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## Good-bye, Children; Good-bye, Mary, Mother of Sorrows: The Church and the Holocaust in the Art of Louis Malle

ELISA NEW

From this point on, there will be no further chronological progression, but a number of long sequences, as if one were patiently following the movements and gestures of three people. They will never speak, or only rarely. Nor will there be any further reference to the war: in this sun-drenched setting, with no other human being present, we will have the feeling of being outside time, outside history, in a kind of eternity in which the basic activities of life are repeated endlessly and monotonously over and over again. These final scenes, which are simultaneously sad and serene, will be like a long sustained organ pedal point.

— LOUIS MALLE, screenplay of *Lacombe, Lucien*, 85

**S**TANDING LAST YEAR WITH MY DAUGHTER in a grove of birches by a fenced-in clearing at Kuzhai, a few miles outside Siauliai, Lithuania, I suddenly thought of the late Louis Malle and of his 1987 memoir of hidden children, collaborationist France, and guilty Christendom, *Au revoir, les enfants*.

Research for a book in progress had taken me to this town and its environing necklace of mass graves, a few hours south of Riga and a few hours north of Kovno. It was at this grassy site, or at one of the other mounds around my ancestral town, that the first Holocaust victims from my own family had been shot by Einsatzgruppe A. Some of their children may have died with them, but, according to

Lazer Lifschitz, keeper of Siauliai's Jewish past, several Levy children had outlived their parents by two years.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Lazer's ghetto census of 1942 makes it clear that three small Levy girls—Rocha, 2, Aliza, 4, and Sora, 6—had lived in Siauliai's Traku Ghetto until the fall of 1943, all three apparently cared for by an older sibling, her ghetto job, "potato sorter." The record also confirms that this girl, Dora, was only fourteen when the census was taken in 1942. For these two years, this teenager, my own daughter's age, somehow found means and heart to keep her sisters or cousins alive until the morning of November 5, 1943. Then, trucks and loudspeakers rolled up the little incline near the old Jewish cemetery. All those children under twelve without parents to hide them, or adults to bribe townspeople for their rescue, were rounded up and shipped to Auschwitz. Among these were Rocha, Aliza, and Sora and also their twelve-year-old cousin, Izaakos. Izaakos's father, Solomon, the only Lithuanian Levy to survive the Holocaust, could not prevent his son's being taken.

What happened to teenage Dora, or to Izaakos's mother or sister, Lazer's record does not show. Today, in the aftermath of Baltic independence, the struggling institutions and emissaries of memory get scant support. For different reasons from formerly, the last marks of the Nazi period are now slowly disappearing from those Eastern European towns that for fifty years had remained, though neglected, intact. If the Soviets erected no monuments acknowledging the Jewish victims of Nazi incursions, neither did they erect hotels. With Western capital flowing into the Baltics, now the ghetto courtyards and splintered shacks, the bullet-scarred walls and one-lane thoroughfares ending in places of execution in the forest—many of these have become choice sites for tourist or industrial development.

The Church, however, is assiduous. Not far from the grave site of Siauliai's Jews, crowding a rise known the world over as the Hill of Crosses, thousands and thousands of crosses—small and large, metal, wood, amber, paper, and stone—contend for outline against the Baltic sky. Until the fall of Communism, the Hill of Crosses had been subject to intermittent bulldozings, some calculated, some capricious—but now its crosses multiply prolific in a great spiky oratorio of faith. Less to have been expected, but unmistakable, is the Church's deliberate, committed extension of its traditional tokens and offices of succor to the memory of the Jews.

The controversial convent at Auschwitz is the best-known—and for some, most infamous—instance of the Church’s solicitude. But a traveler visiting obscure places in forest glades off minor, unmarked roads in Baltic Europe will also find the Church making efforts far beyond perfunctory, and thus, commanding attention.

For instance. Above this mass grave outside Siauliai rises a tall sculpture, fifteen feet high. It is a grieving mother, exquisitely carved. A Lady of Sorrow fashioned from one slender tree of sinuous grain, this *pietà* stands under a barn-like little roof adorned with flowers and vernacular gingerbread. Her hair, luxuriant—the color of sap—falls over one shoulder and onto one breast: around her neck hangs a string of large and simple beads. Her hands are folded in a posture helpless or submissive. Tucked above them, in the crook of her long wooden arms, is a stylized sheaf, betokening renewal.

How to interpret this Lady? How to regard this carefully fashioned artifact of Christian, rather than Jewish, memory? How, indeed, to judge the moral integrity, or artistic appropriateness of Catholic Europe’s propinquity in the environs of Jewish catastrophe?

Those familiar with the searching literature of post-Holocaust representation know that ever since Theodor Adorno pronounced that “after Auschwitz,” there could be no more “poetry,” we have struggled with the incommensurability of reflection and testimony, with the crossed agendas of the aesthetic and the humanly inexpressible, with the inadequacy of the lyric and the tragic, and of imagination itself, to express the reality of genocide. That there must be art, poetry even, few dispute. It is in art, as Saul Friedlander points out, that we “work through” lest we merely “act out” trauma.<sup>2</sup> And yet, as theorists from Adorno through LaCapra, Lang, and Friedlander insist, the very foundations and offices of art—pleasure, instruction, catharsis, closure—are all thwarted by the event whose representation pleasure traduces and before which reason shuts down. Not only is it true, as Geoffrey Hartman writes in the introduction to the best extant gathering of this criticism, *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, that “acting to understand . . . [the Holocaust] the imagination has little occasion to leap”<sup>3</sup> but also, in Lawrence Langer’s words, that “language . . . clutter[s] the mind with verbal filters against the truth.”<sup>4</sup> Further, the risks of appropriately representing the Shoah grow higher as information gives way to interpretation, as firsthand accounts of victims



are supplemented by secondhand accounts of those spatially or temporally removed. And the risks grow greater still as that portion of humankind not chosen for extermination—the non-Jewish world—takes up its task of memory. Although a Jewish catastrophe, to the extent that the Holocaust will continue to bear on the conscience of this world, it also exacts demonstrations of nonproprietary compassion; of empathy without the insult of identification.

