CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Memory, Friendship, and History in Au revoir les enfants

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'A haunting and timeless truth.'
– Louis Malle (1988: v)

Louis Malle's 1987 film about a childhood wartime memory that had haunted him for forty years proves as disturbing and powerful for audiences thirty years after its release as it was in its initial run, evoking the essential reciprocity of personal and historical memory across the cinematic field. Hugo Frey characterises this work by calling Malle 'a memorial activist ... a filmmaker who repeatedly engage[s] with the meaning of the past' (2004: 90). French audiences of the 1980s were, for the most part, still embroiled in the arguments and contradictions of the Occupation, while contemporary audiences often see both times, the 1940s and the 1980s, as distant historical moments whose evocative resonances barely whisper to them. And yet the power of intense experience combined with distanced yet compassionate observation, enlightened by the revelation of newly significant historical information, is capable of transcending time and crossing generations. Most of the film is a recognisable New Wave-like representation of childhood friendship, maternal attachment, curiosity and youthful bonding, while the last few sequences wake us from our nostalgic reverie to face the cold historical truth of the Final Solution and Vichy France's eager participation in it.

Audience familiarity with the exact events is not necessary, yet the historical and symbolic specificity of this film makes it extremely timely and relevant. It challenges us with our own questions of conscience and moral obligation at a time when these are continually and excruciatingly called into question. The film is set in January of 1944 at a Catholic boarding school near Fontainebleau; Malle's statement in voice-over at the film's close comes from somewhere between New York (as per the preface to the screenplay), Paris and Le Coual, in 1987. Referring to the sight of his denounced Jewish friend being marched away by the Gestapo he states: 'Over forty years have passed, but I will remember every second of that January morning until the day I die.' With this poignant personal intervention, the fictive spell is broken and fictional narrative becomes evidentiary document of a very specific past, and a warning for the future. Story becomes History and personal reflection becomes a social and moral call to action. Likewise, film spectatorship is transformed from passive absorption in a compelling narrative to active engagement with issues in contemporary history.

The film opens at the Paris Lyon train station where young Julien Quentin (Gaspard Manesse) delivers an emotional farewell to his mother, as students returning from winter vacation board the waiting train. A subtle irony is set up as Madame Quentin waves to them and says 'Bonjour les enfants', something that will trace the distance between the relatively minor separation anxiety of this bourgeois kid and the very tragic separation (preceded by other invisible separations) of the ending, where the phrase that titles the film 'Au revoir les enfants' – uttered by Père Jean as he accompanies his three charges to their, and his own, deaths – punctuates the overwhelming and memorable sadness of the scene. It is clear from the very beginning of the film, and by the preponderance of close-ups, that this is Julien's story; the fact that he is a proxy for Malle himself, although surmised, is only established with certainty by the ending quote. With this opening we are thus plunged into the world of adolescent boys, and every attendant activity, though occurring against the backdrop of the Nazi occupation of France and its Vichy counterpart near the end of the War, seems ordinary enough. Yet we notice, with a subtle sense of dread, that the varied signs of this Occupation will coalesce as the historical details (redolent of the vicious ideology and hatred characteristic of the era) move from simple background to motivating foreground and transform the story of innocence and joyful exuberance into one of unwitting betrayal and brutal cruelty, and thus into an iconic representation of the age. By the end of the film it is not only Julien's story, but also that of the hidden Jewish children, and beyond that, the story of a generation's tragedy that is ours as well.

A short summary of the action will help to trace this evolution. Once maternal goodbyes are said, the film's credits appear over the movement of the train, as a forlorn Julien watches the landscape speed by. This will create a parallel with the ending close-up of a devastated Julien, suddenly and painfully aware of the unspeakable cruelty of the world as he now sees it, while Malle as the director attests to the power of that vivid memory, thus integrating the represented self with the actual self, and historical catastrophe with personal trauma. The opening credits end with a dedication, as the young students march past a sign designating 'Carmelite Convent. School of Saint John of the Cross', and Malle's own children are evoked: 'For Cuotemoc, Justine et Chloë.' These credits, signs of authorship and production, will disappear until the film's end, when Malle makes his final statement, one that brings us back to the reality outside of the world of the film, and emphasises the central place of children in the Malle oeuvre, this time in the context of historical awareness. In an interview Malle has said that he feels that today's young generation can relate very well to the context of 1944: 'It gave me hope, because I could suddenly see that children of today watching this film would

be seized by what was going on…' (French 1993: 178). Malle thus forges a revised cinematic relation to history, one in which moral, ethical and political imperatives combine to create a new kind of film spectatorship through the powerful evocation of a distant past with crucial implications for the present and the future.

