Dee Luo

Professor Trezise

Representing the Holocaust

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Reconstructing the Past with the Overlapping Present

After opening to the first page of Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*, the reader is presented with a map. Maps represent a factual and structural representation of the layout of a certain location – upon first glance, a map does not contain any meaning behind the placement of streets and avenues. Modiano strategically uses these maps of the XIIe and XVIIIe Arrondissement, not only uncovering an otherwise forgotten story from the streets but also weaving his own personal meaning into the map. The Boulevard Ornano is not just a Parisian boulevard; it is where Modiano would come as a child with his mother to go to the flea markets, or to go to the cinema. It is also where the Bruder family resided before their arrest. With these overlapping elements of historical fact, personal narrative, and tracing another’s past, Modiano is able to create a relationship that, while lacking a conclusion, sheds light on several different aspects of the Holocaust.

In searching for the truth behind the enigma that is the Holocaust, it is common to find both historical fact and individual testimony. However, it is much harder to put the two pieces together, to find the relationship between the numbers and the infinite memories or connections. Modiano makes this attempt in *Dora Bruder* by following the mysterious disappearance of a Jewish girl during the time of the Occupation in France through evidentiary documentation. While he gives no reason for his obsession with the life of this teenager, this representation of the Holocaust provides a perspective that begins with small details, for example, a photograph. From these small details of this girl’s existence, we are further presented with not only historical evidence, but we also see Modiano tie in details of his own personal life and history. The combination of these elements at times allows the reader to make connections, but at other times interferes with the overall flow of the text and what is presented. In particular, Modiano’s personal anecdotes at times seem to take away from the representation, distracting the reader from Dora and her connection to the historical facts of the Holocaust. For example, his distanced relationship with his father sometimes overwhelmed the reading, focusing more on Modiano’s emotions rather than the connections to the Holocaust.

An overarching theme of Modiano’s text is the overlap between past and present in one location. For example, he writes “All that remains of the building occupied by the Prefecture of Police during the Occupation is a huge spectral barracks beside the Seine… And we can hardly believe that this building we pass every day can be unchanged since the forties. We persuade ourselves that these cannot be the same stones, the same corridors” (69). It is easy, as Modiano writes, to consider the past to be a separate idea tucked away in the back of one’s mind — memories of what has happened. However, by overlapping stories of the present to those of the past by specific location, Modiano is keeping the memory alive. The buildings that Dora lived in, or those that held arrested prisoners waiting for their fate, still exist today in the same physical form. In a metaphorical sense, they bore witness to what happened and still remain functional today. In using this technique, Modiano creates effective links between the past and present, emphasizing the idea that the present could not be possible without the past. An important concept to keep in mind when considering the Holocaust is the idea that what precedes us in history will always have an effect on the present-day. While the atrocities have ended and life has moved away from the industrialized murder that terrorized Europe some sixty years ago, the consequences are ongoing and the events cannot simply be forgotten.

Modiano also complements historical reconstruction with the life of young Dora Bruder. Generally when the Holocaust is portrayed through facts, the numbers are broad and do not tell us anything about the actual details of the event itself, just the physical results. We are told estimated numbers of deaths, how many people went through the concentration camps, and other figures that don’t give us much deeper meaning. Modiano instead finds very specific historical documentation, such as letters, official correspondence, and photographs, to reconstruct the life of this girl. While historians use this information to try and build a clearer broad image of the Holocaust, Modiano uses this evidence to emphasize the individual experiences and struggles. Without the historical evidence Modiano finds, Dora would cease to exist. This highlights another important idea to remember when representing the Holocaust; within the mass of Jews and prisoners that suffered during the Holocaust, each individual had a different story to tell. Each individual account of those who suffered would give us a different perspective of the Holocaust. In putting all these individual perspectives together, we would perhaps be able to more fully grasp what happened and how they happened. Although we unfortunately cannot pinpoint all details or understand what it truly felt like to be in that situation, each individual account matters and should be kept alive. Modiano never gives any reason to why he wants to find Dora Bruder’s story, and the purpose of his search is never unveiled. Yet, we see through his search that there is only so much that historical reconstruction can do in painting a picture of events. What must also be included is testimony, to get a specific and in-depth view of the events. Without witness, we lack the emotional details and the meaning of what life was like to people that lived through the events. In a way, testimonies make the events more real to the readers, because it forces us to put ourselves in their shoes and consider the mental and emotional states of the witnesses.

