After Testimony

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First, a few words about my title. I have chosen to speak of “recent” literature in order to avoid the word “contemporary.” The notion of the contemporary, of sharing the same time (whether the present time or the time of the event), remains open to question, and we shall in fact question it later via the opposition between the “news value” (actualité) of memory and “memorial renewal” (actualisation).¹ It is also important to point out that the word “recent” does not necessarily imply that we are concerned here with young writers: certain of them may be in their fifties or older. Joseph Bialot, who is well known for the score of detective novels he has written, had published nothing on his experience of the concentration camps until he produced C’est en hiver que les jours rallongent (Days Seem Longer in Winter).² Given that libraries assign this work to the shelf marked “eyewitness accounts,” and that the detective novels may be regarded as one of the detours that the author, born in Warsaw in 1923, needed to make in order to come to terms with his private memory and a whole painful span of his existence, there is no doubt that since the end of the 1980s, his project as a writer has been overdetermined by a memorial context. It will be apparent here that the very notion of “generation” needs to be reviewed and relativized, at least as regards an emergence into language that brings together at the same moment a number of authors who, as we shall see, were in some cases born forty years apart. As for the expression “confronting the past,” I have chosen it because it is sufficiently vast and vague to allow one subsequently to differentiate
between history and memory as specific modes of relationship to the past, both being determined by violence and its consequences. Obviously, it does not mean that memory and history are anthropologically determined by violence whatever the context in which we think of them, but, in our époque and culture, the main meaning and custom of memory and history—that is, the hegemonic sense of memory and history, our episteme, as Foucault might say—is determined in that way.

In this respect, the 1970s mark a gradual shift in the meanings attached to many of the figures through which collective violence is represented—the cultural family, mapped closely onto history, that consists in particular of heroes, saviors, victims, traitors, political criminals, collaborators, and so on. Following the Second World War and decolonization, the economy of these representations in relation to one another can be seen to undergo a striking modification. The shift was crystallized and made permanent at the turning point of the decade 1980–90 with the breakup of the Communist bloc, but it had been set in motion long before. One of the dominant directions of the shift was explicitly determined by the memorial questions at the center of which the genocide of the Jews casts its somber light. The unique character of that event was now explicitly acknowledged, which previously had not been the case; from that point on, it has functioned as a horizon of reference, and even, in some people’s view, as a paradigm.

A rereading of collective history then begins to take shape that focuses on civilian victims and those forgotten by official history. In the process, these become the subject of an increasing number of literary works and films, most of which grow out of family scenarios and finally become fully developed narrative schemas. Many theoretical and critical studies have been devoted to such questions, too, basing themselves primarily on textual corpuses. For example, Marianne Hirsch has proposed the concept of “postmemory,” Susan Suleiman the expression “the 1.5 generation,” while Dominique Viart, with his phrase “the family relation story (récit de filiation)” draws on a vast corpus that goes well beyond the Jewish genocide as such. The notion of “autofiction”—that is, a work labeled “novel” which nevertheless features the actual writer as its main character—constitutes another of these new theoretical tools.

While situating myself in close proximity to these various reflections, I would like to approach the corpus by bringing to light certain of the conditions that, in parallel with the historical events the works in question refer to, have helped to make possible the writing of this recent literature. Subsequently, I shall discuss the principal tendencies and themes that have become prominent over the last fifteen years.
1. Narrative Conditions and Sequences

Within the framework of the approach adopted here, I shall limit myself to two questions. The first is the epistemic question of the family, which represents a central point of departure for each of the texts I shall examine. The second, operating at an epistemological level, strives to grasp the 1980s return to autobiography in particular, and to memory in general.

The Model Family and Its Histories

Why is the family located at the center of this memorial configuration? The political terrors of the twentieth century were determined by impulses of annihilation that impinged not only on individuals but also on their whole family, their genealogy, and their group culture. The realization by descendants of what their ancestors lived through has become an integral part of the way the very conception of the family is structured. Thus, many of the imaginary conceptions by which families define themselves have been reconstituted by default around the black hole of terror. Even the groups who are least affected are still burdened with suspicions about what their relatives may have done, or not done, during the war or the occupation period in order to save themselves. In this way, a whole series of possibilities opens up according to whether the family is Jewish, whether the father was in the Resistance, whether he was a passive civilian or a collaborator. Or even worse. In the specific German context, evidently the question of collaboration is not relevant. There are degrees and differentiations, ranging from those who were simple Nazis to those who were more involved in the terror system, all the way up to the Nazi, or worse, the SS staff. At the opposite end, we encounter those who helped Jews or those who participated actively in one of the Resistance movements (Catholic or Protestant or Communist). Would the filiation and its imaginary be sufficient to justify memorial writers when they choose to enter via the family door? In order to clarify the terms of that question, we need to take a brief look backward.

From the nineteenth century onwards, the family became an object, a site, and an agent of social regulation; it remains today a primary site of subject formation and, as a corollary, one of the most powerful normative investments of our culture. In the process, it functions as a relevant indicator, as a sociologist would say, of the state of society, and in this context, of the type of relationship that society maintains with its past. This relationship has evolved in a manner similar to the shift of representations referred
to above. In the 1960s and 1970s, the family was decried as harmful: it was considered responsible for the long-term survival of bourgeois values. Pasolini’s *Theorem* (1968) or Ettore Scola’s *Ugly, Dirty and Bad* (1976) identify the family as a focus of perversions and alienation. In 1971, the family becomes a pathogenic, ultraconservative milieu, both as seen through the lens of Ken Loach’s camera and in the language of the anti-psychiatry movement: this is the moment when David Cooper writes *The Death of the Family*. Barthes denounces “The Father—that Talker” (“Au séminaire”) in the very same year that he announces the “death of the author.” Bourgeois norms become the object of a widely shared hatred.