In this context, it is generally agreed that the Catholic Church has proven consistently unequal to the admittedly stringent demands imposed by this unprecedented historical event. Debórah Dwork and Robert Von Pelt, among others, have explored how the Christian enterprise of commemorating the Holocaust has been

liable to mystify and traduce the “perdition” of Shoah by rendering it tragedy or Passion, by lending closure and redemptive form to an experience repelling such closure.<sup>5</sup> The presumed ecumenism, or catholicity, that reshapes inexplicable loss into catharsis, recasting the murder of the Jews as a type of Christic suffering, is informed by an old triumphalism. In the “battle of symbols and proliferation of stars and crosses” that dot Bunker II, the resting place of Edith Stein, the Church offends the memory of the Jew it would beatify by rendering “Auschwitz a new Golgotha, and the Jews had died there, with Christ’s Cross placed over their shoulders.”<sup>6</sup> In short, such abstractions and universalizations of the Holocaust as endeavor to install it in Christendom’s memory cannot remain unimplicated in eroding the particularity of the genocide.

On the other hand, as Catholic theologian David Tracy reminds us in the same volume: “The Cross, as instrument of both disgrace and death—Paul insisted not on Christ triumphal but Christ crucified—should deconstruct any Christian temptation to triumphalism from within.”<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging that a “facile inclusiveness” defames the honor of the dead and defers the true witness of the present, Tracy emphasizes the *obligation* of Christian witness to revelatory events. Neither does Tracy stint to suggest that such witness may demand a “methodical suspicion of earlier and traditional teachings.” The Church bearing fitting witness will put aside nostalgia for Church infallibility and deploy more charily those devices of symmetry and synthesis that render all data adjunct to Christian type. It will apprehend the Holocaust “not merely as one more interruptive event added to Hegel’s slaughter bench of history . . . but as a caesura within history.”<sup>8</sup>

The strain of witness that Tracy describes is one that acknowledges the brokenness of Church authority and the chastening of time by history. Such witness can no “longer remember anything—even the central Christian confession, even the Gospel as confessing narrative, even the grounding passion narrative—in the same way again.”<sup>9</sup>

In the *pietà* at Kuzhai, I thought I glimpsed this brokenness, and bewilderment, obligation—and so I was not, though I might have been, offended, but rather, unspeakably moved. I was moved not least because, although expressive of pity, this Mary seemed not quite—or perhaps, better, not yet—to know exactly whom she pitied, whose slaughtered innocence she mourned. Standing vigil for

some thousand forgotten Jews off a tractor-rutted minor road, she looked dispatched, posted, to a symbolic task whose profundity she embodied—but to what purpose? At whose behest? For the sake of whose redemption? Her office was unclear. Did she mourn the actual suffering of these Jews, these mothers and fathers of children, themselves children of mothers and fathers? Or, merely, through them, her own, nearer, dearer, suffering son, the child-king of the Jews? Could it be that she grieved, too, for her own lapsed or dilatory pity? Could it be that this mother mourned not only Son, not only Mother, but Mother Church, who, in forgetting pity, forgot herself, her office, her very Catholicism?

This Lady of Sorrows installed at Kuzhai has come to stand for me for the long, yet unfinished, business of Christendom's penitence, and for a necessary ordeal being undergone by a church that keeps sacred and inflamed at its heart this image: the image of the grieving mother and the slaughtered child. It is with this image—with its mystery and its now more ambiguous message—that the Church is obliged to bear, or regain the right to bear, witness.

This is, I think, why, when I stood at my family's grave in Siauliai, I thought of Louis Malle and the uneasy voice-over with which he ends his film *Au revoir, les enfants*: "More than forty years have passed, but I will remember every second of that January morning until I die." It is this same tableau of the Mother Church and her children (and of the test to which history put the Church—and how the test was failed) that Malle labors to understand in *Au revoir, les enfants*. At the end of this film, Malle confesses his own organ of memory still broken and thus his story not a solution to, but a symptom of, that brokenness. In this film, one that draws together themes of a whole career, Malle confesses his nation's culpability and his civilization's dire childishness. But he also inserts into the record his own account of the Church's false witness. Even more, he evokes the eclipse, the severing—indeed, the orphaning—of his generation's and his faith's innocence, and with it his own.<sup>10</sup>

By the time Malle released *Au revoir, les enfants* in 1987, the quality of his witness was already under sharp scrutiny. Malle had done his apprenticeship as assistant to the legendary filmmaker Robert Bresson, an artist whose Catholic austerity is manifest in his choice of subjects as well as his style.<sup>11</sup> However, Malle's early independent work—precocious, adventurous, and ambitious—tended to suggest his closer ties with the more youthful and iconoclastic temper of the New

Wave. Malle's first film credits included not only such provocations as the frankly sexual *The Lover* and *A Very Private Affair*, but even before these, camera and then directorial credit for Jacques Cousteau's limpidly beautiful *Undersea World*. No student of Malle's career, or of the New Wave of which it forms a chapter, can forget that moment's high confidence in film's representational capacities. Indeed, Malle and his generation assumed that a film owed its life far more to brilliancy of representation than to anything represented. They took it for granted, further, that it is the film's director, his confidence and artistic insouciance, that turns the sometimes unremarkable events on screen into unforgettable experience. A medium this acute, this subtle, could, in the hands of the director technically deft, render virtually anything worth watching. By means of lustrousness of surface, of lighting, of length or suddenness of shots, cinematic virtuosity could deliver impacts not dependent on the old mimetic staples of spectacle (something to see!) or narrative (something going to happen?).

