

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

197

Volume 197

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the *Literary Criticism Series* follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Louis Begley

1933-

(Born Ludwik Begleiter) Polish-born American novelist.

The following entry provides an overview of Begley's career through 2003.

INTRODUCTION

Although he did not begin writing until age fifty-five, Begley's literary debut, the novel *Wartime Lies* (1991), became a highly celebrated and award-winning publication. Focusing on a young Jewish boy in Nazi-occupied Poland, *Wartime Lies* has been compared to works by Primo Levi, Jerzy Kosinski, and other Holocaust writers; Begley's other novels have drawn comparisons to works by Edith Wharton and Henry James. While much of his writing contains autobiographical elements, Begley strongly emphasizes the fictional aspects of his works. Critics have praised his witty narratives and unapologetic presentation of flawed characters—elements that have proven popular with readers and reviewers alike. Begley's fourth novel, *About Schmidt* (1996), was adapted into a successful, award-winning motion picture starring Jack Nicholson in 2002.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Begley was born in Stryj, Poland (located in present-day Ukraine) on October 6, 1933, to Edward, a Jewish physician, and his wife, Frances. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Begley's father, who worked as a physician for the Russian army, was forced to retreat with the Russians, leaving his wife and son stranded in occupied Poland. To avoid being sent to concentration camps, Begley and his mother obtained false papers and pretended to be Polish Catholics. Many of the difficulties and strife they experienced provide the basis for *Wartime Lies*. At the end of the war the family was reunited. They briefly relocated to Paris and in 1947 moved to New York. Begley graduated from Brooklyn's Erasmus Hall High School in 1950 and earned a scholarship to Harvard University. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1953 and in 1954 earned a *summa cum laude* degree in English literature.

After graduation, Begley registered for the draft and served eighteen months in Germany with the U.S. Army 9th Division. In 1956 he married Sally Higginson, whom



he met at Harvard, and enrolled in Harvard Law School. Upon graduation he accepted a position at Debevoise & Plimpton, a prestigious Manhattan law firm. His marriage to Higginson ended in 1970 and in 1974 he married Anka Muhlstein, a French-born writer. In 1989, at the age of fifty-five, Begley began to write his first work, *Wartime Lies*. The novel received the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Aer-Lingus International Fiction Prize, and the Prix Médicis Etranger. Begley continues to work for Debevoise & Plimpton and writes on weekends and on summer sabbaticals. He resides with Anka in New York City and vacations yearly in Venice, Italy.

MAJOR WORKS

Wartime Lies recounts the hardships of six-year-old orphan Maciek and his resilient and resourceful Aunt Tania—both Jews in German-occupied Poland during World War II. Tania protects Maciek and, through a

succession of ruses and fabrications, she and Maciek survive extermination by posing as Catholics. The false pretenses save them, but Maciek has difficulty maintaining his real identity after many years of presenting an untrue image of himself. At the conclusion of the novel, the narrator—an aging man who is acknowledged as the present-day Maciek—states that his childhood was too horrible to remember; that Maciek's story is just another lie passed off as the truth by the narrator. The topic of fabricated identity is also a main theme in Begley's second novel, *The Man Who Was Late* (1993). The protagonist, Ben, is a man haunted by his past—he too is a Holocaust survivor—and he tries to suppress his memories of childhood. He recreates his past in an attempt to achieve personal perfection, surrounding himself with the finest goods, socializing with the elite, and presenting himself as a sophisticated, elegant man. Because he expends extravagant effort on controlling himself, he cannot release his emotions, causing difficulties in his relationships. Through complicated decisions he loses his marriage, the affection of his stepchildren, a chance at true love, and ultimately his own life. In *As Max Saw It* (1994) Begley introduces another man of privilege, detached from human relationships. Max is coerced into a friendship with Charlie, an overbearing college acquaintance, and Toby, Charlie's Adonis-like lover. Max tries to maintain his distance but when Toby begins to die from AIDS, Max is torn between his desire to remain aloof and his newly acquired sense of responsibility to his friend. Death and mortality become the main points of focus in *Mistler's Exit* (1998). Mistler has been diagnosed with inoperable liver cancer and is given only a few months to live. Although he is married and has a son, he decides to keep his condition secret and travels to Venice under the pretense of a business trip. While in Venice he becomes involved in a brief, torrid affair with a much younger woman, reunites with an old flame from college, and contemplates his life and impending death. Many critics have interpreted the character of Mistler as a vehicle for Begley to explore what he regards as a warped sense of ethics and morals present in America's elite social circles. Begley continues to examine moral flaws of the wealthy in modern America in *About Schmidt* (1996) and *Schmidt Delivered* (2000). Albert Schmidt is a lonely and unlikable man—argumentative, self-centered, and an anti-Semite. His inflexible views and politically incorrect stances are considered status quo among his elite circle of friends. He is confronted with his anti-Semitic viewpoints when Charlotte, his only child, marries a Jewish lawyer. In his search for contentment, he begins an affair with Carrie, a Puerto Rican waitress younger than his daughter. Through Carrie, Schmidt finds happiness and begins to gain some measure of tolerance, but ultimately remains steadfast in his ways, and in *Schmidt Delivered*, he loses Carrie because of his selfishness and intractability. In *Ship-*