With its cheap realism, the “mode rétro”s that began in the 1970s may have been a harbinger of the reversal that was to take place at the end of the 1980s, when the family became a positive focus of interest and people turned back to it, just as the authors who had previously flaunted the most neutral or “blank” mode of writing (*écriture blanche*) turned to autobiography. If it is with this past that present-day writers construct their family narratives, one may ask oneself whether that signifies a reinforcement of the family as an institution or whether it is not rather a different, non-“revolutionary” way of calling it into question, one that uses the past as a form of mediation.

*The Rehabilitation of Autobiography*

In 1968, Roland Barthes wrote his groundbreaking article with its categorical title “The Death of the Author.” It ends on an irrevocable judgment, pronounced in a prophetic tone: “the birth of the reader must be paid for with the death of the Author.” Barthes’s disqualification of the author is formulated in the wake of a series of position-taking statements and essays produced by the *nouveau roman* school (of which Nathalie Sarraute’s *L’Ère du soupçon* (*The Age of Suspicion*, 1956) was a precursor, followed by, among others, the essays of Alain Robbe-Grillet (written in a highly polemical tone), as well as by Barthes himself (*Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* [*Writing Degree Zero*], for example), by Julia Kristeva, and, more generally, by intellectuals and academics affiliated with non-Althusserian structuralism; to these one may also add Maurice Blanchot. In the 1980s, however, directly countering this erasure of the subject, there comes about a return to autobiography, coinciding with the increasingly persistent presence of memorial questions. Many narrative works bear witness to a shift in which one can perceive the convergence and partial overlapping of the story-telling frameworks of memory, the family,
and biography. This trinity gives rise to a new direction that is loaded with significance.

Yet must we therefore conclude that the importance acquired by autobiographical issues and the renewed theoretical interest they elicited represent a genuine reversal of the previous situation? If it is true that from the 1950s to the 2000s, there is a shift from an uncompromising erasure of the subject to self-exhibition, this must rather be understood as the elaboration of new authorial configurations that draw their nourishment from the materials of memory, and vice versa—configurations arising from the dialectic between, on the one hand, the author and what he or she is the focus of (in particular at the level of subjectivity) and, on the other, his or her relationship to the world and to history. The very writers who were emblematic of self-erasure and intransitivity retune their literary awareness to the wavelength of autobiography, and thence (since we must avoid harboring the illusion that autobiography can ever be the shortest and only authentic route leading from the self back to the self) to the question of the subject. Nathalie Sarraute writes *Enfance* (*Childhood*) in 1983, Marguerite Duras *L’Amant* (*The Lover*) in 1984 and *La Douleur* (*War: A Memoir*) in 1985, and Robbe-Grillet *Le Miroir qui revient* (*Ghosts in the Mirror*) in 1984. And Barthes himself, having already published *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), takes the view in 1980 that one must henceforth “observe” a possible “return to the author” (*La Préparation* 276). This return to self, which is also an interplay between self and autobiography, leaves a margin broad enough to accommodate a powerful recharging of the question of genealogy, since autobiography as a genre does not fully account for the majority of the texts I have cited that bring together the family constellation in all its forms: the father figure, whether as a presence in Robbe-Grillet’s *Le miroir qui revient* or as a painful absence in Claude Simon’s *L’Acacia* (*The Acacia*) of 1989; the close, affectionate relationship between father and daughter in Sarraute’s *Enfance*, where the mother figure, distant and clumsily egocentric, is desacralized; the mother again in Duras’s *L’Amant*, or as a central structuring presence in Pèrec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (*W, or the Memory of Childhood*), where the father rarely appears, or in *Roland Barthes*, and then again in Roland Barthes’s *La Chambre claire* (*Camera Lucida*) (1980). Another way of putting it, however, would be that the literary program of self-effacement was incapable of resisting the attraction of the force field of memorial questions as they emerged in the 1980s. In that perspective, what occupies the foreground is the writer’s whole relationship to society, his or her way of listening to it, being sensitive to it, permeable to it.
The Lure of the Memorial

The return to autobiography is present in works where memorial expression leads the subject to revisit the history of his or her family in the context of history in general, thus anticipating quite specifically the tendencies of recent literature. Let us consider an example from outside the corpus of writing in the French language. In 1976, Christa Wolf’s novel *Kindheitsmuster (A Model Childhood)* already carries traces of this movement and, one might say, anticipates it. Her project in *Kindheitsmuster* is characterized by the “crabwalk” (*Krebsgang*) long before Günter Grass made the word famous by using it in the title of one of his novels (*Im Krebsgang* 2002):

The closer someone is to us, the more difficult it seems to be to say something conclusive about them: that’s well known. The child who had crept away to hide inside me—has she come out? Or was she so startled that she looked for a deeper, more inaccessible hiding place? Has memory done its duty? Or has it allowed itself to be used to prove by its fallibility that it is impossible to avoid the deadly sin of our times, which is: not to be willing to discover one’s own identity?