Thus, Malle's ease with, and delight in, cinematic representation had to be a factor in the debate, when it came, about the representability of experience and the obligations of the director in the precincts of the Holocaust. Malle's position would attract further scrutiny insofar as when, in *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), he trained his lens on French responsibility for the Holocaust, it was without any of the apparent incredulity and horror of Renais's *Night and Fog* or any of the documentary irony of Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*. This film's depiction of a morally shallow, and banally guilty Vichy *milicien* seemed, to many critics, too ready to watch without bearing witness and especially too forgiving toward its lumpen collaborator protagonist. Its appearance (just after Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*) followed by that of *Au revoir, les enfants* (just before *Shoah*) would put Malle's two films of Jews and collaboration at the center of an increasingly heated international debate about the moral impossibility of "seeing" the Holocaust and the moral failure of looking away. It was the question of the decency of watching, of sight for sight's sake (rather than, say, for witness's sake), that the release of Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* brought to the fore. Making images of Auschwitz insulted the memory of those who died there, but leaving acts of standing by, of collaboration and abetting unshaped by some representational judgment was travesty, too. What kind of obliquity, then, what kind of mimetic restraint suited this subject? Twice, Malle's treatment of



provincial people remote from direct responsibility was measured against Ophuls's and then Lanzmann's different strategies of obliquity. Twice, his films divided the international critical community.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty years later, and perhaps for twenty years hence, we are still debating what standards of propriety should govern cinematic treatments of the Holocaust. That the question remains unsettled is evidenced in the fairly recent *contretemps* over Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*, which, in particular in its first, magic-realist half, chooses the kind of obliquity Malle did. In any case, Malle's films of Vichy are watersheds revealing his generation's increasing consciousness and analysis of the moral work films can do and the ethical strictures under which they operate. Malle explores the watching that faces up to history versus the watching, prurient, that spies on horror. He shows us activist watching, pacifist watching, the vigil's watch, the sentry's watch, and the watch of the avid child—all the manifold permutations and iterations of sight as it is aesthetic, social, and moral at the same time. In his work, we may discern a tightening and intensifying correlation of filmic vision with religious and political witness.

Film's answerability to these moral, but especially political, demands of witness appropriately occupied critics of Malle's wartime retrospections throughout the 1970s and 80s. It was proper that Malle's film, along with others released during this period, would attract the close scrutiny owing to any firsthand testimony, since it was during this same period—especially from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties—that these children of the war who had grown up to be artists reached their ripest maturity. From 1975 to 1985, those adolescents of the wartime period who had become novelists, poets, and filmmakers of reputation were in their prime. Thus it was that the best work of Malle, Ophuls, Wertmuller, and Wadja in film, and of Appelfeld, Levi, Fink, and Styron in fiction tested, and helped to crystallize, post-Holocaust canons of representational decorum as well as beginning to define the appropriately variant standards affecting victims and bystanders. At such a moment, an urgent one that would only come once, attention to the guilty inventory of the Christian world could hardly have been a priority. It would, indeed, have been impertinent.

It is no more. Now we profit by going back to see not only the ideological good faith of films of this generation, and not only the adequacy of realist technique or accountability accepted by institutions of faith, but also the analyses of faith in the midst of venality that these films of the period also ventured. It is now worth recalling, and sounding the implications of, the fact that Malle began his career as assistant to Robert Bresson, whose masterpieces—*A Man Escaped*, *The Pickpocket*, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*—deployed visual starkness and a sometimes flat austerity as a way to catch the movements of the soul. Bresson turns every milieu into a crucible of the spirit. His films are ballets of striving and discipline. Malle, I would like to suggest, increasingly shows a similar impulse.

As I hope to show, Malle did not only strive to achieve the realism of his New Wave forebears and to create a realism adequate to his own experience of the war's events. He also sought a realism adequate to his more capacious, more religious sense of time itself: a realism, we might say, as adequate to *kairos*—to time given coherence through and by eternity—as to *chronos*, time experienced as history or progression.<sup>13</sup> It is in *Au revoir, les enfants* that Malle gives most careful development to the tension between temporal versus eternal obligations: that tension between the Augustinian City of Man, broken up into millions of disparate minutes—each, say, a shot long—and the City of God, where eternity's aspect joins beginnings to ends.

As he moved out of the New Wave orbit, and especially in his English-language films of the 1970s, Malle increasingly showed himself engaged by innocence and guilt, purity and corruption, and with the people who choose between them. What so often distinguishes Malle's protagonists in films of these years is how, though caught in history's dailiness, in the specifics of milieu, they live by and are judged by values more transcendent. They often seem less *characters*—shaped or conditioned by imperfect environments—than souls, as in Bresson, under trial in fallen landscapes.

To take just a few examples from Malle's better-known English-language films: the belle of the cathouse in *Pretty Baby* has the spirit of the matron she eventually becomes, but her daughter, even married and decked out in domesticity, is, deep down, a whore; Malle's veteran hustler in *Atlantic City* is uncannily pure, falling prey to a passion as guileless as a boy's; and the quickened racism of the shrimper in *Alamo Bay* reveals his pact with forces not just ugly but infernal.

Socioeconomic, psychological, and cultural factors are given play in this phase of Malle's work, but the disposition of the person to moral or immoral acts will always have a less proximate trigger than nature, nurture, or the ideological motivations that the culture provides.