wreck (2003) Begley examines a married man who obsessively desires a young woman. As in his other novels, Begley dispassionately writes about the man's trials—neither excusing the man's behavior nor condemning it, but merely presenting the story to let readers pass judgment.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Upon publication, *Wartime Lies* was viewed as an astoundingly accomplished first novel. Critics have applauded Begley's depiction of identity loss and the survivor's guilt common among Holocaust survivors. While critical response to *Wartime Lies* was overwhelmingly positive, Begley's other novels have elicited mixed opinions. Some reviewers have been disgusted by the shallowness of such characters as Mistler and Schmidt. Conversely, others have found that Begley's creation of these unlikable men—and his sympathetic portrayal of them—is skillful, shrewd, and appealing to readers. Commentators have complimented Begley's clear prose and elegant phrasing, and his novels have been noted for unmasking the façade of perfection among the social elite. Thomas Hines wrote "Begley uses his intimate attunement to the language, habits and assumptions of the upper classes to reveal the tiny cracks in the system and to excavate the subtle cruelties and disarray that lie quietly beneath the surface."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Wartime Lies (novel) 1991
The Man Who Was Late (novel) 1993
As Max Saw It (novel) 1994
About Schmidt (novel) 1996
Mistler's Exit (novel) 1998
Schmidt Delivered (novel) 2000
Shipwreck (novel) 2003

CRITICISM

Janet Malcolm (review date 13 June 1991)

SOURCE: Malcolm, Janet. "A Matter of Life and Death." *New York Review of Books* 38, no. 11 (13 June 1991): 16-17.

[In the following review, Malcolm examines the nature of survival in *Wartime Lies*, pondering the effects on the young protagonist produced by random and indifferent deaths.]

Early in this chilling novel [*Wartime Lies*] about a Jewish boy named Maciek and his aunt Tania, who survive the Nazi years in Poland by acquiring false Aryan papers, the question of the child's circumcised penis is raised. As the narrator dryly points out, Jewish women could represent themselves as Aryans easily enough, but

with men, there was no cheating, no place for Jewish ruses. Very early in the process would come the simple, logical invitation: If Pan is not a kike, a *zidlak*, would he please let down his trousers? A thousand excuses if we are wrong.

"With his old man's flabby skin" the boy's grandfather "might even pass the trousers test if he was careful. It was possible, with surgical glue, to shape and fasten enough skin around the gland to imitate a real uncut foreskin. Grandfather was duly equipped with such glue." But for the boy, only surgery with skin grafts could achieve the desired effect, an alternative considered by the aunt and the grandparents, and ultimately rejected. For, in addition to the risk of infection and of the graft not taking,

there was the problem of growth. My penis would become longer but the grafted skin would not keep pace. I would have trouble with erections. This last consideration tipped the scales. They decided to leave me as I was.