And the past, which still had the power to impose its own linguistic rules and split the first person into a second and a third—is its authority shattered? Will the voices grow quiet?

I don’t know. (Wolf 530)

Christa Wolf here transmits the uncertainty that ties the past to the present via the figures of the parents and the self. In the course of a visit to the town, now in Poland, where she spent the first sixteen years of her life before fleeing the Soviet troops in 1945, Christa Wolf explores the past of her childhood through the mediation of the character little Nelly. The narrative unfolds at three levels: 1) the act of remembrance of that period, during which the child witnessed events and signs that are retrospectively clarified by meanings she was not able fully to grasp, but that seemed nonetheless evident; 2) a visit to the town in the summer of 1971; and 3) a self-conscious reflection on memory and the work that writing allows her to carry out to that end. The narrative construction thus consists in a to-and-fro movement between the present moment of narration and a narrated past interspaced with a critical reflexivity that preserves the distance between what took place and the *a posteriori* consciousness of an irremediable disaster. Although Pèrec was situated on the symmetrically opposite side (since his parents did not belong
to a German “minority” [*deutsche Minderheit*] who had settled in Poland, but were Polish Jewish immigrants who had come to France to live their modest lives and were then persecuted by Vichy and the Nazis), the writing of *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* deploys a closely related approach: it aims at a reconstitution that, articulated on the two complementary levels of autobiography and fiction, carries within itself the knowledge that it will be impossible to fill the gap in an existence fractured by “l’Histoire avec sa grande hache” (“History with a capital H,” where “capital” is also to be understood as in “capital punishment”) (13). The two approaches may be seen to move even closer together when one notes that Perec’s project for this book had included a third level, as in the three-dimensional structure of Wolf’s novel, on the question of writing itself; although it did not appear as such in the final version of the work, its presence is visible throughout the whole text. An intermediate narrative level—this time specifically narrative, however—is likewise to be found in several of the novels of Patrick Modiano, who was born, we should recall, just after the war. There again, the expression of uncertainty, the “shifty” element, to use one of the author’s own terms, is present from his earliest works, *La Place de l’Étoile* (1968) and *Les Boulevards de ceinture* (*Ring Roads*) (1971), in connection with his father who, probably by making shabby compromises, had managed to evade anti-Semitic persecution.

### 2. Memorial Permutations

The family, autobiography, and memorial investigation thus constitute the conditions for, and the limits within which, recent memorial literature was eventually to develop. I should like to present that literature here within the frame of two types of discourse: one a discourse of homage or celebration, the other of suspicion, the latter being the one that achieves by far the widest resonance while at the same time accommodating itself within the perspective opened up by the authors mentioned previously. In every case, the writer becomes the archeologist of his own genealogy; in the process, he selects a parental figure as a mediator between himself and history. This is perhaps also one of the few critical and heuristic resources still available to us today when we seek to confront history. What follows from that is the question of the impact of social discourse, the question of the permeability of certain of these texts to the memorial *doxa* that nowadays occupies the public sphere.
Paying Homage

Speaking of the problematics of the notion of filiation, Dominique Viart cites the dynastic fictions of Sylvie Germain: *Le Livre des nuits* (*The Book of Nights*) (1985); *Nuit d’ambre* (*Night of Amber*) (1987); and *Jours de colère* (*Days of Wrath*) (1989). Viart also demonstrates the importance of the double paternal and maternal line, the place assigned to ancestors, or the succession of generations, in Pierre Bergougnoux’s *La Maison rose* (*The Pink House*) (1987), *L’Orphelin* (*The Orphan*) (1992), *La Toussaint* (*All Saints’ Day*) (1994), and *Miette* (*Crumb*) (1995). To these examples one should add Jean Rouaud’s series of novels, beginning with *Les Champs d’honneur* (*Fields of Glory*) (1990), which are devoted to the maternal grandfather, then the father, then the mother; we shall return to Rouaud’s work later. Even Michel Quint’s *Effroyables jardins* (*Strange Gardens*) (2000) carries a dedication to the memory of the author’s grandfather, “a miner who had fought at Verdun,” and of the author’s father, who “had fought in the Resistance” and was a teacher. “Contemporary writers take for granted their own fragility: it is this that prevents them, in their capacity as both authors and readers, from turning themselves into figures of authority,” comments Dominique Viart (131).

“My father was no hero. For a long time, I would doubtless have preferred him to be one. At least so that I could boast about it” (Pachet 9). Pierre Pachet here brings out the dilemma of a mode of writing that no longer draws on classic models in order to evoke the figure of the father. This does not mean, however, that he liquidates “the Father,” as certain writers of the 1970s would have done. Pachet belongs to a current of writing in which the father figure moves closer to the ordinary man he should always have been. He is not an anti-hero. The object is to deconstruct the myth of “my Father the hero” without destroying the paternal image. The writer gambles on being able to describe what remains while quietly taking apart the symbolic apparatus that made the father an inaccessible being, someone to be feared but admired. It is easy to associate what Pachet does in this book with Perec’s description, in *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, of his father as a man struck down by a fatal chance that carried with it neither glory nor cowardice. Alternatively, one might recall what Régine Robin says about her father, whose glimpse of Lenin on his white horse crossing the river Bug she conflates with Fabrice’s encounter with Napoleon at Waterloo (Robin 1–108). Similarly, in *La Place* (*A Man’s Place*), Annie Ernaux speaks about her father with rigorous dignity and no trappings: during the Occupation, he is “the hero of the supply-lines” (44). Or again, a sober idealization of the father may be constructed around a sense of absence and disappearance. One wonders whether it is not by
The sense of uncertainty that is in play here is expressed in a direct, critical form along the double axis of the parental past and of literary traditions. This angle of approach, which was already apparent in the French Romantics, is undoubtedly germane to those who feel that they have inherited a past they would not necessarily have wished for, a past through which their parents moved or where they themselves may have been on the scene. The arousal of consciousness that is thus set in motion does not only move outwards (toward family members, literary traditions); it also involves the intimate domain of the subject, inciting it to engage in a self-reflexive dialogue. Marc Weitzmann’s Chaos (1997), Lorette Nobécourt’s Horsita (1999), and Catherine Cusset’s La Haine de la famille (Family Hatred) (2001) may be cited here as examples. All three narrators settle their scores with a very close family member who has deceived them or whose behavior carries connotations of falsehood.