Almost as soon as Julien arrives at the school he is introduced to one of three new boys that the headmaster, Père Jean (Philippe Morier-Genoud), has brought in – a young, fairly awkward, quiet boy named Jean Bonnet (Raphaël Fejtö), who is immediately taunted by the others. He's a stranger in their midst, but Julien's participatory hostility gradually turns to curiosity and then to friendship, as the two grow closer by degrees until the catastrophic final scenes. Within the relatively enclosed spaces of the school (the classroom, the dormitory, the refectory, the schoolyard, the air-raid cellar, the chapel) – except for a number of forays into the village, including the public bathhouse, lunch at a fancy restaurant, and one frightening event amid the boulders of the Fontainebleau park – the film gives a fairly accurate representation of the daily life and adolescent energy of the boarding school. It is a world apart, where the safety of ritual and the commonality of experience offer a kind of protective shield for the more disturbing considerations of the age. But this atmosphere functions really as authenticating background for what becomes the heart of the story: Julien's recognition of Jean's Jewish identity (and its significance, retrospectively determined, in history). From that point on, in the middle of the film, the narrative gradually transforms its focus from Julien's experience to historical reflection.

In 1987 the issue of 'hidden children', those Jewish boys and girls who sought protection from extermination by assuming false identities either with compassionate families or with those who sought to profit from the crisis, was barely acknowledged. The first International Conference of Hidden Children took place in New York City in 1991, four years after the film came out. Most who participated thought their experience was unique; the conference changed that and gave way to organisations that encouraged accounts of the now-grown children about their experiences in hiding. In 1987 the few references to this phenomenon were absorbed in Holocaust literature, but Malle's choice to make this film acknowledges his political commitment, as a non-Jew, to this widespread, yet fairly unknown situation. Of course, the fate of some hidden children was much worse – most of those discovered or denounced perished in Auschwitz, with no one left to tell their stories. Malle gives voice to at least one of these, in the context of his own personal revelation. And what he conveys in making the film is his own horror as a child which gave him the desire to become a filmmaker: 'In 1942, we would see children my age wearing the yellow star. I would ask, 'Why? Why him and not me?' No one had a good answer. From that moment on, I felt that the world of adults was one of injustice, deception, false explanations, hypocrisy and lies [...]. And following that morning in January, when Bonnet left, the feeling became a certitude' (Insdorf 2003: 91)

The growing importance of the Holocaust imprint on this childhood memory finds concrete expression as the film progresses. And the film which, as noted, seems to be at first glance about childhood innocence and its loss becomes a narrative of historically tragic proportions. As the friendship between Julien and this mysterious boy

Fig. 1: *Au revoir les enfants* (1987): Jean and Julien wrapped in blankets.

warms, the reality of the hostile threat becomes more visible. The thread of increasing reference to the anti-Semitic attitudes that undergird the Holocaust gains prominence. This can be traced in the film through a set of subtle and symbolic clusters in categories beginning with the letter M: Mothers, Memento, Milice, Movies, Music, Murder and Memory. Either they are foregrounded in specific events or situations, or they are alluded to across the text, creating a symbolic network of references that become central to the film's meaning.

