



## From the novel-History to the micro- historical inquiry A selective study of Patrick Modiano's work\*

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THE writing of history takes an increasingly central place in the novel of the end of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Novels like *The Company of Ghosts* by Lydie Salvayre, *Murder in Memoriam* by Didier Daeninckx, *None of us will return* by Charlotte Delbo, *Black Coat* by Chantal Chawaf, *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell, *Brodeck* by Patrick Claudel or *HHhH* by Laurent Binet investigate themes such as war, the Occupation, the Holocaust – put it another way, the most significant subjects of the history of the past century. However, in the contemporary novel, writing history may not necessarily be the same as writing a historical novel. Each of these authors chooses a singular aesthetic for their transcription of history which can at times take the work of the same writer. This is what we perceive in the novels of Modiano. Writing of the French Occupation during the Second World War is what characterizes a large part of Patrick Modiano's work. His texts are indeed an interrogation and a permanent search for the past of his paternal lineage, but also the past in the collective sense. Notwithstanding the transcription of history in *La Place de l'Etoile* (1968), *La Ronde de Nuit* (1969), *Les Boulevards de ceinture* (1971), and *Dora Bruder* (1997), these texts are far from the traditional historical novel.

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Indeed, in these novels, the historicization of fiction is done by forms of writing that differ from that of the historical novel. If the latter represents the major events by a general projection of notorious personages, in Modiano's novels, the prominent historical personages are present only to accentuate the life of the marginalized and the forgotten in the History, such as Dora Bruder, the eponymous character of Modiano's book. Moreover, while in a historical novel the diegesis takes place prior to the enunciation, the story of the Modiano's novels dates back only three years before his birth. In addition, unlike the precise spatio-temporal indications that historical novels provide the reader from the beginning, his works generally lack the defined spatio-temporal markings. Nonetheless, Modiano's documentation work is close to the practices of the authors of historical novels.

Apparently, the recourse to history does not take into account the representation of the world as its principal aim. If this French novelist talks about the Occupation and collaboration, his goal is not to resurrect these events. In other words, his texts identify with the social science literature of which Ivan Jablonka speaks in *History Is a Contemporary Literature: Manifesto for the Social Sciences*: a literature trying to tell the truth instead of inventing stories. With an epistemological aim, each of Modiano's works is a research around a questioning which the author regards as primordial. Therefore, his first novels are "history novels", not because they tell historical events, but because they invite the reader to think about the versions of the official History instead of representing or re-creating the already-occurred events. As for *Dora Bruder*, a novel about a long and detailed investigation on the tracks of a young deported girl who died in Auschwitz, which possesses minimal fictional elements, it identifies rather with a "text-search" or a "micro-historical inquiry" akin to what Calro Ginzburg does in *The Cheese and the Worms* or Ivan Jablonka in *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had*. Nevertheless, the Modianian research does not lead to a definitive answer. It is indeed the inquiry of the truth (research) that is a priority for this author, not the results achieved.

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