Chaos draws on the biblical model of Abel and Cain as reconfigured by modernity and psychoanalysis in order to place on the stage a brother, a Holocaust denier who, as the editor of a “New” historical review, apparently purloined their grandfather’s manuscript, written during the Resistance. The personal history of the narrator’s principal friend, a historian born in 1947, is itself freighted with his father’s past in the notorious Vichy militia. In Horsita, it is the father who plays the role of the bad lot as seen by...
his daughter Hortense, the narrator: she reads the father’s personal diary, passed on to her by François (the uncle of her lover Samuel, both of whom are Jewish). She discovers that her father was apparently a collaborator who had taken part in the looting of Jewish property and who had also joined the SS. It turns out, however, that the diary is a fake, invented wholesale by Samuel’s uncle. The structure of the text remains relatively complex, with split narratives and flashbacks, the presence of a child as a focalizing character and a female narrator who interpolates an episode recounting a visit to San Salvador. The use of different typefaces increases the “broken” character of the text, thus reflecting the psychological anguish of the narrator who finds she has become a prisoner of the inquiry she is conducting into her father’s life:

A construction site! that’s what we are, a site for the erection of some kind of witches’ sabbath! And in the end it will be language itself that will bury us all, I wish I could experience everything so I could tell you everything, death included, that bellowing of consciousness as it is burned alive, words are executioners, syntax has drilled its way into our skull! (244)

In *Chaos*, the narrator’s brother makes away with the grandfather’s manuscript: as a result, “its disappearance blocks all means of access to the family heritage” (101–2). What is more, the narrator finds that he has to lie in order to cover up for his brother. Likewise, in Alain Nadaud’s *La Fonte des glaces (The Melting of the Ice)* (2000), the grandfather’s dossier, “bought at a sky-high price” in a hurry, turns out to be “truncated or composed of dubious documents. The moment the pages are put back in their right order, the fact becomes obvious: none of these archives is an original” (41). In this way, not only is the very notion of a written document heavily invested with inauthenticity, thus indirectly shifting the debate to the question of fiction, but the narrator is deceived and abused. This theme, in its feminine aspect, is also endowed with a sexual sense. Horsita, the imaginary double of the female narrator in the novel of that name, has been raped: the abuse thus spreads from mind to body, driving the subject as a whole to a point where it faces possible destruction. A similar situation occurs in Sylvie Germain’s *L’Enfant Méduse (The Medusa Child)* (1991), which we shall be considering later. As it happens, what is in the news in the late 1990s suggests a connection with literature here. Thus, for example, many a story, from Christine Angot’s to Annie Ernaux’s, was inspired by media coverage of incest and violence to minors. With the figure of the brother for Germain, and more generally the
figure of the father, the site of authority and power is wholly overthrown and obliterated.

In Catherine Cusset’s *La Haine de la famille*, which is less parodic than *Chaos* and less experimental in its writing than *Horsita*, it is the mother who, in chapter V (“1943”), appears in the guise of a cheat. She capitalizes on the fact that she was apparently “semi”-traumatized by the arrest of her own mother—in other words, the grandmother of the female narrator. The grandmother herself is treated as a hero, whereas the mother is thoroughly ridiculed. In contrast to the female family line (and one should recall that the transmission of Jewishness passes through the maternal line), the father is “of French stock.” He is derisively presented as “apolitical,” even though he worked for the “fascist paper *Gringoire.*”

These novels are very much in harmony, as it happens, with the 1990s, the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and they respond more or less explicitly to the reference points of a horizon of expectation dominated by the memorial and by the question of the victims. It is in this broader context that we must now consider this “recent literature.”

