Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 23
Issue 1 *Empire and Occupation in France and
the Francophone Worlds*

Article 2

1-1-1999

Between L'Irréparable and l'Irrepérable: Subject to the Past

Downing Thomas
University of Iowa

Steven Ungar
University of Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>

Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Downing and Ungar, Steven (1999) "Between L'Irréparable and l'Irrepérable: Subject to the Past," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1451>

This Introductory Material is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Between L'Irréparable and l'Irreparable: Subject to the Past

Abstract

This issue of STCL grew from papers presented at a conference, "Memory in Context: Occupation and Empire in France and the Francophone World," held at the University of Iowa in April, 1996...

Keywords

colonialism, colonial identity, postcolonial identity, hexagonal France, historical studies, literary studies, 1940-44 occupation, power, discourse, identity, memory, l'irréparable, l'irreparable, resoration

Between *L'Irréparable* and *l'Irreparable*:
Subject to the Past

Downing Thomas and Steven Ungar
University of Iowa

This issue of *STCL* grew from papers presented at a conference, "Memory in Context: Occupation and Empire in France and the Francophone World," held at the University of Iowa in April, 1996. The conference was organized by five UI colleagues who wanted to explore three areas of inquiry related to modern France: 1) the 1940-44 occupation period, 2) the transition from colonial to postcolonial identities and continued relations between "hexagonal" France and the "Francophone" world, and 3) issues of method and modes of inquiry in historical and literary studies. Speakers were invited to address the interplay of various practices across different media and cultural groups, an interplay out of which France's recent past has resurfaced in modes of recovery ranging from commemoration to scandal.

The essays chosen for this special issue also contribute to the rethinking of French Studies—as opposed to the discrete categories of literature, French civilization, and French history—that we sought to foster through collaboration across conventional academic disciplines. While scrutinizing the modes of inquiry through which scholars examine historical memory, this volume explores questions of power, discourse, identity, and memory that are common to the two topical sections on the Occupation and on colonial/postcolonial issues.

The kindred notions of *l'irréparable* and *l'irreparable* are an appropriate place to begin since they evoke the historical grounding from which we and our colleagues have worked. *L'irréparable* describes that which is tainted and therefore cannot be restored, remedied, mended, or returned to a state of previous well-being.

L'irréparable defines a state of loss, naming an object or event that cannot be located, situated, or recognized. If *l'irréparable* evokes past events through present reckonings, *l'irréparable* describes a state more indefinite, less intelligible. The contributors to section one on occupation attempt to recover or at least to remind us of what was—or may remain—*irréparable*, even though the events they analyze may remain *irréparable*. In the section on empire, however, though its effects may pertain to *l'irréparable* as well as to *l'irréparable*, the essays restore or otherwise reestablish values and memories in the wake of empire, to resituate that which had been obfuscated, dislocated, or destroyed.

It is no coincidence that the term *l'irréparable* was used in 1995 by French President Jacques Chirac and again in 1997 by newly appointed Prime Minister Lionel Jospin to characterize the responsibility of the French authorities in the July 1942 *rafle du Vel' d'Hiv* that led to the deportation and death of thousands of Jews. Instead of refusing or failing to acknowledge French participation, as former President François Mitterrand had done, Jospin conceded that “this roundup was decided on, planned, and carried out by Frenchmen.” In a complete reversal of Mitterrand’s position, Jospin went as far as to declare that “not a single German soldier was necessary to accomplish this deed” (*Libération* July 21, 1997, 11). These statements reveal an explicit will to come to terms with a past that is felt to be almost beyond reach because those who lived it are mostly gone.

Jospin’s declaration could also be seen as an attempt to redefine the legacy of the French Socialist Party, particularly in relation to Mitterrand’s ambiguous postwar dealings with René Bousquet, which Richard J. Golsan mentions below. After the inability of the French justice system to contend adequately with the events of the 1940s, often for reasons clearly beyond its control as in the case of Bousquet’s preemptive assassination, Jospin’s remarks echo the general anticipation that surrounded the October 1997 trial of another major wartime figure, Maurice Papon. By raising the specter of *l'irréparable*, Chirac and Jospin demonstrate the extent to which memory—what Jospin invoked as “des lieux de mémoire, un temps de mémoire” ‘places for remembering, a time for remembering’—constitutes the political present and future in relation to an unresolved past. As Phillip Watts reminds us in his essay, memory is not simply the antithesis of forgetting (nor is history the antithesis of fiction), but can operate in multiple directions, recasting the past as it explains the present and prepares the future.