The reader must question why, in this depiction of a girl’s life during the Occupation, Modiano introduces and draws upon details of his own personal life. Most notably, Modiano’s troubled relationships with his parents seem to obstruct the ultimate goal of the text, to create this representation of Dora’s life during the Occupation. While it is true that Modiano’s father was arrested and had to escape the authorities during the Occupation, he does not really use his father’s story to make the same connections between past and present as he does with Dora’s story. One possible explanation for these personal anecdotes is that Modiano is attempting to make Dora more tangible not only to the reader, but also to himself. Without his personal connections, we only see Dora’s life through a series of official documents and hypotheses. It is frustrating for the reader to have to construct the life of a girl through nothing but spaced out documentation of her location. Everything else about her life is presented through endless questions. We cannot connect with Dora as an individual, and this is unfortunately the case with many forgotten Holocaust victims. Yet, as Modiano considers his personal issues, he attempts to relate them to Dora’s experiences to perhaps try to understand what was going through her mind at certain points of her life. For example, when discussing Dora running away, Modiano writes “It would help to know if the weather was fine on 14 December, the day of Dora’s escape. Perhaps it was one of those mild, sunny winter days when you have a feeling of holiday and eternity—the illusory feeling that the course of time is suspended, and that you need only slip through this breach to escape the trap that is closing around you” (48). The feeling Modiano describes is portrayed as a personal feeling that he connects with his own running away experience, and he suggests to himself and to the readers that Dora might have felt the same way, making her more real as a person.

Another way of analyzing meaning behind historical evidence is Modiano’s use of a photograph of Dora’s family. A photograph is able to capture a moment of time and transform this moment of time into a representation that can last for an eternity. However, this moment cannot be truly preserved without an understanding of the context, or the feelings and emotions present in the photograph. Modiano presents us with a photo of Dora, standing next to two women who appear to be her mother and grandmother. On the surface, without considering the context of the photo, it appears to be quite ordinary. Yet Modiano pushes us to consider these details in a larger context. He writes “I don’t know when this photograph was taken. It could only have been in 1941, when Dora was a boarder at Saint-Coeur-de-Marie, or else early in the spring of 1942, when she returned to the Boulevard Ornano after her escape in December” (74-75). He analyzes small details, noting that “She holds her head high, her eyes are grave, but a smile is beginning to float about her lips. And this gives her face an expression of sad sweetness and defiance” (75). Modiano describes the picture in great detail, suggesting context behind the image presented.

Furthermore, hypotheses play a significant role in Modiano’s text. As stated earlier, we are only able to reconstruct Dora’s life through historical documentation of her whereabouts. Modiano spends a majority of the text proposing possible explanations of where Dora was, how she was feeling, etc. He continually uses phrases such as “perhaps” and “I am reduced to conjecture.” These questions are never answered, and Modiano’s hypotheses are never confirmed. However, the hypotheses show the reader the possibility and dimensions of how Dora may have lived her life. Perhaps Modiano is trying to make sense of Dora’s life and what happened to her by filling in the blanks with his own ideas, and allowing the reader to do the same. The hypotheses he proposes give Dora depth and allow us to imagine her life and personal struggles that aren’t reflected by the facts. It emphasizes the obscurity and mystery that remains in history, especially in events such as the Holocaust, where there are few left to give a real account of what living was like at the time.

What are missing from this representation, and unfortunately from many other representations of the Holocaust, are the personal details. Even with Modiano’s intertwining of historical evidence, his relation to Dora’s past, and his own personal narrative, there still seems to be something lacking from the book. Dora’s personal life – her feelings, reasons, and explanations – is missing. Modiano finds documents tracking her movement, and even then we still do not know her whereabouts at times of her life. Perhaps, however, this is overlying purpose of his work. He writes, “I shall never know how she spent her days… 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” (62). Perhaps the present-day importance of Dora’s life, and the Holocaust, lies in the fact that there are still so many aspects that we can never understand. While this can be frustrating, there is also a quiet honor and respect for those secrets, some very dark, that haunt any reconstruction of the Holocaust. These secrets are safe, as Modiano suggests, from anything that may dehumanize or depersonalize their valuable origin. As events become classified and described in historical context, they tend to be regarded as something set in time and over and done with, only to be tucked away. By allowing these secrets to linger, Modiano is tactfully leaving Dora’s story open to the readers. She did die as a result of the camps, but it is never explicitly stated. We have the facts, the numbers, and the stories – what we don’t have, and what will allow the Holocaust to live on as an event that has an everlasting effect on history, are the secrets.