*“Social Discourse” and Its Effects*

Family questions and secrets over three generations; the genocide of the Jews as “memorial news” (*actualité mémorielle*), with denial as its corollary; the written text as fake; a critique of the blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality and a calling into question of literary illusion; even incest and crimes within the family—such are the problematic concerns that many recent novels share with the current (*actuel*) horizon of expectation. Satisfying that expectation generally means causing no upsets and no disappointments, conjuring up prospects of consolation and redemption, if only by showing that life is possible “afterwards.” The observation that literary texts are tuned in to the horizon of expectation is corroborated by the fact that these writers are highly permeable to what Marc Angenot has called “social discourse.”13 They borrow from it both its memorial lexicon and the historical references that motivate and shape it. One even finds, recurring from one text to another, little standard scenarios, narrative micro-models as it were, that reinforce the process of historical connotation. Among these are the opposition between a “Resistance” and a “collaborationist” past; the looting of Jewish goods, which occupied the front pages in the 1990s in the form of the scandal of Nazi gold reported to be held in Swiss banks; the stereotypes
There is thus an important distinction to be made when it comes to recent works. Texts that are permeable to the mood of the day and the impact of fashions exploit the news value (*actualité*) of memory, whereas those that operate by means of memorial renewal (*actualisation*) translate what took place into terms that are compatible with the present time; the object of such translation is that the process of transmission should have its effect, yet without giving rise to the belief that a permanent, successful act of mourning is possible where crimes have been committed that bordered on the very limit of what is human, attempting to destroy it root and branch. The news value of memory is a vast cultural phenomenon that always seems to stifle the energies of memorial renewal, if only because it is always inclined to chatter, whereas genuine transmission requires silences and intervals for reflection.

Perhaps as a result of the interaction between the public news value (*actualité*) of memory and an ethics of transmission, the conditions under which memorial references are reorganized undergo an evolution. The memorial paradigm is flexible, nourished and energized by the tensions between different memories, which in turn proliferate with the emergence of discourses of recognition, demands for justice, and the bringing to light of stretches of history repressed by the political authorities. Although in France the memory of Algeria is present in a number of novels (e.g., Clémence Boulouque’s *Sujets libres* [*Free Subjects*] of 2005), it is the 1914–18 war that has acquired the greatest news value (*actualité*) in the domain of the novel. Published a year before Sébastien Japrisot’s *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (*A Very Long Engagement*) (1991), Jean Rouaud’s *Les Champs d’honneur* (1990) was certainly a text that anticipated the relaunch of this theme; a considerable number of historical studies on the subject were also published in the 1990s, writing the First World War into the archive of the twentieth century as one of the greatest crimes of the modern world.

At times, the exercise of writing attempts to expose a genealogy of crime. For example, in *Les Champs d’honneur*, the horror of the scene where soldiers are gassed on the front, north of Ypres, provides a premonition of “the future death-camps” (146). Other examples include references to Buchenwald (157) or the firebombing of Dresden (173) in the closing pages of the same author’s *Des Hommes illustres* (*Of Illustrious Men*). François Bon, in *Buzon’s Crime*, also interpolates the following reference, although it is foreign to the plot: “The gas was a can thrown at human height, the corpses had been burnt by human hands . . .” (46). At other times, the writer’s personality gives way to the narcissistic attractions of an easy audience response. “Tomorrow, on
Tuesday, she will be eight months old. I know: when she came out, it was from me. It was horrifying. A thousand times worse than Auschwitz,” writes Christine Angot at the beginning of Léonore, toujours (Leonora, Forever) (12). And two-thirds of the way through, one finds this: “Last night I dreamt of a German called Angst who had been raped. The Jews had taken him prisoner, then tortured him. Since my father, my dreams have become perverted. [. . . ]” (103), and it continues in the same way, following a script that is half sadomasochistic, half incestuous. As a more recent example of these effects of fashion, one may cite Amélie Nothomb’s Acide sulfurique (Sulphuric Acid) (2005), where the system of the concentration camps, with its matriculation numbers and its kapos, constitutes the semantic universe of the novel. One may well ask whether history at large, the history of the “great” crimes and wars, is not in some sense conscripted here as a decor within which to approach the central anthropological question of the suffering body.

Philippe Claudel, with his Les Âmes grises (Grey Souls) (2003), which won the Renaudot Prize, is one of the latest authors so far to have been inspired by the Great War. Situated behind the front lines, his novel features the sor did murder of a little girl and a police investigation. The author thus displays his ability to listen with particular attention to the “sensitive” themes that are carried by the media and on which, in the process, the pathos of the moment is focused. Sylvie Germain draws on the Christological theme par excellence of the suffering that is written on the body, at the interface between individual and collective crime, and situates it in the perspective of the disappearance of the body. In her novel L’Enfant méduse (The Medusa Child) (1991), the 1939–45 war is present only in the background, but it determines the reflection on violence and its transmission that is carried by the story as a whole. Lucie Daubigné is a quiet, innocent child up to the day when her elder half-brother Ferdinand begins to crucify her. Hesubjects her to ritual rape and reduces her to such a state of moral and physical degradation (she turns into a thin, ugly creature, filled with hate) that she shuts herself away in her secret shame. It turns out not only that the father of the (half-) brother was killed at the front but also that his body was smashed to pieces by a shell. “Lieutenant Morrogues’s death could not be doubted, yet his corpse did not exist” (85). Brought up by his mother to believe in the sacredness of his striking resemblance to his father, Ferdinand becomes a “living tomb” (78) to his father’s memory and thereby a monster. The irreversible disappearance of bodies was given a new meaning by the genocide of the Jews, which from then on became established as the cultural prism through which it was possible to interpret, or reinterpret, every disappearance of a body.