In these films of the 1970s and 80s, Malle treats the inner life as a mystery, and the will as a free, but also wild-swinging and awkward, endowment: freedom is a catapult arduous to manage. In counterpoint, Malle's settings—though richly, even factitiously realistic—have a way of transmogrifying into tableau. They have a deliberately denatured, periodized or stylized look, their very realism driven so far as to look like allegory—flat and surreal, or pulsing with a superreal portentousness. Thus, whether posed against the sepia tones of Storyville, or etched in relief against a vast seascape garish with neon, Malle's characters achieve an italicized quality impossible for mere products of environment. Sometimes, indeed, this drastic foregrounding of the human agonist is taken to extreme, even absurd, lengths and can, depending on one's taste, seem unbearably mannered. It was one thing for Bresson to turn the jailbreak of a prisoner, the career of a Dostoyevskian pickpocket, or the ordeal of a female saint into portraits of the spirit's ardor. But if not everyone, for instance, chose to have dinner with André, it was perhaps because, in the film *My Dinner with André*, Malle lent ordinary narcissistic New Yorkers the scope for self-revelation that we allow Saint John of the Cross, Hamlet of Denmark, and certain characters in Chekhov—but rarely adult Americans. For the sake of revealing André, or his soul's, strivings, Malle sacrificed a warmer, wider angle on his characters' lives. Only the dinner's solicitous waiter, interrupting André's confessions to fill the water glasses, reminds us to wonder just how André pays for his insights—how much this soliloquist's rent runs.

By the time of his last film, the superb *Vanya on 42nd Street*, Malle had learned to make the strain between setting and soul, slack world and inner *agon*, an innovative theme of his art rather than an eccentric mannerism of his style. But it is in *Au revoir, les enfants* that self and soul, history and time, innocent child and experienced witness find not the reconciliation, but the tense and vexed relation that distinguishes Malle's most mature and memorable art. It is in *Au revoir, les enfants* that Malle allows the close grain of the quotidian to weaken, to show how thin, how friable, the real really is.

Malle begins in the thinness, the shallowness of *chronos*: of calendrical time with its local schedules and minor holidays. It is the last year of the occupation, and the characters in *Au revoir, les enfants* rush from day to day. Nervous, averting their eyes from the more profound undertow of history, they skitter across the troubled surface. The French society Malle surveys is one where enduring forms of value and belief are attenuated in social rituals, where both passive and active acts of resistance are submerged in mores and manners. Though under occupation, all France is occupied with the day to day. There are no longer views, and the Church, the one institution capable of seeing beyond the moment, improvises ineffectually.

The opening scene of *Au revoir, les enfants* sets the tone. At a railroad station, Julien Quentin (Gaspard Manesse) says good-bye to his mother (Francine Racette) as he returns to school after the Christmas holiday. Enduring for as long as he can her fulsome farewells, putting off her unsettling declarations that she'd dress up in short pants and join him if she could, finally Julien bursts out that he detests her. On his face we see the candor of the needy child contend against the consolations of passive aggression. His brother, François (Carre de Malberg), is wiser to the world's ways. Making ironic eyebrows at his mother, smoking his corn-silk cigarettes, he swings nonchalantly onto the train. The scene telescopes a theme that Malle develops over the course of the film. The social shell of custom has already hardened around François. He is simply further along in the curriculum that corrects tenderness or pity with strategies of deflection. François is master of reflex and quip; of jocular feints, disingenuous, cruel.

The monastery school to which the boys travel reinforces such lessons. Supervised by a corps of kindly, but also abstracted and undemonstrative monks, Julien and his schoolmates seem to live mostly alone in a sharp-elbowed subculture that reflects in miniature the larger culture outside. Under occupation for the last four years, the French bear their discomforts with testy, put-upon submission. More sullen than subversive, unwilling to bring feeling from its deepest spring, they ration everything. Just so, throughout the film, Julien wears a look of studied myopia, a strain of the brittle affectlessness that is in the air. The war pinches everyone, even the children of the rich. In their barracks-like dormitory, the boys shiver under meager blankets. They leave the public baths with wet heads, walking in short pants

on streets slicked over by ice. They curse their chafed places: they get frostbite. Smarting constantly, they are nevertheless avid students of insensibility. Early on, we watch Julien impassively carve a crimson furrow in his hand with the hooked nib of his pen. In a favorite schoolyard game, the boys joust on stilts, exchanging the taunts of abuse they learn from their elders: “Pig!” “Jew!” “Infidel!” They call the monks who teach them “monkeys.”

Forced to grow up too fast, Julien’s classmates harness their childish malice to the social tics that vulnerability engenders: scapegoating and gratuitous cruelty. Only in moments of unconsciousness, in sleep or fantasy, do their grimaces relax. Then Malle lets the camera pan across a row of boys sleeping under an icon of the Virgin Mary to emphasize the smallness of the bodies under the thin blankets. A boy cries out in his sleep to remind us that these are little children separated from their mothers.

Indeed, in that aching socket where familial tenderness should be, Malle develops one of the film’s most powerful motifs. By this time, all Europe is one large, dismembered family. The separation of Jewish children from their parents is echoed in the wider dissolution of family bonds. Jean Bonnet (Raphael Fejto), lodged for a season in the monastery school, has, we are given to understand, already lost his parents by the film’s beginning. But Julien is a kind of foundling as well. His parents live separately according to an urbane fiction that leaves his father “busy at the plant” while his mother remains in Paris, discreetly unfaithful. And although family tenderness, model for all love (including Christian love, as Malle’s lingering shots of the Virgin Mary would suggest), has become bad form, we cannot mistake how these innocents strain after it. Julien seizes moments alone to smell the perfume on his mail. Famished for female tenderness, the boys channel their surplus longings into a sexuality that is also overdetermined. The lack of female succor or pity intensifies their fantasies about their desultorily sexy piano teacher. It is loneliness as much as lust that fuels the avid midnight vigils over *The Arabian Nights*. These are the shallow outlets for inner lives full of longings, secrets, and needs. Julien awakes nightly in a wet bed, and Malle lets us wonder what it is that Julien mops up night after night—a man’s semen or a boy’s pee? Thus he dramatizes some intrapsychic dislocations that war can wreak. For Julien, adolescence is less a bridge connecting childhood to adulthood than a kind of double exposure where the

integrity of one stage is compromised by the embarrassment of the other: purity by experience, knowledge by knowingness.