The passage is typical of the book's irony and metaphoric proficiency. As the narrative unfolds, we see that "the problem of growth" extends beyond the operation of de-circumcision and is the problem of the book. What happens to a child's soul when he lives his childhood in constant fear for his life and witnesses atrocities that no child should know of, no less witness? In a prologue, the narrator—who is the adult the child has become, "a man with a nice face and sad eyes, fifty or more winters on his back, living a moderately pleasant life in a tranquil country"—refers to skin that covers another part of the anatomy. The man is "a bookish fellow," a Latinist who "reveres" the *Aeneid* because "that is where he first found civil expression for his own shame at being alive, his skin intact and virgin of tattoo, when his kinsmen and almost all the others, so many surely more deserving than he, perished in the conflagration." Between the images of the tattooed arm and the erect penis Begley has situated his austere moral and psychological fable of survival. Like other contributors to what Lawrence Langer has called the literature of atrocity, Begley writes with a kind of muted and stunned air, as if the words are sticking in his throat. The exquisite soft note of the master writer of the genre, Primo Levi, is sometimes heard in the novel, and Levi's bitter reflection (so quietly murmured, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, that it goes by almost unnoticed) that "the worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died"

has not gone unremarked by Begley. The thought inhabits the novel and gives it its pervasive atmosphere of moral anxiety.

It is a woman, the aunt Tania, who is the instrument of survival, and who is equipped by character and temperament to take the assertive measures necessary to cheat death in the time of its near-total ascendancy. To create his remarkable heroine Begley has drawn on ancient and modern literary models: the character has the courage and selflessness of Alcestis, the brilliance and inventiveness of the Duchessa Sanseverina, the hardness of Becky Sharp. He has also drawn on Freud for his elucidation of the remarkable psychological situation in which his fable is set—the situation of a boy upon whom dire circumstances have imposed the fulfillment of a child's headiest Oedipal wishes. The father is absent—he disappears into Russia at the beginning of the novel—and the grandparents also disappear from the boy's childhood as part of the strategy of survival whereby Jewish families with false papers split up in order to be less conspicuous. Tania, who has been Maciek's surrogate mother all his life (the real mother died in childbirth), briefly provides him with a surrogate father when she takes up with an influential German officer named Reinhard, a kind of Mosca *manqué*, but he, too, passes out of the picture, and the field is left to the nine-year-old Maciek.

The aunt and the boy move from place to place with their false identities, never daring to stay anywhere too long (blackmailers, who bleed Jews dry and then turn them over to the Gestapo, lurk like sharks throughout Nazi-occupied Poland); they are like a pair of traveling charlatans, working in ever more perfect sync, and becoming intimate in ways that people who do not lie together (the pun serves the idea) possibly never know. Near the end of the book, the boy begins to feel the debit side of sleeping with his mother. (Although, as it happens, the pair sleep in the same bed throughout most of the novel, they do not literally breach the incest barrier or come anywhere near breaching it; but the relationship is nevertheless incestuous.) He articulates what all children who are brought into arousing relationships with adults must obscurely feel: the sense of the relationship's crushing inequality and of their own powerlessness. "I admired and loved my beautiful and brave aunt with increasing passion," Maciek says.

Her body could never be close enough to mine; she was the fortress against danger and the well of all comfort. . . . I waited impatiently for the nights when I knew she would come to bed wearing only a slip so that I could feel closer to her.

And yet

I had never seen Tania naked. Tania undressed was Tania in her slip or Tania in her long nightgown. Her bodily functions were private, even under the most

constraining conditions. On the other hand, my nakedness and my bowel and bladder movements continued to be subject to question, inspection and comment.

In the mind of the boy (as recollected by the man), he himself is a poor, weak creature (there are echoes of the sickly and coddled young Marcel in the self-representation), while the aunt is a being of almost mythic powerfulness, an androgynous goddess embodying the paternal as well as maternal principles, both *fortress* and *well*. Her audacity and guile know no bounds; in a scene in the latter half of the novel her mission-impossible capacities reach a thrilling culmination. It is the summer of 1944 and the pair have escaped detection as Jews only to find themselves trapped in a roundup of Poles at the central railroad station in Warsaw following the premature, ill-fated uprising of the Polish resistance. Begley has rendered the scene like an immense narrative painting. As far as the eye can see, frightened men, women, and children, who have been marched to the station and assembled in columns, wait to board trains to Auschwitz; Ukrainian guards with whips and dogs savagely herd people onto the trains as Wehrmacht and SS officers look on impassively. We glimpse Tania and Maciek in the crowd. At the start of the march the previous day, Tania had smeared her face with soot and walked bent over like an old woman so as to escape notice by the Ukrainians, who were raping and sometimes, for good measure, bayoneting attractive young women. Now, as the column approaches the station, she undergoes another transformation:

Over my tearful protests she had used our remaining water to wash our faces and hands. She brushed the dust off her clothes and mine and straightened them. Then she combed my hair, and, with great concentration, peering into the pocket mirror, combed her own hair and put on lipstick, studied the result, and made little corrections. I was astonished to see how she had transformed herself. The stooped-over, soot-smeared old woman of the march from the Old Town had vanished. Instead, when we entered the station, I was holding the hand of a dignified and self-confident young matron. Unlike the day before, she was not hanging back, trying to lose us in the crowd; she pushed her way to the outside row and, holding my hand very tight, to my horror, led me away from the column so that we were standing, completely exposed, in the space on the platform between the rest of the people and the train. Despite my panic, I began to understand that Tania was putting on a very special show. Her clear blue eyes surveyed the scene before her; it was as if she could barely contain her impatience and indignation. I thought that if she had had an umbrella she would be tapping the platform with it.

Pulling the boy behind her, Tania strides over to a fat Wehrmacht captain standing on the platform and,

addressing him in her haughtiest tone, she asked if he would be kind enough to tell her where these awful trains were going. The answer made my legs tremble:

Auschwitz. Completely wrong destination, replied Tania. To find herself with all these disreputable-looking people, being shouted at by drunk and disorderly soldiers, and all this in front of a train going to a place she had never heard of, was intolerable. She was a doctor's wife from R., about two hours from Warsaw; she had come to Warsaw to buy dresses and have her son's eyes examined; of course, everything she bought had been lost in this dreadful confusion. We had nothing to do with whatever was going on here. Would he, as an officer, impose some order and help us find a train to R.? We had spent almost all our money, but she thought she had enough for a second-class compartment. The captain burst out laughing. My dear lady, he said to Tania, not even my wife orders me about quite this way. Could Tania assure him her husband would be glad to have her return? And where had she learned such literary turns of expression? After he had an answer to these basic questions he would see about this wretched train business. Tania blushed. Should I tell you the truth, even though you won't like it? Naturally, replied the captain. I think my husband doesn't mind my being sometimes hot tempered. I learned German in school and probably I managed to improve it by reading, especially everything by Thomas Mann I can find in the original—not much in R., but quite a lot in Warsaw. It's a good way for a provincial housewife to keep occupied. I know Mann's work is forbidden in the Reich, but that is the truth. I am not a party member, merely a railroad specialist, announced the captain still laughing, I am glad you have chosen a great stylist. Shall I get someone to carry your suitcases while we look for transportation to R.?

In a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of October 14, 1983, Gabriel Josipovici severely criticized a book called *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* for the simple-minded note of rejoicing it struck in recounting stories of successful survival through luck, quick-wittedness, or the intervention of the Almighty. Holding up for special disapprobation a tale in which a rabbi survives a mass shooting because he is wearing a garment with apparent magical properties, Josipovici icily asks, "What kind of God is this who saves those with magic cloaks and not others? What kind of faith is this that rejoices in personal safety and spares no thought for those who did not get up?"

Josipovici's question rings throughout *Wartime Lies*. The account of the aunt's brilliant charade of "identification with the aggressor" is told in full awareness of its moral ambiguity. The image of "those awful trains" haunts the book, as do the shades of "those who did not get up." The foreground fairy story of survival is but a prism through which the horror story of the Holocaust is refracted. In the relationship of the boy and the aunt we see a kind of distorting mirror image of the relationship of the Jew and the Nazi. Although the aunt is "good," her methods have a heart-freezing Teutonic efficiency, and the boy's abject dependence on her has a chilling pathos. Embedded in Begley's narrative of the boy's ambivalence toward his too powerful and too

desirable protectress and of his, perforce, weak struggle to free himself from her iron hold—since his life depends on strict obedience and adherence to her program of survival—is a meditation on authoritarianism of great subtlety and originality.