Sylvie Germain’s many books include a biographical essay on Etty
Hillesum and, more recently, a story with a Nazi background, Magnus (2005). Since the beginning of her career, she has thus been asking the same question: can an inheritance that comes out of the void be anything other than pathogenic? Can it produce anything other than monsters? It becomes clear, then, that one strand (but not all) of the literature of our day is capable of taking responsibility for transmission by giving currency to the questions that haunt our civilization—or by giving its ghosts the form of a question, thus opening up the possibility of comprehension. The issues of radical violence that are peculiar to the modern world have been so powerfully brought into focus in our day by the genocide of the Jews that authors seem irresistibly drawn to integrating it into their narrative or even using it as their subject matter. This is the case with Philippe Claudel’s Rapport de Brodeck (Brodeck’s Report) (2007) and in particular Clémence Boulouque’s Nuit ouverte (Open Night) (2007). Among the other factors (both events and discourse) that have undoubtedly set in motion these memorial associations, there can be no doubt that the Rwanda genocide of 1994 and the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia (1992–95), the Srebrenica massacre, for example, have played an important part. The “disappeared” of the Argentinean dictatorship should also be taken into account. But they too are often interpreted with a reference to the Shoah somewhere in the background.

3. Was My Grandfather a Nazi?

The narrative schema we have been considering and the approach that underpins it become unavoidable for a considerable number of sons and grandsons from the country where it all began, Germany. In that sense, the title of the book by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, “Opa war kein Nazi” (“Grandpa Wasn’t a Nazi”), exemplifies the impulse that one might describe as an awakening of consciousness leading to a desire to investigate the past. In this instance, instead of a fictional inquiry conceived by a French writer, as with Denis Lachaud’s J’apprends l’allemand (German Lessons) of 1998, one encounters an approach in which a tension is established between fictional projection and autobiography, as, for example, in In den Augen meines Großvaters (In My Grandfather’s Eyes) by Thomas Medicus, a German born in 1953. The author came of age just after the consciousness-raising movement that, in Germany after 1968, incited children violently to denounce their fathers’ Nazi past. His grandfather had been the only Wehrmacht general to be killed in Italy: “A German Wehrmacht general who was fatally wounded in 1944 in a partisan ambush in Tuscany and who
bears the Italian family name Crisolli—that configuration, as complex as it was accidental, appeared to me, with all of its factual character, as the subject for a novel, as a literary challenge” (“‘Comprendre’” 93).

Various factors were responsible for Thomas Medicus’s decision to embark on this adventure, mingling the biographical, autobiographical, and fictional genres. In the first place, in 1989, after the fall of the Wall, it became easy to travel to Eastern Europe and visit Poland, where his family had settled. Second, the 1990s were of course a period of intense commemorative activity. There was the long debate on the Holocaust Monument in Berlin, and in particular, the great “Crimes of the Wehrmacht” exhibition that began in 1995 and was shown throughout Germany and Austria. This photographic exhibition might well be considered as comparable, mutatis mutandis, to the broadcasting of the television serial Holocaust in 1978. It sensitized Medicus, and many other Germans, to questions that had not been raised until then, from that point of view, about the massacres in which the Wehrmacht had taken part or which they had supported logistically on the Eastern Front. Another biographical factor is the death of Medicus’s father at age forty-nine, the same age that his grandfather died: as he reaches this critical year, Medicus is himself gripped by the fear of death. It is against this background that, in 2001, his inquiry begins.

Inquiries flourish on clues and documentary sources. “I decided to do some research on Wilhelm Crisolli and solve the enigma of his death. I had some papers in my possession” (In den Augen 54). In 1986, when his grandmother died, he received an envelope containing fifty-one photographs of his grandfather taken in Italy and Denmark. It is not until fifteen years later, encouraged by the events we have mentioned above, that Medicus exploits the potential of this material. He now begins to ask questions about the photographs. Ever since the opening sentences of Modiano’s Boulevards de ceinture (1971) or Perec’s W ou le souvenir d’enfance (1975), the photograph is recognized as one of the major topoi of memorial investigation, whether mediated by the literary text, by cinema, or by other art forms. It endorses an external narrative point of view that makes it clear that the author knows a good deal less than is hidden beneath the surface of reality, thus setting in motion—and in that sense justifying—the logic of the inquiry as a whole and of its referential grounding.

The first phase takes Medicus to Poland, where he attempts to capture the local atmosphere. Moved by a romantic impulse, he dwells more on the landscapes than on the people. In any case, claiming that his book belongs to the genre of “travel narrative,” he tells us that he sees himself as belonging to “a rich literary tradition” in which the human figure and the landscape
form “a kind of mythical unity” (“Comprendre” 88). Then the tone changes, and so does the approach. He now conducts his inquiry in Italy. He consults the military archives and meets Carlo Gentile, a historian who really exists. Where the facts are not sufficient, he entrusts himself to the powers of literary imagination (literarische Einbildungskraft) (In den Augen 235). On the technical level, he uses shifts of point of view in order to construct a plurality of perspectives. Thus he imaginatively inhabits the mind of his grandfather and proceeds to elaborate a fictional version of Crisolli’s family life. The photographs take their place here to mark the phases of the narrative and provide support for the quest, while at the same time setting aside within the realm of what can be said the unknown quotient of what can be seen. What, then, is the project around which this set of procedures is articulated?