Mothers

The most obvious examples of the Mother are the farewell scenes of Julien and his elegant haute bourgeoisie mother (played by Francine Racette). More than once he buries his head in her ample fur, expresses the need to be near her (and she for him), and articulates his adulation through the somewhat desperate appeals. Yet to the fullness of Mme Quentin's presence to her son and her avowals of a similar desire to be together, we can contrast the absence of Jean Bonnet's mother, alluded to in short conversations that subtly suggest the tragedy of most Jewish mothers of the Holocaust, something even Holocaust literature itself tends to elide, with its focus on surviving children, and the scarcity of available maternal writing. Here, however, a letter falls from Jean's desk, and an unresponsive Julien reads it. The poignant tones of Julien's dispassionate voice-over ironise the tenderness of the text: 'My little darling, as you'll understand, it is very hard for me to write to you. Monsieur D. is going to Lyon and has offered to mail this letter. Your aunt and I are going out as little as possible.' Julien responds with an unfeeling 'your mother's up to something', as the reality of hunted Jews in hiding has not yet taken hold of him. Later in a completely innocuous and

friendly exchange, the privileged Julien tells Jean about the skill of his family cook, Adrienne. But he doesn't understand the absence of a family cook for Jean who sets him straight by stating that his mother, who does all the family cooking, is a very good cook, while the enormity of the tragedy of Jewish families is evoked under the surface. Family cooking is one of the ways in which Jewish culture is transmitted, the way it surrounds its young. Jewish cooking can suggest a familial embrace and in this context it is a sign of an impossible longing.

Memento

A reminder of the past, a keepsake. Late one night Julien awakens to see Jean place two candles on his bed and say a prayer in a foreign language: *Baruch Atah Adonai...* This evokes the candle-lighting ceremony performed every Friday night in Jewish families for the Sabbath. The meal is central, there are flowers and special dishes, the family is around the dining table, and the table becomes a sort of secular altar. Deriving from the fourth Biblical commandment, 'Remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy', it is meant to be a celebration of the family through a weekly observance. 'The Joy of Sabbath' is the title that Leon Ringelblum used for his documentation of Jewish life in the Warsaw ghetto contrasting optimistic humanism with murderous brutality. The Sabbath designates a day separate from usual daily activities and is especially seen as a time of familial togetherness. These resonances are unknown, even strange, to Julien but those familiar with Sabbath customs will understand the longing attached to the ritual and the drive toward preservation that Jean performs. Nevertheless, this is after the discovery of Jean's real name and provides further confirmation of an affinity in spite of strangeness; Julien's curiosity is piqued and his sense of connection to this 'outsider' grows. In speaking of this sequence, Malle confirms that he didn't see it himself, but was told about it by someone who did. Skeptics will point out that true hidden children did not dare make their religion visible; however, Malle's interest in including this scene attests to the affirmative portrait of Jewish identity in the context of the widespread cultural anti-Semitism of the War years, and Julien and Jean's growing affinity in spite of different religious backgrounds and their contrasting cultural acceptance.

Milice

The oversised black berets of the Milice, the French fascist police force formed in 1943, make their emphatic appearance in the fashionable restaurant, 'Le Grand Cerf'. A French paramilitary organisation created by the Vichy regime ostensibly in order to combat the French Resistance, their xenophobic stance allows them to harass Jews in the name of patriotism. The appearance of these men here, a demonstration of the servile collaboration associated with this group, is solely to exercise the ill-gotten authority by terrorising an elegant Jewish diner. 'Madame, we serve France, our country. This man has insulted us.' Patriotism is evoked in defense of an extreme reaction to the very presence of a Jew, demonstrating the ideology of racial elimination contained in French policy, and it foreshadows the fate of Jean and his two compatriots. The display

of cold hatred nevertheless allows the Quentin family to express a kind of solidarity with Jews, something that Jean silently observes, while the dynamics of the power-wielding French Right provide an occasion for some drunken Wehrmacht soldiers to feign gallantry. By this time, we know about Jean's dark secret, and Malle gently alludes to the atmosphere of terror evoked for this hidden child. The theatrical quality of the episode also affords an opportunity to relate several points of view regarding the Jews in France: Mme Quentin espouses a quasi-liberal view, although she still abhors Jewish Socialist leader (and former President of the Council) Léon Blum; others in the restaurant challenge the Milice and side with the Jewish gentleman. Malle also foregrounds the incipient anti-Semitism of the fascist social culture, something that will be played out tragically at the film's end.

