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The rhetoric of the void and its ambiguities

Starting point for my lecture is the idea that there can be no 'mutual' talk of the *void*. Rather, the meaning of the void is always linked to precursor narratives and semantics which are very different and which therefore cannot be de-contextualized. In order to explore these thoughts and their implications, I will refer to a text written by the French author Patrick Modiano. The story *Dora Bruder* was published in 1997. Patrick Modiano was born in 1945; as early as in his first novel, *La Place de l'Étoile*, published in 1968 (and, maybe not coincidentally, never translated into German), the history of persecution and extermination of the Jewish people emerged and has always been present in his writing.

In the narrative *Dora Bruder* the void appears as a historic trace – or rather as the fading away of a trace. Modiano's text follows the fading trace of a name, "Dora Bruder", and tries to reconstruct/construct the story that lies hidden in this name, concentrating on the years 1940, 1941 and 1942. The attempt to recover and to piece together splinters, fragments of this story, appears in the text as deciphering work. It mainly takes the first-person narrator to two scenes: to the *archives* and to the *topography of the city of Paris*. Names, data, records etc. are used as 'signs of reality' in Modiano's text. This method strongly determines the resistance the story offers to processes of historization as well as to those of dehistorization. In Modiano's text, *void* also refers to the disappearing of the traces of culprits and onlookers, for example, to the manipulation of the archives, which actively caused or helped such disappearances after 1945. The testimony of every single person arrested during the raids bore the signature and thus the name of the policeman who had made the arrest. These thousands upon thousands of testimonies from the so-called *Police for Jewish Affairs* (*les policiers des Questions juives*), writes Modiano, have been destroyed and their names will never be known.¹ The few intact documents which the first-person narrator is able to find are the ones that escaped destruction because they were forgotten, "inadvertently forgotten" (p.104/p.107).

Thus, Modiano does not use *void* as a universal term which, so to speak, can function as a common place of a collective "we", torn away from the specific historic contexts in which a single subject moves. When, for example, in his discussion with Ignatz Bubis in December 1998, Martin Walser gives the parabolic style of his early narratives as grounds for why the Hitler Youth and Auschwitz *cannot* appear in his "Geschichten von 1955"² (Stories of 1955), then the stylization and the existentialist gesture of this style produces the effect of a rhetoric of the void which creates places emptied of history.

The reading of Modiano's text which I will suggest focuses on four aspects:

- the figure of the course of time, which is characterized by the formula "Between yesterday and today"
- the signifier of the void in the text
- the elements of a language of names
- and the postal figure of memory employed in the story.

"Between yesterday and today"

The beginning of the first-person narrator's search is marked by an accidental finding: a missing person's ad published in the December 31, 1941 edition of the *Paris Soir*. "Between yesterday and today" ("D'hier à aujourd'hui") is the title of the column in the newspaper *Paris Soir* in which, at the end of the 80s, the first-person narrator finds the above-mentioned ad by chance, which marks the beginning of his *recherche* and also the beginning of the book. It contains a brief personal description, the *signalement*, of the girl named Dora Bruder and an address, to which any information should kindly be sent, the address of the girl's parents, "41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris" (p.5/p.7). In the course of the text, this title of a column becomes a characteristic of the narrative's time structure and of the narrative position, which traverses the chronology restored by precisely assembling data. "Between yesterday and today. The perspectives become misconstrued for me with the passing of the years, the winters get mixed up. The one of 1965 and the one of 1942. / D'hier à aujourd'hui. Avec le recul des années, les perspectives se brouillent pour moi, les hivers se mêlent l'un à l'autre. Celui de 1965 et celui de 1942." (p.8/p.10) At the end of the narrative, in the last few sentences, the time of grammatical past (September 19, 1942, the day after the deportation of Dora Bruder and her father, Ernest Bruder, from Drancy to Auschwitz) makes a leap right into the present to come to a standstill there.³ On this September 19 the Germans imposed a curfew – "the city was deserted as if to set a sign for Dora's absence./La ville était déserte, comme pour marquer l'absence de Dora." (p.149/p.144) "Since then," the text goes on, "the Paris where I tried to find traces of her has remained as deserted and silent as on that day. I walk through the empty streets. For me, they remain empty, even in the evening, in the peak period, when people press into the subway entrances. I cannot help but think of her and feel an echo of her presence in certain districts. / Depuis, le Paris où j'ai tenté de retrouver sa trace est demeuré aussi désert et silencieux que ce jour-là. Je marche à travers les rues vides. Pour moi elles le restent, même le soir, à l'heure des embouteillages, quand les gens se pressent vers les bouches de métro. Je ne peux pas m'empêcher de penser à elle et de sentir un écho de sa présence dans certains quartiers." (p.149/p.144) The "between yesterday and today"/"d'hier à aujourd'hui" that marks the disruption of the chronological course of time which is developed in great detail in the narrative, intensifies here around a date⁴, with the break of which time stands still. However, this date does not indicate the event itself (the deportation and the persecution preceding it), but rather what the event leaves as a sign, namely 'absence'. The text itself finally comes to a standstill in the standstill of time which has also passed over or rather swallowed the date of birth of the first-person narrator (he was born in 1945 as the reader was told earlier).