The grandfather is present in the narrator’s life only under the auspices of death: this principle is maintained throughout, from his family’s evocations of him up to the scene where his body is transferred to a military cemetery. The object, in other words, is to elucidate the grandfather’s death, not his life. This is the reason why Medicus is not interested in the Eastern Front—at least, that is how he justifies it. The only episode included from that period is the description by a female cousin of Crisolli’s refusal to obey an order given by one of his superiors, an act of resistance that had acquired an almost mythical status (213–14, 222). One is not dealing here, then, with an attempt at biographical reconstitution, and still less with a hagiography. Medicus insists on his grandfather’s responsibility for a crime (the murder of a priest and two women) committed in Italy (193), giving him the benefit of no attenuating circumstances. He affirms unequivocally (perhaps a shade too unequivocally) that he was a criminal (Täter), citing in support the files of the twentieth Luftwaffen-Felddivision.

This parental figure whom Medicus experienced only via his disappearance provides him with traces, minimal footholds, in the backward, upstream journey of his identity as he brings it face-to-face with his genealogy, or rather his hypothetical genealogy. In that sense, the fact that his grandfather died before he was born frees him from one of the constantly recurring stereotypes of such literature and, as it were, of culture itself: the memory of the “kind old grand-dad” who bounces his grandson on his knee and then, on further inquiry, turns out to be a wicked ogre (a stereotype of which Lachaud has availed himself abundantly). If Medicus does not formulate his relation to his grandfather by way of the topos of disclaimed affection, he nonetheless recognizes a kind of idealization thwarted by fascination/repulsion (62).

The real element of the unknown concerns the subject “Medicus” (or what he will become after the age of forty-nine). "My grandfather appeared to
me as the vanishing point of my biography, towards which ran the converging lines of what I had done and what I had not done, what I have become and what I have not become” (54). Elsewhere, the technical advantage of the shifts in point of view also licenses the more ambiguous game—which Medicus plays in the mode of fictional projection, making claims to empathy—of taking the place of a murderer.

If I wanted to know as much as possible about Wilhelm Crisolli, there was only one approach I would adopt which could not be limited to the collection of mere facts. As the title of my book indicates, I risked making the experiment of discovering how the career office who was my grandfather had observed his world, and what experiences I could read in that gaze of his which I found captured in different photographic portraits. ("‘Comprendre’” 84)

One may then wonder whether one is not dealing here with a literature that achieves expression through the tension between the memorial approach and the emergence of a new autobiographical approach that handles life through the mediation of the figure of a dead person who disappeared from the scene at the age the author has reached at the moment he begins to write. That would invite one to reflect on the place of the dead person—an impossible place—as a focus for the story, as a position to occupy in order to open up the possibility of narrative and narrative as possibility. Thus the act of narration conjures into reality the possibility of an impossibility in order to give itself enough distance—for mediation always means taking one’s distance—for its own operations without wanting to turn the text into a scene of judgment. Medicus makes it quite clear that he wishes to be neither the plaintiff, nor the defendant, nor the judge. “The only role that I dared to take on was that of the investigator (Ermittler)” (In den Augen 239). To avoid making a judgment in order to understand the criminal, yet without pardoning him, is something like the approach Primo Levi proposes in order to handle the grey zone of collaboration (24–52). For Medicus, the object is to weigh up the probable and the improbable (In den Augen 245).

At the end of the book, the narrator hears that an Italian is writing a novel about a Wehrmacht general. His immediate response is to carry on with his enquiry, but then he stops and offers us instead a conclusion that enjoins reconciliation with oneself:

To see oneself reflected every day, from one year to the next, perhaps for ever, in the eyes of one’s grandfather, appeared to me not to be the most
helpful means of finding one’s way out of the labyrinth of *damnatio memoriae*, the erasure of memory. It was important to remember, but also to forget. (248)

The questioning and the inquiry are not directed primarily toward the discovery of identity; their purpose is to allay the pain of mourning. Such mourning would be not so much for the loss of a family member to whom the subject was presumably closely attached as for the historical event itself, once the subject has taken responsibility for facing up to what took place. In that sense, Crisolli could be said to have been a figure of mediation, making it possible to assume a position not in history itself, which is no longer possible, but face-to-face with the history that the inheritors never wanted.

4. A Brief, General Synthesis

Taken as a whole, these works are characterized, on the one hand, by a writing protocol that combines a complex schema with a narrative logic and, on the other, by the interaction of two kinds of temporal relation, which may also be described as questions.

Let us begin with the writing protocol. The schema in question proves in fact to be mixed, blending a narrative schema with a family schema. This composite structure enables it to serve as a prism through which the narrator, embarking on a quest for his or her own identity, may revisit his family history from the perspective of history at large, and vice versa. The writer then seeks to elucidate the identity of one of his relations; the father is often here a referential construction, one enigmatic aspect of which is linked to an experience that took place, in particular, between 1939 and 1945 and, more generally, in the course of some major historical event. The narrative logic, for its part, gives the schema its dynamic movement and its temporality: it is a logic of enquiry. Combining as it does the detective scenario with the hermeneutic quest, the enquiry focuses on the question of the crimes committed and of guilt. In the process, it brings out the influence of the narrative structures of the *roman noir* on literature in general, which in turn makes sense of these political crimes by establishing their close connection with other crimes, especially those that take place within the framework of the family (incest, the massacre of a whole family by one of its members, etc.).