The case of Lucie and Raymond Aubrac, prominent Resistance leaders from Lyon, raises a set of questions linked more directly to *l'irreparable*. On May 17, 1997, the Aubracs met with a panel of historians (Daniel Cordier, François Bédarida, Jean-Pierre Azéma, Henry Rousso, Laurent Douzou, Dominique Veillon, Jean-Pierre Vernant, and Maurice Agulhon) with the goal of producing a more coherent picture of their participation in certain events of the Resistance. The roundtable had been motivated by two recent characterizations of the Aubracs that are diametrically opposed: 1) Claude Berri's feature film glorifying their role in the Resistance, and 2) Gérard Chauvy's book, *Aubrac, Lyon 1943* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), that questions their acts of resistance by publishing *in extenso* Barbie's 1990 "testament," written by his lawyer, Jacques Vergès, in which the Aubracs are accused of betraying the Resistance. While the panel of historians found both Barbie's "testament" and Berri's film of little interest as historical *repères*, several points remained unclear.

One of these concerns whether or not Barbie, who had arrested and held Aubrac, had discovered that he was a prominent leader of the *Armée secrète*. The problem arose because Aubrac provided two official answers to that question: the first, given to counter-espionage agents in London in February, 1944, according to which Barbie had identified him as Aubrac (alias Vallet, alias Ermelin); the second, another official inquiry in Algiers in June of the same year, during which he said that he had not been identified as Aubrac. François Bédarida, along with the others, wondered "how a man like you, having so much self-control . . . can have oscillated endlessly between saying either, 'No, I was not recognized to be Aubrac,' or 'Yes, I was' " (*Libération*, "Les Aubrac et les historiens," July 9, 1997, xviii). Aubrac repeatedly insisted that he could not explain the discrepancy and that the inconsistency had no explanation: "There is no rational explanation for that; it's a memory lapse" (xvii).

None of the historians was seeking to discredit the Aubracs or their role in the Resistance; yet they were perplexed by the two versions and could not account for the apparent discrepancy between them. Lucie, however, noted a possible explanation, one that the historians failed to grasp because they were looking for rational, political motivations. She remarked that "when he says that his true identity wasn't discovered, he's clearly thinking of his real name: Samuel" (xviii). François Bédarida immediately shifted the discussion back to the political: "Let's consider the context. The objective

of the German police was to kill it in the womb" (xviii). Of course, Bédarida is right. Barbie would not have been interested in a Jew; rather, he sought to capture the leaders of the *Armée secrète*, whose size the Germans had overestimated. Yet given that Raymond was doubly hidden (as both resistant and French Jew), it is conceivable that his identity as Samuel may have appeared to him, suddenly and without rational explanation, as the one that had to be hidden.

The case of the Aubracs reveals the oscillation between the workings of memory (or its lapse) as meaningfully restoring or producing identity—as in Assia Djebar's *anamnèse*—and memory as ultimately failing, or *irrépérable*. Through slips and gaps such as those of Aubrac, the essays in this collection seek to return to past persons, communities, and events, to reconsider or reconstruct an understanding of and for the present.

Explicitly or by implication, this issue of *STCL* is grounded in an attempt to contend with the ongoing presence of the historical phenomena of occupation and empire in debates concerning contemporary France. Key issues of debate include the politics of national identity and recall the past understood as an interplay of history and memory.¹ As such, the essays in the current issue extend by topic and/or method the concept of Vichy Syndrome defined a decade ago by the historian Henry Rousso as stages of collective recall linked to the 1940-44 occupation of France. In particular, this concept has focused on policies involving the deportation of French and non-French Jews on the part of the *Etat Français* government established in the provincial resort town of Vichy under the leadership of France's World War I military hero, Maréchal Philippe Pétain. Rousso's notion was especially forceful in its transposition of collective recall into a set of symptoms linked to a common origin. At least as forceful was the timeliness that recast accounts of the Occupation period in terms of trauma at the level of nation, a trauma with which France had purportedly not contended in full.

Much like Robert Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (1972) fifteen years earlier, Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome* (1987) questioned received accounts of the 1940-44 period in ways that kept France's recent past present and open to re-assessment. As long as witnesses to the period remained alive, personal accounts continued to add to and often challenge an historical record increasingly open to revision. At stake in this interplay of challenge and revision was both the accuracy of the historical record and the

impact of the Vichy period on debates surrounding the identity of postwar France from 1944 to the present.

The Vichy Syndrome remains a requisite reference for inquiry into issues of national identity in postwar France linked to the 1940-44 period. At the same time, it should be recalled that Rousso has recently reconsidered his 1987 book in light of issues that it raised as well as external factors in the interim. The result of this reconsideration was *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas* (1994), in which Rousso and coauthor Eric Conan contended with the extent to which the emphasis on Vichy's anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in *The Vichy Syndrome* had obscured other aspects of the period.