Signifier of the void

The signifier of the void crosses through the entire text. Often, as in the passage quoted above, this refers to descriptions of the first-person narrator, how he passes through the topography of the city of Paris, and then converts the attempt to wipe out traces in public into a theme: "Je me suis dit que plus personne ne se souvenait de rien. Derrière le mur s'étendait un no man's land, une zone de vide et d'oubli." [I thought to myself that nobody remembers anything anymore. Behind the wall extends a no man's land, an area of void and forgetting.] (p.131) In the petrified structure of the city, but also in the archives the first-person narrator comes across the systematic elimination of buildings and files often ordered by authorities, he finds empty spaces which hide a history of collaboration. Amnesia guarantees the advance of

historic time. Yet, writing absence and void into it again produces a text-based method which opposes the amnesia and the vanishing without a trace (in this respect the text creates a void which cannot be filled with words, but it does so with words, in a very poetic way): "It is said that the places preserve at the least a slight imprint of the people who have lived there. Imprint: indentation or relief. I felt a sense of absence and void every time I came to a place where they had lived." (p.28) The German translation of the French original misses a phrase which states the term 'imprint' more precisely and again intensifies the lack in it: "Empreinte: marque en creux ou en relief. [a mark which is a depression, a hollow space, or which stands out in a relief]. Pour Ernest et Cécile Bruder, pour Dora, je dirai: en creux." (p.29) [For Ernest and Cécile Bruder, for Dora, I would say: a depression.] In contrast the rediscovery in Modiano's text refers to files, documents, police registers, which have escaped destruction often only because they were forgotten: for example they give names of informers and collaborators, and by quoting from them, publishing passages from them, the text also opposes the culprits' disappearing without a trace.

Moments of a language of names

In addition to the signifier of the void, the text contains moments of a language of names, i.e. names of places where remains of memories have been deposited and which, for that reason, become signifiers indicating a continuing effect of past events that lasts until the present – "*les noms anciens*", the old names which can still be read on blue signposts: "DRANCY" or "ROMAINVILLE". Or a name whose characters are easy to read but difficult to interpret: the name "DUREMORD", clearly visible on a wooden shed from back then, which was forgotten and therefore captured in time (p.147/p.142), a name which shifts between written meaning and phonetic meaning, between French and German.⁵

In the perspective of the first-person narrator, in the perspective of its reading, the names neglect the distance of the time passed since 1945, in the same way in which his writing position is based on the present ("J'ai écrit ces pages en novembre 1996" (p.50) – I wrote these pages in November 1996) which disregards the distance of the years or compresses it in order to establish a link between one's own past, the "Paris of those days", and the Paris of today. "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." (p.50) [I have the impression that I am the only one who makes a link between the Paris of those days and the one of today, the only one to remember all those details.] The figure of this link is not distant and clear, but one of unreadable closeness, of the parasitical. This is uncovered, for example, in a passage of the narrative which deals with the theft of a novel's title. And the first-person narrator calls it *coincidence* in the French original that he brings a copy of his first book, *La Place de l'Étoile*, to someone who, surprised by the title, goes and fetches a slim grey volume from his library: *La Place de l'Étoile* by Robert Desnos. He, the recipient of the present, had "published this work himself in Rodez in 1945, a few months after the death of Robert Desnos in camp Theresienstadt and in the year of my birth. I did not know that Robert Desnos had written *La Place de l'Étoile*. I had, completely unintentionally, stolen his title. / Je lui avais volé, bien involontairement, son titre." (p.103/p.100)⁶ Through the use of the word *involontairement* in the French original, this involuntary act of theft, of appropriation of someone else's property (here referring to a writing or meaning that is someone else's property) also reminds of the meaning of 'involuntary memory', the *mémoire involontaire* of Proust; however this act could as well be called a case of *intergenerational cryptomnesia*.

The postal figure of memory

This type of interconnection, which goes against the grain in historicism, trying to instead start a correspondence of the times, finds its equivalent and its literal representation in the postal figure of memory which is developed at one point in Modiano's text.⁷ In the archives, writes Modiano, "hundreds and hundreds of letters are still waiting", desperate petitions of persecuted Jews to the police prefect of Paris of that time, which have never been answered. They still exist and are readable because they were forgotten: "They have been lying there for more than half a century, like mailbags that were forgotten in the furthest corner of the hangar of a remote *Aéropostale* station. Today we are able to read them. Those to whom they were addressed did not want to pay any attention to them, and now it is up to us, those who were not yet born at that time, to be their recipients and guardians" (p.86). Not the image of a message in the bottle, but the one of undelivered airmail is evoked here; the archives of the police prefecture, "a large, eerie barracks on the banks of the Seine" (p.85), are compared to a "distant station of the *Aéropostale*". The letters' destination is divided by the distinction between addressees and recipients: "Ceux à qui elles étaient adressées n'ont pas voulu en tenir compte et maintenant, c'est nous, qui n'étions pas encore nés à cette époque, qui en sommes les destinataires et les gardiens" (p.84).