The interaction of the two temporal questions is situated on an entirely different level. It allows an approach that takes as its starting point the tension between the notions of *actualité* and *actualisation*, which are two spe-
pecific modes of relation to the time of the event as referential object. The news value (actualité) of memory is a product of operative media-related and institutional factors that make memory present in an extreme degree, indeed omnipresent, in the total set of discourses that traverse the domain of the social and establish themselves as the doxa, to the point where memory becomes a recurrent frame for our vision of the world (Marc Angenot’s notion of “social discourse” is particularly appropriate here). There is a real danger that this “presentification” of memory, a specifically cultural phenomenon of which entry into the economic sphere is only one derivative form, will reify what happened or turn it into a mere cliché. More precisely, the complexity of the event itself is constantly exposed to the risk of being sacrificed to facilitate communication or indeed consumption, where “communication” means overdetermination by the constraints of reception. As we have seen, there are a considerable number of authors who rehearse these effects within their works with a greater or lesser degree of critical distance. As for actualisation, it draws on a virtually contrary logic. It consists in the labor of translating an experience with the aim of transmitting it. For even if the historical character of translations shows that the same text is translated differently from one period to another, it remains true that the criterion against which the translation is judged must always be the source text and not, as is often feared, the context of reception, which is in any case not necessarily the same as the target context. It is on the basis of this set of narrative procedures and this tension between two kinds of temporal relation that the corpus of memorial literature offers itself for interpretation.

Yet if one can establish a proximity of this kind between literature and the norms of the moment, the actualité of memory, can literature be said to retain its critical power? The reply to this question surely holds no surprises, since between doubt and certainty, the fictional and the factual, autofiction and autobiography, but also between love and hate, mourning and melancholy, this memorial literature, which is also a literature of destabilized identities, can find no definitive answers to the questions it asks. The quest does not end in the discovery of an identity, but rather serves to demonstrate, and sometimes to harness, the fragility of identity. At the same time, to come closer to one’s own identity by revisiting one’s family via history writ large is also to gain a footing in the history that is staking its claim in our day through a permanent act of remembrance. What really matters for these authors, I would argue, is to take up their position in that memory—not having participated in the events themselves—and strive to use it as a way of gaining some measure of the detachment that emotion will not allow. Perhaps it is in this tension that one may locate the resistance point of literature
to the pressure of memorial *actualité*. Perhaps it is at that exact point that literature in particular and the arts in general insert dialectic into the cultural sphere.

**Notes**

1. [Translator’s note:] The opposition between *actualité* and *actualisation*, which plays a key role in the argument of this article, cannot be translated into English as it stands while preserving the same connotations. The adjectival form *actuel* means “belonging to the present moment,” “current,” “topical”; the noun *actualité* means “current events,” and in the plural, “news” (as in “the television news”). I have attempted to preserve something of the opposition here by using the expressions “news value” and “memorial renewal”; elsewhere, I have sometimes varied these expressions to suit the context. Wherever *actualité*, *actualisation*, or (occasionally) a related word is used, I have added the French word in parentheses after the translation so that the reader can track the argument through. The opposition is lucidly redefined toward the end of the essay, so there should be no doubt about its sense and import.

2. [Translator’s note:] Translations of titles (provided only for primary sources, not for critical works and the like) are in most cases those of published versions. Where I have not been able to find a published English translation, I have translated the title myself or (as here) used a plausible version from an Internet site. No translation is given for titles consisting only of names or of words having the same meaning in English. Translations of titles are provided only at the first mention of the work. Where a text is quoted, I have provided the page reference for the original version, not the translation. All translations of quoted passages are my own.

3. See Doubrovsky.
4. See Donzelot; de Singly; Attias-Donfut, Lapierre, and Segalen.
5. On the “mode rétro” and its relation to memories of the Occupation in France, see Rousso, 149–56.
6. “Earlier drafts began differently: with flight—when the child was almost sixteen—or with the attempt to describe the work of memory as a crabwalk, as a laborious backwards movement” (Wolf 11).
7. [Translator’s note:] Perec is punning here on the name of the letter “h” in French, which is a homonym of the French word for “axe”: thus literally, “History with its capital ‘H’ / with its great axe.”
8. See Lejeune 89ff.
10. [Translator’s note:] The reference here is to a scene at the beginning of Stendhal’s novel *La Chartreuse de Parme* (The Charterhouse of Parma).
11. See Hirsch.
12. This sentence does not appear in the English edition, which was written (and revised in places) by Klüger herself.
13. See Angenot 13ff. In defining “social discourse,” Marc Angenot explains that it is
a question of the “generic systems,” the “repertoires of topics,” the “sequence rules for utterances that, in a given society, organise the sayable—what can be narrated and asserted [the narratable and assertable]—and guarantee the discursive division of labour” (13ff.). In the pages that follow, he insists in particular on the “generalized and hegemonic interactive features of [social discourse].” If social discourse may easily be seen as analogous to ideology, there is nonetheless a difference: the meanings that it carries outstrip both in quantity and in organization those circulated by ideology and introduce cultural elements that are not subject to ideology’s surveillance.

14. It is therefore necessary here to make a critical reassessment of what some call “competition between victims” (concurrence de victimes), with particular reference to Jean-Michel Chaumont’s book (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), which uses the phrase as its title. If there may sometimes be rivalry and conflict (terms that do not connote the market as “competition” does), these are only epiphenomena of memorial historicity itself, which functions by a differentiation of memories one from the other and, in the process, by creating an effect of stimulation, promotes mourning and rationalization in a society historically marked by violence.

15. Hillesum was a young Dutch Jew, an intellectual, who was deported to Auschwitz in 1943 and subsequently died there. She is well known for her diary, Het verstoorde leven (An Interrupted Life).

Works Cited