Movies

As an antidote to this dynamic scene of tension, and after the maternal visit with its promises of a future reunion at Mardi Gras (and more subtle contrasts between the childhood realities of the two boys), a diversion planned as an amusement by the monks takes place. After some fiddling with the unfamiliar equipment, the whole school settles down to watch a projection of Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* to the musical accompaniment by Mlle. Davenne and M. Florent who play a Rondo Cappriccio by Saint-Saëns. The primitive viewing conditions, the benches, the equipment, the makeshift score, do not mitigate the pure joy that this movie brings its audience. Although they have presumably seen it many times, Chaplin's gentle comedy mixed with pathos enthralls children and adults alike. All join in shared laughter, in a momentary utopian vision of community. Even the besieged kitchen helper, Joseph, seated next to Père Jean in a stunning portrait of contrasts, laugh together; '[It] is a tender moment, a moment of forgetfulness' (Malle 1988: 65). But it is a forgetfulness tinged with longing for the two hidden children (shown in close-up) whose vision of freedom evoked by the Statue of Liberty will never be realised. The Chaplin film continues as the ship full of immigrants sails into New York Harbor, and Malle emphasises, in dreamy, poignant close-ups, the doomed faces of two of the hidden children, Jean and Negus, contrasting with the eager, aspirational wonder of Julien, whose world is still one of possibilities. It is hard to ignore the unexpected symbolism of the Statue of Liberty in *The Immigrant*, as it reverberates beyond the film-within-the-film to show its audience the possibility of freedom that exists at the margins of the contemporary crisis. It also suggests Malle's renewed perspective on his homeland as he crafts his fiction from his own position as 'immigrant' in New York City.

Music

The friendship between Julien and Jean finally solidifies, joyfully, around music. At first, earlier in the film, Jean's proficiency with a piano sonata by Schubert earns the admiration of the music teacher Mlle Davenne (Irène Jacob) and the resentment of the untalented student (in this case), Julien. It establishes something of a cliché, although

over at the end of the film and instills a humanist commitment to social values that marks his filmmaking career.

Memory

Until fairly recently, and certainly a decade or two after *Au revoir les enfants*, the situation of hidden children in France seemed like a secondary, if compelling, tributary to World War II histories. It is only with the increased revelation of the tragedy known as the Vel' d'Hiv – named for the Winter Cycling Stadium in Paris where, on 16/17 July 1942, Jewish families were rounded up by French police and held for a week with neither food nor water until transported to Pithiviers or Drancy on their way to certain death in Auschwitz – that the tragedy of Jewish children was highlighted. This was the first time that whole families were arrested, and it made the danger for every Jewish child palpable. Malle himself refers to the widespread knowledge of this event, and he was only twelve at the time. Most did not know exactly what would happen to the Jews in the East, but they certainly knew that it was tragic. The revelation has been gradual but forceful, and the emphasis on the tragedy of the children as well as on the collective responsibility of the French nation has intensified, including at the highest level of the State.

Memory is the catalyst for Malle's return to France, its form is the film *Au revoir les enfants*. When he revisited this very vivid school time memory he reworked the raw material of recollection with the contributions of other witnesses, others who had been in or around the school at the time. He was not interested in a detailed documentation of events, but rather in the reconstruction of the emotional impact of the situation of shock, plumbing its historical significance from the distance of decades in order to give the viewer a visceral experience of history, to renew compassion. In saying 'Memory is not frozen, it's very much alive, it moves, it changes' (French 1993: 167), he refers to his own process, the working through of what was personally traumatic into a historically and emotionally significant film. He started work on the film from the last sequences, the most vivid to him, and tried to avoid sentimentality and cliché. Of the authorial intervention at the end he says: 'These lines were the first thing I wrote before I even started the screenplay. [...] [The] fact that I would inject my own voice – suddenly jumping forty years – that was my intention. [...] I knew it *had* to be my voice. I thought it was important for people watching the film to understand at the end that this story was a true story and actually came directly from my memory' (French 1993: 181, 182). Memory as authenticating instance, without the visual cues or dreamy reflections that indicate a cinematic past. This is the method that Louis Malle has chosen in order to create the impact and visceral experience of history and the contemporary renewal of commitment and compassion. Free of any restrictive category of film (childhood, New Wave, personal reflection, Holocaust film) and yet partaking of all of them, *Au revoir les enfants* engages our own sense of responsibility in the face of evil and encourages us to confront that evil, to welcome it so that we might enact change.

Fig. 3: *Au revoir les enfants*: Farewell as Remembrance.

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