Quoting from some of these letters that had remained unnoticed and unanswered, the first-person narrator reads them like a delivery made to himself. A passage from one of these futile letters goes: "Dear Mr. Prefect, may I take the liberty, regarding my husband, Zelik Pergricht, to kindly ask you to receive news from him as well as any information ..." (p.87) or: "Dear Director of the Jewish authority, I most humbly ask you to release my daughter, Nelly Trautmann, from camp Drancy ..." (p.86). The mail that has never reached its addressee here becomes the image of a memory constellation in which the time order of the generations is disregarded. The recipient assumes the role of the addressee and understands that his role can no longer be anything else than that of a "recipient and guardian" who reads the letters and keeps them, quotes from them and hands them down, realizing that he is involved in the circulation of the letters' messages or has to start it again. He places himself in the gap of time that exists between, on the one hand, addressing and sending and, on the other, delivering and reading.

Yet at the same time, the figure of a correspondence between the times, described in this way, which is opposed to the idea of a continuum of time in the sense of historicism, underlines the crucial delay which cannot be made up for and which structures this correspondence. The waiting has become reversed in this constellation: it is no longer about waiting for mail that contains an answer, but vice versa: the mail waits to be read by the following generations ("Mais il reste, dans les archives, des centaines et des centaines de lettres" (p.84)), and any reading of it will come too late, will be in vain in the sense of the hope linked to the sending that has long perished, become obsolete. Read in this way, the letters become testimonies: testimony of the futile waiting for an answer, of the unfulfilled pleas and the injustice that can never be put right. Maybe it is really these rediscovered letters in Modiano's text that are an expression of what Jacques Derrida called *restances*.⁸

References

- ¹ Patrick Modiano: Dora Bruder. Munich, Vienna 1998, p.84. French original: Dora Bruder. Paris 1997, p.86. These two editions will be quoted from in the following (page references appear in brackets, the page references from the German edition will be followed by those from the French original).
- ² Because they "are written from the spirit of Kafka, they are Kafkaesquely developed parables, the Hitler Youth (*HJ*) or League of German Girls (*BdM*) cannot appear with the best will in the world. [...]it is like that with parables. They are stylized in a way that there cannot be any Hitler Youth." *Wir brauchen eine neue Sprache für die Erinnerung. Das Treffen von Ignatz Bubis und Martin Walser: Vom Wegschauen als lebensrettender Massnahme, von der Befreiung des Gewissens und den Rechten der Literatur. [We need a new language for the memory. The meeting of Ignatz Bubis and Martin Walser: Of looking away as a life-saving measure, of the liberation of the conscience and the rights of literature.]* In: F.A.Z., No. 290, December 14, 1998, p.39-41, here p.39).
- ³ In this context it would be instructive to analyze more closely the variations of tenses in Modiano's text. It catches the eye that the narrative past, the *imparfait*, is used rather very rarely, while *présent* and *passé composé* dominate, i.e. together with the present tense forms which in English would correspond to the perfect. This could be linked to the implicit meaning of the perfect tense as described by Toshiaki Kobayashi: "Contrary to the past tense, the perfect implies that what has passed still exists in the present. In this respect, in melancholy, the past is not a mere past, but a perfect. Things that, on the one hand, are already in the past and therefore irrevocable, on the other hand, still exist as past and irrevocable things." Toshiaki Kobayashi: *Melancholie und Zeit*. Basel, Frankfurt/M. 1998, p.168
- ⁴ Regarding the word *depuis* which can mean 'from a date on' as well as 'from a place', cf. Jacques Derrida in a different context: "the word 'depuis' has (...) the twofold (temporal and spatial) meaning of what historically marks the break of an event (...) and synchronically the spatial distance from a place." Jacques Derrida: *Vergessen wir nicht - die Psychoanalyse!* Frankfurt/M. 1998, p.13-14.
- ⁵ Duremord in French sounds like *dure mort* which means hard, slow death. The German word *Mord* instead means murder.
- ⁶ *La place de l'étoile* is the title of the first novel by Patrick Modiano, published in 1968. Here, the quotation of the novel's title functions as a sign of reality which - in the sense of the "autobiographical pact" of Philippe Lejeune - legitimizes the identity of the first-person narrator and author ("Patrick Modiano").
- ⁷ More on this figure in the writings of Heinrich Heine cf. Sigrid Weigel: Heinrich Heines orientalische und okzidentalische Wechsel. Postalische Poetologie als Korrespondenz mit der Vergangenheit und den Toten. In: Klaus Briegleb und Itta Shedletzky (Hg.): *Das Jerusalem Heine-Symposium. Gedächtnis, Mythos, Modernität*. Hamburg 2001, p.135-147.
- ⁸ Formed in analogy to *différance*, the ending of which, *-ance*, as Derrida puts it, "remains undecided between the active and the passive (...), is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice". Jacques Derrida: *Randgänge der Philosophie*. Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Vienna 1976, p.13.

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