a member of the notorious French Gestapo band of the rue Lauriston (48–49, 112–13). For a discussion of the relationship between these arrest scenes and the role they play in Modiano's psychological and literary evolution, see Alan Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (Oxford: Berg, 1996) 142–204.
5. For insightful discussions of the literary manifestations of the relationship between Modiano and his father in earlier works and on Modiano's willingness to forgive,

see William VanderWolk, *Rewriting the Past: Memory, History, and Narration in the Novels of Patrick Modiano* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997); see also Alan Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (Oxford: Berg, 1996); for a discussion of Modiano's ambivalence toward his father as revealed in his early works, see also Ora Avni, *D'un passé l'autre: aux portes de l'histoire avec Patrick Modiano* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997).

6. Patrick Modiano, *La Petite Bijou* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) 154. The female protagonist in this work appears for the first time in Modiano's repertoire as a lonely child, another victim of maternal indifference, in *De si braves garçons* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

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