The author is a fifty-seven-year-old New York lawyer who has not previously written fiction. He and I have been friends for years. I have known that he spent the war years in Poland, but until reading this book, I did not know anything about his wartime experiences; he never spoke of them. After reading it, I begin to know what he must have experienced, since a book like this could not have been written except out of first-hand knowledge of the history it chronicles. The Holocaust is permanently lodged in the unconscious memory of our time; we cannot free ourselves of our grief and anger. *Wartime Lies*, even as it brings these emotions to the surface, denies us the solace of catharsis. The crime was too great, the motive unfathomable.

Bryan Cheyette (review date 16 August 1991)

SOURCE: Cheyette, Bryan. "Recapturing a Lost Childhood." *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4611 (16 August 1991): 23.

[In the following review, Cheyette examines the protagonist's loss of identity in *Wartime Lies*, contending that the story is well written, but that Begley's ease with the language denotes his need to justify his own survival of the Holocaust.]

The Holocaust still claims its victims, to this day. The children of survivors, often the unwitting receptacles of their parents' suffering, have themselves begun to comprehend the ramifications for their own lives of a history which has been agonizingly repressed. Returning to the origins of this cycle of pain, Louis Begley, a Jewish child-survivor of Nazi-occupied Poland, has waited over forty years to write his first novel, *Wartime Lies*, in a bid to recapture his lost childhood. The book is as much about the psychological consequences of this loss as anything else.

The short opening section of *Wartime Lies*, which anticipates the novel as a whole, is written from the standpoint of a fifty-year-old man who, looking back on his boyhood in Poland, thinks of himself as a "voyeur of evil": "is that the inevitable evolution of the child he once was, the price to be paid for his sort of survival?" The child in question is named Maciek, after an old Polish song, and he was born in the fateful year of 1933. Fateful, not just because of Hitler's acquisition of power, but because Maciek's mother died in childbirth. *Wartime Lies* is constructed as a kind of reverse *Bil-*

dungsroman, charting the growing maturity of the young Maciek, but instead of gaining a sense of self-knowledge, Maciek is increasingly aware of the necessary loss of "self" which enables him to survive on "aryan papers". He is a "scrawny and nervous" child. Maciek's Aunt Tania (his mother's sister) acts throughout as his surrogate mother and, along with his Polish nanny before the war, begins to nurse him back to health. The early chapters are written in fairy-tale mode as if to stress the wonderment and romance of his "normal" well-to-do Polish upbringing. Speaking of his grandfather "in that golden fall of 1937", Maciek thinks of himself as "his hope, the little man to whom he was teaching all his secrets, the heir to his farms and forests and broken dreams".

After this "season of enchantment", the "fabric" of his youth begins to unravel and his aunt and grandfather are, eventually, forced to go into hiding with him and to travel precariously throughout Poland as "aryans". The figure of Tania dominates the novel, as she both exerts an absolute control over Maciek, and also takes a perverse pleasure in the freedom of her newfound role as his saviour. According to Jewish tradition, Tania was expected to marry Maciek's father after the death of her sister. Her refusal to do this, and her sexual adventures as a single woman, made her a family outcast in peacetime but an indispensable asset during the Nazi occupation. After learning to type German by copying page after page of a German novel, she sleeps with a Nazi bureaucrat in her home town who, in turn, helps protect her. Later on, the haughty tone of her educated German persuades a guard at the railway station in Warsaw to let her and her family travel on a "civilian" train. The entrepreneurship which she demonstrates selling black-market Polish vodka during the war would have been gently quashed in less harrowing times.

Louis Begley makes an essential distinction between Tania's necessary public immorality and her private regimentation of Maciek in order that he can pass muster as a Polish Catholic. It is, precisely, Maciek's inability to distinguish between public and private deceit in this way that is the author's main concern. At a young age, "wartime lies" become ingrained in Maciek as part of his consciousness and, with this devastating loss of identity, he is unable to "recover" completely after the war. Only his circumcised penis prevents Maciek from a total surrender to Polish Catholicism. (Deborah Dwork, in her recent study of Jewish youth in Nazi Europe, points out that circumcised boys were often dressed as girls to evade this notably absolute form of identity check.) But even in post-war Poland, with the continuation of antisemitic pogroms, Maciek avoids "urinating in public places and otherwise displaying that telltale member". This was, in the end, the much-reduced sum of his "identity".