It is in this context, then, that Julien and Jean become friends. For a long while, their interest in each other can only flow through subterranean channels. When Jean first arrives, assigned to the bedstead next to Julien's, Julien warns him: "Don't mess with me. I'm tough." Then he watches indifferently as Jean climbs into his short-sheeted pallet. For almost the full first half of the film, Julien keeps his growing curiosity about Jean safely under cover by participating in the obligatory hazing of "Easter Bonnet," as, ironically, the Jewish fugitive is dubbed. But Julien's sensitivities are stirred, as well as his curiosity piqued, when the headmaster, Father Jean, asks him to be nice to the new boy. And Julien is hooked when, one night waking up on his wet sheets, he sees, as if in a dream, Jean swaying over two lit candles. Soon after this, he snoops in Jean's locker and finds the Jewish boy's real name in the label of a book pasted front side down. Only by holding the book up to the mirror can Julien decode the name—"Kippelstein."

In one sense, of course, this mirror reading is poignantly of a piece with the normative contrariety, the ricochets and reflexes of self-protectiveness, that give such emotional brittleness to the world that the film reveals. Just as he declares his love for his mother in an epithet of hate, Julien approaches friendship through ambush, loyalty through spying. On the other hand, Julien's mirror reading is also the kind of act that a boy learns from Sherlock Holmes, a copy of which he spots on Jean's nightstand the night that the Jewish boy arrives. Julien's whole friendship with Jean will flower in light of this scene. In the image of the mirror's doubling, Malle begins to draw out art's redemptive cousinship with feigning. In the mirror of mimesis, the boys' famished hearts find truth and meaning.

From hiding, from lying, from all feeling under wraps, Jean and Julien depart together into the spiritually richer world of the undercover. For instance, the fact of Jean's Jewishness is a secret that the boys share in deadly, terrified earnest—but also with a certain derring-do. It is, for example, in an exchange of cryptic signs straight out of Dupin or Conan Doyle or the hugger-mugger of detective cinema, that Julien lets Jean know that *he* knows his true identity: the token is a slice of *treyf* pâté. When Julien hisses "Kippelstein" over the proffered pâté, Jean tries to throttle him; Julien responds in turn, and they fight, their violence like the exchange of a password. In

this scene, as in others to follow, their scrapping provides a mutual outlet for the terrible tension that suffuses their world. But, again, too, the boys fight with a certain joy, the joy, say, of *Noble Comrades*, of *Musketeers* who always enter thrusting and jabbing. Indeed, the friends' happiest moments together have the rich and rounded quality of favorite chapters from boys' books, of exploits laid up in adventure fiction. Playing jazz piano during an air raid, lifting chestnuts from a kitchen abandoned for the shelters, the two friends savor that literary correlate of fear and real danger that all children love: adventure. The doubleness of these scenes shows imagination finding a place of flourishing; shows, indeed, the redemptive, the life-giving intervention of art—sublimation's rehabilitation of mere fantasy.

Yet even as Malle bestows on Jean and Julien the blessings of fantasy, affording them, in a time, a realm of imaginative exercise that is every child's due, a cautionary vein runs through the film. In a world occupied by the Big Lie, to fail to distinguish adventure from peril, beauty from aestheticized horror, may abet moral voyeurism, may release imagination into escapism. At such a pass, the only true art is that which holds the mirror up to the mirror: which reveals the power to distort in its own depths. Such art finds vantage point, a place of witness, on watching. It frames mimesis, a form of play, within history's graver register.

Malle's film achieves this crucial reflexivity in a scene where the boys' friendship is cemented. In this scene, he frames a classic narrative motif, that of the hunt, within the lethal context of Jean's actual huntedness. It is late afternoon, a cold day in March, and the boys roam the woods pursuing clues and some treasure in a race to beat a contending team. Set upon by the "enemy," Julien and Jean flee in different directions. Malle chooses to follow Julien as he runs through the forest, getting the rasp of his breath on the soundtrack, capturing the desperation of a child who runs as if for his life. He might, of course, have followed Jean and so underscored the larger bounty hunt that is the Jewish boy's whole existence. But the director's choice rather makes the film's indictment clear: it is not only the loss of European Jewry hinted at here but the absence of imagination, the failure of empathy, that permitted this loss. It is thus Malle the moralist who presses Julien to his physical limits in a kind of dark simulation, a vicarious ordeal through which the Christian endures, though only in play (though only by means of the cheapest "identification"), his friend's bitter fate. The difference between the game of the

hunt, between the *frisson* of fear such games incite and the terror with which Jean lives, is unmistakable.

This episode has yet more to show. Outdistancing his pursuers, Julien stumbles upon the path to the treasure. And shortly thereafter, Jean, who has escaped his enemy captors, appears from behind a rock. Jean and Julien are lost. In a gloom so dense it is dreamlike, the landscape suddenly spooky, medieval, the boys pick their way over boulders lichened with frost. Pressing through brambles, they are careful to maintain stony faces in the deepening twilight. Suddenly, they hear a snort, and a wild boar, archaic emblem of all the lowering brutality in store—but small, and so anticlimactic, too—plunges through the forest.

And then a second anticlimax: as the boys find their way out of the gloom, desecrating the road, they are suddenly caught in a pair of headlights: two Germans patrol the macadam. Jean takes off for his life in a panicked run, but, as it turns out, these are harmless, even “good” Germans. With the still-pimpled faces of scouts hurried into Hitler Youth (and then, by a stroke of luck, to a provincial detail far from action), these troops point their guns for sport, laugh and then scoop Jean up into their burly arms. “Lost any children?” they ask, good-natured, as they restore the children to the monastery school.