For Bertram M. Gordon, *Un Passé qui ne passe pas* was a necessary corrective to the reassessment of France's recent past that *The Vichy Syndrome* had promoted seven years earlier. Questioning the evidence for and against the obsessional fixation with wartime France that was Rousso's central thesis, Gordon set forth what amounted to a program for inquiry in the wake of *The Vichy Syndrome*:

Vichy, to begin with, is a complex problem which must be addressed with care. Too often the term "Vichy" is used to describe only the 1940-44 years in France, and then only as a single unit. A historical evaluation of Vichy must include more than merely the events of 1940 through 1944. The consequences of the 1939 and 1940 campaigns in Western Europe, the provisional divisions of defeated France into zones by the Germans in 1940, and the revision in November 1942, when the Germans occupied the previously unoccupied zone are all part of the Vichy story, as in the extension of the war into the French possessions in Africa and elsewhere around the world. France's involvement in the complex relations between Germany and the Iberian countries form part of the Vichy story, as do the activities of the Free French, wherever they were, the Liberation of 1944, and the purges that followed. Assessment of Vichy really includes the entire World War II collaboration paradigm. For the former Soviet satellites of Central and Eastern Europe this paradigm extends at least through 1989. Those who have addressed this problem rarely note that France is but one player in a much larger historical problem in which accusatory passion has often displaced reasoned historical analysis. (496-97)

Gordon's remarks clarify the revised scope of inquiry within which the "Memory in Context" conference and present collection

took shape, especially with regard to the call for comparative study. From the perspective of empire, Benjamin Stora has adapted Rousseau's notion of syndrome with reference to the lasting impact of the 1954-1962 period on the identities of both France and Algeria: "The war in Algeria is certainly one of those great founding dramas, and in two ways: openly in Algeria, where for thirty years it has been presented as the very essence of the legitimacy of power; secretly in France, where it subtends contemporary French political culture" (Stora, *Histoire* 7).² Much as Rousseau argued concerning Vichy, Stora sought to trace the after-history (*post-histoire*) of what he described as the trauma (*traumatisme*) of an Algerian war that France won in military terms but lost in political terms (Stora 288).

What Rousseau and Stora have argued, each in his own way, and while recognizing the specificity of their chosen objects of inquiry, constitutes both a caution and a challenge. As such, their work remains essential during a period when the more the reference points of occupation and empire recede into the past, the more they assert their timeliness for ongoing debates surrounding national identity in twentieth-century France.

Notes

1. Among recent sources in English, see Jill Forbes and Michael Kelly, eds. *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction*; Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed. "France's Identity Crises"; Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars Over Cultural Identity*; Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: The Constructions of the French Past*; Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*; Steven Ungar and Tom Conley, eds. *Identity Papers: Contested Nationhood in Twentieth-Century France*.

2. See also Stora's *Imaginaires de guerre: Algérie—Viêt-nam, en France et aux Etats-Unis*. In English, see David Schalk's *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam*.

Works Cited

"Les Aubrac et les historiens." *Libération*, July 9, 1997, supplement.

Chapuy, Gérard. *Algeria and the Ivory Tower*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1997.

DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1451

- Forbes, Jill, and Michael Kelly. *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Gordon, Bertram M. "The 'Vichy Syndrome' Problem in History." *French Historical Studies* 19.2 (1995): 495-518.
- Kritzman, Lawrence D., ed. *France's Identity Crises. Sub-Stance* 76-77 (1995): 1-216.
- Lebovics, Herman. *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
- Noiriel, Gerard. *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*. Trans. Geoffroy de Laforcade. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Nora, Pierre. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Paxton, Robert O. *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*. New York: Knopf, 1972.
- Rousso, Henry. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- . *Vichy, un passé que ne passe pas*. Paris: Fayard, 1994.
- Schalk, David L. *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Stora, Benjamin. *La Gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*. Paris: La Découverte, 1991.
- . *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale: 1830-1954*. Paris: La Découverte, 1991.
- . *Imaginaires de guerre: Algérie - Viet-Nam en France et aux Etats-Unis*. Paris: La Découverte, 1997.
- Ungar, Steven, and Tom Conley, eds. *Identity Papers: Contested Nationhood in Twentieth-Century France*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Viot, Pascal. "Vel' d'Hiv: Jospin dans les pas de Chirac." *Libération* July 21, 1997: 11.

Acknowledgments

The articles in this issue were first presented in the form of papers at a Humanities Symposium, "Memory and Context: Occupation and Empire in France and the Francophone World," held at The University of Iowa on April 17-20, 1996. We gratefully acknowledge support for the symposium and this special issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* from The University of Iowa Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, the Cultural Affairs Council in the Graduate College, the Institute for Cinema and Culture, the Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry (POROI), the Program in Comparative Literature, and the Department of French and Italian.