Wartime Lies is an extremely polished book, and this is both its strength and its undoubted weakness. Unlike a writer such as Aharon Appelfeld (also a child survivor of the Holocaust)—who imbues the very fabric of his fiction with a sense of the disjunction between his childhood memories and the words used to describe them—Begley assumes that the smooth, moralistic retelling of his story can, somehow, do justice to it. Those who wrote their memoirs soon after their experiences in the death camps, such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, were painfully aware of the inadequacy of the words which they were using. I hope that Begley will now go on to tell his own wartime story directly and realize that there is no such thing as “wartime truths”, only different kinds of lying.

Julian Duplain (review date 15 January 1993)

SOURCE: Duplain, Julian. “Loss Adjuster.” *New Statesman & Society* 6, no. 235 (15 January 1993): 39.

[In the following review, Duplain applauds Begley’s precise descriptions of places in *The Man Who Was Late*.]

Two years ago Louis Begley published his first novel, *Wartime Lies*, the story of a Jewish boy in eastern Poland who survived the Holocaust, almost alone from his family, by a mixture of assimilation and blind cunning. The horror was narrated from a distance of 40 years, across the Atlantic, by a reticent man with “a nice face and sad eyes” who nowadays reveals his suffering past only in the line of his jaw, never in conversation.

The Man Who Was Late is an oblique sequel. Ben, Harvard graduate and the consummate American banker, is not the Maciek who survived the Warsaw Uprising, but the hints of a central European ghetto history are there. There’s the name, of course, and his voice with “an overlay of strangeness of which he was always aware”: a reference to Jerzy Kosinski’s Holocaust novel, *The Painted Bird*. But when Ben goes so far as to mention an incident of Nazi brutality, in the initial intimacy of the adulterous affair that forms the main action of the novel, he is incapable of describing what happened next: “I don’t know, or perhaps I had forgotten that too.”

Ben’s careful erasure of any personal history enables him to move easily among the bourgeoisie without upsetting the social balance. Posted to Paris in the late 1960s to deal with international co-financing contracts, he manages to play the World Bank off against the Japanese government, flatter the pride of both parties and secure funding for a key project in Brazil.

But professional success conceals personal failure. Even before he went to Paris, Ben was divorced from Rachel, who first gave the gawky immigrant student a “crash course in the good life”. His stepdaughters, now students themselves, have become “bad loans”, treating Ben as a mere careers adviser. In his flat by the Jardin du Luxembourg, he pursues regular assignations that scarcely deviate from the purely physical until he meets Véronique.

We see Véronique from two sides: Ben’s own notes (the “Notabens”, a loose-leaf diary scribbled on hotel letterheads), and the observations of Jack, Véronique’s transatlantic cousin and Ben’s old college friend. It is Jack who has performed this “work of the imagination”, collating and editing Ben’s chronology, which contrasts with his own contented marriage, family holidays and easy management of minor corporate life.

“A friend such as I sufficed,” Jack remarks, a steady point of reference with the kind of personal history Ben can feel comfortable with. The Notabens, though, reflect a despairing condescension at how little this oldest of friends knows him: “Poor Jack! . . . is it possible he doesn’t understand what has happened to Me?”

What has happened to Ben is unremarkable. Unable to be a father himself, he has lost his stepchildren after the divorce from Rachel. But when Véronique offers to leave her husband (the red-blooded lawyer to whom Ben has been channelling work), it is the thought of her young son Laurent that makes Ben dither. He would not, he fears, be able to love the boy properly, and would lose his surrogate offspring a second time. After a season of *liaisons dangereuses*, Ben moves too late and is left unbearably alone: “I reek of loneliness and loss.”

The locations—Paris, Biarritz, Copacabana, New York—and the high-life characters promise another literary soap opera. But Begley forestalls sneers by cutting out the pop-psychology and concentrating instead on precise historical immersion. Just as he fixed every detail of occupied Lvov and Warsaw in *Wartime Lies*, here we have Paris in 1969: the streets, restaurants, tailors and parks in a city where Pompidou is the president, not an arts centre.

It is Begley’s immense facility for the appropriate habits and places that create a time-bubble (with the odd newspaper headline: US in Vietnam, Brandt in Warsaw) and, because it is perfect, a sense of great distance. Only when Ben’s stepdaughter tries to bully Ben back to reality and out of the “jetset rut” does it become clear what an elaborate and complete world her father—and Begley—have manufactured.