The scene is profoundly unsettling and instructive, its anticlimaxes, its reassurances providing the seductions of happy closure, bestowing on us the boon of a pleasant shiver as our babes in the woods are returned safe and sound. And Malle’s realist instincts serve him well when he shows us that boyish hearts beat, too, under enemy tunics. This moral fact does no more than thicken the perplexity. As the end of the film will show, our relief could only be based on a childish confidence and faith in decency akin to that that called the emerging news of German crimes too fantastic to be true. “Are there wolves in these woods?” Jean Bonnet had asked Julien, whimpering. There are wolves. With history’s hindsight, we know that the surrender of decency to animality was, in fact, the reality; the confidence in daylight sanity, the dream.

Malle’s tableau of children wandering in a dark wood recalls fairy tales, and then, darkening further, the lost soul of the *Inferno*. As we watch, we think of faith wandering in a thicket and then the manifold meanings of “lost” in these two panicked boys and their two boyish rescuers. In this scene, we watch as Malle plots



against the grain of his realism, *against* the progress of his story's chronology and thus back into deeper Christian time: from *chronos* to a now broken *kairos*.<sup>14</sup>

The interval in the woods, finally, incises and punctures fantasy's blandishments. At other junctures, however, we observe Malle probe the redemptive function of his art.<sup>15</sup> One such function is to excavate the inner, or hidden, life; to peel back tics of subterfuge, to expose the sensibility and so to catch the human visage in its innocent state. In a beautifully reflexive scene—one reminding us just how film ministers to interiority—the camera lingers over the faces of boys and teachers enjoying a Chaplin film. Where prayer, where play, where familial intimacies fail, the film binds this community in congregation. And if Chaplin's slapstick mishaps—his look, in fact, of child dressed up as man—give the children's boyish joy the escape valve that it needs, the joy itself comes from within. In this, arguably the most religious scene in the film, what we see break over each boy's face is nothing less than his soul, nothing less than what God sees. Thus the lame and embittered kitchen boy, the Arab, Joseph, laughs uproariously and hysterically, showing us the desperation soon to be put at the Gestapo's disposal, while the school fat boy, usually wary and constrained, snorts with lusty, unself-conscious pleasure. Julien cracks a smile, Jean allows the corners of his mouth to curve, and Father Jean's face grows serene, as though in this piece of entertainment he recognizes some goodness cognate with that goodness to which he ministers.

By the end of the film, this spectrum of sinners, innocents, saints, and fallen angels will have come into fuller resolution. At one end, Malle will install Father Jean, the Righteous Gentile whose refusal to bow to historical pressure leads him to risk, and finally sacrifice, his life for the sake of four Jewish children. At the other: Joseph, the unfortunate turned collaborator. In between is Malle's pained, sweet portrait of himself in Julien—the boy who wanted to become a priest but became a filmmaker instead.

In the character of Father Jean (played by Philippe Morier-Genoud), Malle risks cliché to offer a cinematic saint's life. The devout, utterly earnest shepherd of several score of Catholic souls and four hidden Jews, Father Jean is a hero of spiritual resistance, his face impassive and grave as the faces of Bresson's Malle watched in his seedtime. A man for whom quotidian acts are always indexed to eternal criteria, Father Jean takes Christ's suffering as the model for our own. When

Julien complains that a spot on his knee is not a scrape but frostbite, the father acknowledges the cold but reproves him for complaining, reminding him of others worse off. Hearing Julien confess his sins, Father presses for Julien's sexual infractions—and even confesses his own. We sense that this is not out of any lechery, but rather fear that Julien will make an incomplete confession and thus his sin collaborate with secrecy.

Father Jean's Catholicism flourishes in his faith in Catholic institutions, and of his church, as bulwark against the temptations bred by collaboration. Thus, while lecturing the prosperous parents of his charges on visitors' day, he inveighs against pride of wealth. Even as one parent storms out, Father Jean calls the assembly to pray for the unfortunate and the persecuted. Further, when, at the end of this sermon, Jean Kippelstein (Bonnet) comes forward half-converted, mouth open for the communion wafer, Father Jean slips Kippelstein's wafer into Julien's mouth. Refraining to press the advantage that many of his church did not scruple to press, Father Jean reminds us of the *quid pro quo* of baptism extracted from numerous helpless Jews by their rescuers. He refuses to exploit worldly circumstances for otherworldly gain.

Devoted to an uncompromising and theoretic unworldliness, Father Jean, however, is an absolutist in a world where all value has become relative, and more, a mortal exemplar, and a willing martyr to the ideal of uncontingent, transhistoric value. Such value dies with him. In the last minutes of the film, as Father Jean is led away by the Gestapo, Malle pulls back the camera to show us, for the first time, Father Jean's feet in martyr's sandals. In the crucible of history, Father Jean becomes, in the truest sense, himself a monk whose soul's order is straighter than his church's soul. His piety lights up the promiscuity of chaos all around.

Just as Father Jean calls the boys to higher forms of self, Joseph (François Negret) is their bad angel and the character in whom Malle shows where action on the worldly plane diverts, maybe forever, any transcendent outcome. For the weakness of Joseph's character is not mitigation but confirmation of his fallen state. Sooty, raging, resentful, Joseph is a creature of nearly unalloyed and desperate will. Like Lucien of *Lacombe, Lucien*, he is vulnerable to the temptation of collaboration because of his underprivilege, but not thereby exempted from it. Like the child-

whore in *Pretty Baby*, like the hustler in *Atlantic City*, like Shane in *Alamo Bay*, Joseph is beset by circumstance—he is the consummate product of a disabling environment. But Joseph is also, as with these others above, a soul whom crisis tests and leaves stripped to his corrupt essence. Joseph's very name, for instance, reminds us of that other Joseph who, from out of the pit and out of Pharaoh's stores, rose up to save an alien people and redeem his own. We are agents of choice, Malle stresses in Joseph. We are bound not to perpetuate but to resist the evils that oppress us, bound to transform our circumstances rather than making pretexts or opportunities, of them.

Joseph, however, is precisely opportunist. Turning his low station to advantage, Joseph lines his pockets and raises his own stock by maintaining a brisk black-market trade fueled by the boys' care packages. The degree to which Joseph is ultimately responsible for his actions is never easily answered, remaining a question whose difficulty is only inflamed when Father Jean discovers Joseph's black-marketeering and throws him out of the monastery. The boys who trade with him have their privileges restricted but Joseph is banished, turned out onto the street orphaned and alone. Joseph accuses Father Jean of expelling him for reasons of his class, his color. The measure of justice in his protest reflects on the Church's elitism, the church that will have this poor sinner in its employ but not on its conscience. Father Jean is implacable, and thus, in some measure, dies with his church's guilt on his head. Austere, he sees only Joseph's depraved heart, gone over to the other side. The next time that we see Joseph, it is in the company of the Gestapo. It is Joseph who has informed on Father Jean and his Jewish charges.

Confronting a shocked Julien in the last minutes of the film, Joseph charges that it is Father Jean who made him what he is, for what else could he do? Malle lets the charge register in Julien's face, and in our minds, allowing us to pity this boy lost between Father Jean's zeal to purge his school of a soul gone bad and his church's neglect of one who might have been saved from himself. Yet Joseph is far from being the film's conscience. He is rather its archangel, tragically tumbled from grace, still fully accountable for embracing an evil that he might have resisted.

And so the fact that Joseph is a child is transformed from mitigating factor to large-scale indictment. He comes to seem in this last scene the embodiment of all

Europe's stunted maturity, of all its shortsighted dependencies, small rationalizations, and petty acquiescences. A cigarette drooping from his mouth, his body swallowed up in an ill-gotten coat, Joseph personifies France's own exploitive immaturity, the meanness of its sophistications, the crudity of its chauvinisms, the subtle mechanisms of the pitiless. Joseph's fall is, in this end, most awful for being so predictable.

In another scene, Malle, on the other hand, explores the way that those moral choices that hindsight recognizes (how could decent people have stayed silent, etc.?) often come masked in the mundanely circumstantial. It is in the little prejudices, minor sexual currents, in the push and pull of the humdrum that the invisible inventory of moral life is drawn up. Having lunch with Madame Quentin on parents' day, Jean and Julien watch a Vichy thug harass a courtly elder gentleman. While the Nazis at surrounding tables drink and laugh, the loutish militiaman demands this Mr. Meyer's papers and then upbraids the Jew for trespass. The Nazis lounge, long-legged, all too unmindful of the altercation. Meanwhile, other customers begin to hiss, collectively endorsing Madame Quentin's superficial judgment: "The gentleman looks perfectly proper." In any case, it is not the hour or the place for ideological drama, at least not for the lumpen crudities of police work. Other considerations intervene. Just as Jean and Julien had enjoyed gratuitous, meaningless rescue by the two German troops, Mr. Meyer is saved, this time, by a youthful Wehrmacht officer. With a courtly "Voilà!" and a cavalier, half-ironic bow to Madame Quentin, the Nazi throws the lout out on his ear, glad to bring off this bit of pretty gallantry.

In such scenes, Malle reminds us of the terrible contingency governing every outcome. They draw into even higher relief Father Jean's discipline. Outside the preserve of his moral stringencies, human responses are arbitrary, exploitive, and self-interested, life and death hanging on the frailest passing variables. If, this lunch hour, the course of events leaves Mr. Meyer untouched, he owes his safety to no stand of resistance, no act of charity or pity or discipline: no act of resolute will. The *milicien* salutes him with a parting shot: "I'll see you again."

This lunch augurs the denouement, a January afternoon, toward which the whole film—one year in Julien's life, the last year in Jean's—moves. For nothing

seems unusual, nothing is to prepare the boys for the morning when a contingent of Nazis, led by a white-haired, smoothly malignant Gestapo chief, arrive in Julien's history class to take away the hidden Jean Kippelstein. As the Nazi slowly scans the faces of the boys, Julien maintains a poker-faced composure. But when he turns to the blackboard, feigning distraction by a map tracking the American advance in pushpins, Julien sneaks one foolhardy sympathetic look at Jean.

This glance costs Jean his life. Fair or not, this momentary flutter links Julien with the sister who gives away another of the boys in the school infirmary, and—to an unmistakable extent—with Joseph and all those others whose failures of resistance sent others to their deaths. In a world that did not gas children, Julien, a child himself, would get to take his turn over. But he gets no such chance. Malle judges him, judges himself, culpable.

With hastily packed bags, the boys all assemble in the schoolyard, where they are treated to a lecture on the French failure of discipline. The Gestapo chief rates the assembled for harboring elements, Jews and traitors, who vitiate their purity. As noxious as this lecture is, and as noisome as the Nazi catechism to which it belongs, it is discipline, though another kind of discipline that Julien lacks and Father Jean has. Only the father, sinewed by his faith to resist, can subordinate impulse to forms of higher calling.

*Au revoir, les enfants* is an album of regrets and a pitiless look back at a human community whose most profound human qualities—fear, friendship, empathy, faith—were swamped by social rituals inadequate to the moment. Even as this film invokes awe at the burden that history placed on citizens the least equipped and least deserving of such burden—children—its school setting is synecdoche for the great school of history and its story of children lost a lesson in the failure of Christian witness. A confession, a memorial tribute, and a powerful artifact in the history of Holocaust representation, *Au revoir, les enfants* is, more than anything, a film about what went wrong in Christendom.

One hundred years and more into film history, we still do not fully reckon film's sober take on all it cannot take in. We tend to see films as capturing, but also defined and captured by, their times: a movie is of this prize cycle, this year; this moment in an auteur's, or an actor's, career. To be sure, film's acuteness is a key to its force. It

seizes us in its light and then lets us go. At the same time, however, film's very medium can show how the present moment, with its shocks and givens, is merely time's *mise-en-scène*. Film intimates the fathomlessness of history beyond the shelf of historicity.

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## NOTES

- I would like to thank Joel Rosenberg for criticism and suggestions that much improved this essay. I would also like to thank Yael Levine for help with manuscript preparation.
- 1 I would like to express my gratitude to Lazer Lifschitz of Siauliai, Lithuania. In 1998, Mr. Lifschitz guided me, as he has guided others, to the mass grave site at Kuzhai, and he also showed me the ghetto census of 1942 that records the existence, and death in the *Kinderaktion*, of the Levy children. On a subsequent trip, in August 2000, Mr. Lifschitz was kind enough to share with me his "personal" archive, a collection of fourteen stuffed notebooks that he keeps in his small home, not far from the old Jewish cemetery. That Mr. Lifschitz still keeps this archive of documents and photographs beside his living-room couch is eloquent testimony to his continuing sense of insecurity and lack of confidence in the public institutions of memory in Baltic Europe.
  - 2 Saul Friedlander, "Trauma, Memory, and Transference," in Geoffrey Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford/Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 260. See also Friedlander's *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), which includes his important critique of Malle's work as "kitsch"; also, Dominick LaCapra's chapter "Writing History, Writing Trauma" in his book of the same title (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Berel Lang's chapter, "The Representation of Evil," in idem, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
  - 3 Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 14.
  - 4 Lawrence Langer's *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 7. See this volume for further exploration of these issues, including film treatments of the Shoah.

- 5 See Dwork and von Pelt's essay "Reclaiming Auschwitz," in Hartman, 232–51, esp. 244.
- 6 Ibid., 245.
- 7 David Tracy, "Christian Witness and the Shoah," in Hartman, 81–89, esp. 81.
- 8 Ibid., 82.
- 9 Ibid., 84. Other searching treatments of Christianity in the aftermath of the Holocaust include Tracy's introduction to Arthur A. Cohen's *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), where he writes: "It is history itself, our history which smashed against itself in the Holocaust—that has exposed the pathos of earlier liberal theologies." See also Edward H. Flannery's classic *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Antisemitism* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); and Franklin Littell's *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
- 10 The breaking, the fracturing, of Christian memory to which Tracy alludes has not yet received much attention. The trauma of such memory cannot, of course, be compared to that described by, and observed among, survivors, yet the historical "caesura" Tracy adduces requires more attention. One may start by observing that Christian accounts of memory stalled in the realization of guilt may find at least partial explanation in descriptions of the Jewish seizure of memory. The locus classicus for accounts of this seizure, or orphaning of memory, is Aharon Appelfeld's "The Awakening," where he writes, "Of course we knew we were free, but that joy was insufficient to still the insulting loss of our childhood. . . . We knew that something warm and precious in us had been lost on the path to self-forgetfulness. . . . Parents, images from our childhood, tribal incantations, whether in the forms of customs or ancestral faith. Without them, what are we? We are hollow, floating on the outermost layer of consciousness. I have said, 'We knew.' But this was a late knowledge, a belated fright. We were already in that domain from which there is no retreat. . . . Only now did it seem clear for the first time to what vast distances we had exiled ourselves, as though we had been imprisoned all those years by unknown enemies, who had forbidden us any contact with our own secrets" (Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 149–52). The experience Appelfeld describes, some version of which is explored in various Christian treatments of memory, is of a kind of childhood memory that is not, and can never again be, a child's. In place of innocence, the ordinary, incomplete knowledge of the child is just arrested, and thus remains crudely outlined knowledge: knowledge stuck in repetition or empty shape. Explaining this phenomenon further, Geoffrey Hartman adduces the example of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), whose comic-book form is not a transparency on "what happened" but instead a

- “transitional object” whose crudity suggests that “the world is not as innocent as it used to be. *Maus*, Hartman continues, “mirrors the vision of an adult who becomes a child again as he tries to master extreme knowledge (Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 20).
- 11 The way that Bresson keeps his camera focused always and ever on the human visage, his interest not character but soul, is evident in all his work. Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper Resources, 2001), calls Bresson “an uncompromising Jansenist preoccupied with ideas of predestination and spiritual grace,” and David Thomson, in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 88, describes Bresson’s subject as invariably as “the pity and splendor of selfishness and sacrifice.”
  - 12 For a good summary of the reception of Malle’s two films and of postwar French cinema of the Vichy period, see Naomi Greene’s recent book, *Landscapes of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Although I believe that Greene’s analysis is often too narrowly focused on ideological questions, it nevertheless provides an excellent survey of French retro film of the post–World War II period. I am in Greene’s debt. I have also learned a great deal from André Bazin’s *French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance: The Birth of a Critical Esthetic* (New York: Ungar, 1981), introduced by François Truffaut and translated by Stanley Hochman.
  - 13 For the classic meditation on time and eternity, see Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, book 11; and for an excellent discussion of *chronos* and *kairos*, see Edward Taylor, *Milton’s Poetry: Its Development in Time* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979), esp. chap. 5. For an enlightening treatment of failures of chronology in Holocaust reflection, see Langer’s “Chronology and Duration in Holocaust Testimonies,” in *Admitting the Holocaust*.
  - 14 LaCapra makes the distinction between absence and loss in terms of shedding light on the “caesura” that Tracy invokes; see LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 64.
  - 15 See Malle’s afterword to *Au Revoir, les Enfants and Lacombe, Lucien: Two Films by Louis Malle* (London and Boston: Faber, 1989), 159, where he weighs in on the vexed question of Holocaust memory when he confesses to “innocent[ly] rewriting history.” Admitting that he has made up the character of Joseph, inserting him into an otherwise “true” account, he nonetheless argues that “only when memory is filtered through imagination . . . will the films we make have real depth.”