

Parisian Space and Memory in Patrick Modiano's Fiction

Elena-Brândușa STEICIUC*

Abstract

Patrick Modiano, the recent Nobel winner, depicts in his writings - more than any other French contemporary novelist - the space of France seen as a "terre d'accueil" for many persons, especially Jews who had to leave their homelands during the Second World War. The very heart of France, Paris is not only the "ville-lumière" much praised by artists of all times and cultures, but also a space where memory is present at any street corner, especially the sad and painful remembrance of anti-Semitism.

This is why our paper will deal with some of the most outstanding aspects concerning France during the 20th century, which are related in Modiano's writings (Ronde de nuit, Livret de famille, Une jeunesse) with memory, especially the Holocaust and the Vichy collaboration experience.

Keywords: Patrick Modiano, French culture, Paris, memory, Holocaust

In the autumn of 2014, French literature was in the spotlight when the Nobel Prize was awarded to Patrick Modiano, an outstanding name in the French and Francophone novel of the last decades. He is an author who has built his work with a jeweler's passion for over four decades, bringing forth the subtle game of memory, closely linked to issues such as identity, origins, roots; in his fiction, Paris holds an important place, connected with an identity quest which is specific to Modiano's style.

Modiano - landmarks in his life and bibliography

Since his debut in 1968, with *Place de l'Étoile*, Modiano has been considered a representative of the "nouvelle fable" in the French literature of those years, strongly marked by the experiment called "Le Nouveau Roman". The young author made a triumphal entry into the literary world, constantly receiving various European awards: Roger Nimier Award (1968); Grand Prize for the novel by the French Academy (1972); Booksellers Award (1976); Goncourt Prize (1978); Prize Prince- Pierre -de- Monaco (1984); Grand Prize for Literature Paul-Morand (2000); Jean-Monnet Prize for European Literature awarded by the Charente Department (2002); Cino del Duca Award (2010); Austrian State Prize for the whole work (2012).

* Professor PhD, "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Romania
selenabrandusa@yahoo.com

What novelty has this shy young author of the late sixties brought to the field of French literature? As mentioned, his literary debut took place in a period of intense controversy of the socio-political structures of France, when the young generation of May '68 "were thoroughly fed up". In keeping with the spirit of those years, the first Modianian novels - *Place de l'Étoile*, *Ronde de nuit*, *Boulevards de ceinture*, the so-called "trilogy of the Occupation" - break a thinking pattern and enter by force into what was called the "Resistance myth". They highlight the painful and complex issue of French collaboration during the Nazi occupation, Jewish identity and anti-Semitism in the Vichy regime. Moreover, the author is obsessed with this period in the history of France at the end of which little Patrick was born, son of a Flemish mother, Luisa Colpeyn, and of a Sephardic Jew father, Albert Modiano.

The same theme is repeated in Louis Malle's movie *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), whose scriptwriter is Patrick Modiano. This film is intended to dynamite the triumphant image of the Resistance. The eponymous hero, a young farmboy from the southwestern occupied France, becomes a member of a pro-German gang that gives him power. Lucien's love for France Horn - the beautiful pianist of Jewish origin, trying to escape from the occupied country - makes him think again about his error. His final execution, at the end of the war, has a highly symbolic value, since it points out the dual aspect of France during World War II: collaboration and resistance.

It is "the Hexagon" that is the space-time background of the novels that followed Modiano's "apprenticeship", during the last decades of the 20th century, where - with the same accuracy - the author reconstructs the Algerian war period or the atmosphere of the sixties modernity; he brings to light marginal, excluded characters, who seem to float without any roots at the edge of society: *Rue des boutiques obscures* (1978); *De si braves garçons* (1982); *Dimanches d'août* (1986); *Voyage de noces* (1990); *Un cirque passe* (1992); *Chien de printemps* (1993); *Dora Bruder* (1997); *Accident nocturne* (2003); *Un pedigree* (2005); *L'herbe des Nuits* (2012). Whatever the event-texture of these writings, they crystallize around some great thematic veins, which ensure the cohesion and consistency of the entire work.

The identity search (of the father, brother or lover, dead or missing in unclear circumstances) is a "fil conducteur" for most of Modiano's novels, because he is the author who impeccably deals, in a Proustian manner, with forms and failures of memory, associated with the obsessive search, that starts over and over again, like a ceaseless game of the eternal return. Maybe that's why the writer often turns to the formula of the "policier" novel, where the original enigma remains the same at the end of the novel and the questions still need an answer. This happens, for example, in *Dimanches d'août*, a dark history in which Sylvia, a beautiful young woman, is kidnapped for a valuable jewel around her neck; her lover, the narrator, will never succeed in clarifying the ambiguous case, which he remembers with a sense of guilt and pain.

The foreigner forced to live in an unknown, hostile environment or the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution, the abandoned, orphaned child / adolescent,

living illegally in the margins of society are other, unavoidable, core themes in Modiano's fiction. Most of his characters are seen at the beginning of life, such as Ingrid Teyrsen, the fragile Austrian Jew, who found refuge in occupied Paris. These young people easily become victims of their own innocence, exploited by unscrupulous adults, and such is the case in *Le café de la jeunesse perdue*, where Louki, a Parisian teenager, during her mother's absence, finds an antidote for her fears in esoteric practices and especially in drugs, the so-called "snow" which her friend Jeanette provides:

He pulled out a metal box. He said it was white powder to snuff, that they called snow. For a short time it gave me a feeling of freshness and relief. I was certain that the anguish and emptiness that had overcome me on the street would not come back again. (Modiano 2012: 108).

Suicide will be the only salvation for the "wounds of childhood and adolescence", except for the narrator, who finds his peace through art.

All these characters wander in an ambiguous space, a trap-universe in which the main points are objects with special meanings: old photographs, newspaper clippings, obsolete directories, posters and Bottin almanacs, from which the search starts without knowing exactly where it would go. Bernard Pivot noticed more than twenty years ago that Modiano's prose rests on a paradox: very concrete space details (streets, buildings and squares of Paris and other cities of France and Europe are described and catalogued with the precision of a surveyor), together with an unclear, ambiguous, vague atmosphere. These elements are meant to complete the construction of the novel, a perfect narrative structure, based mainly on circularity. "So, always go through the same places at different times and, despite the distance between years, we'll end up meeting." (Modiano 2014: 25) says Jean B., narrator of the honeymoon, for whom time is not linear drain, but a circle. Moreover, temporal perception disorder manifests itself in the Modiano's prose through a phenomenon often cited in his texts, pertaining to the art of photography: imprinting; images of the past are much more visible and contoured than the present moment, which leads to confusion not only of ages, but also of identities.

The wide orchestration of themes and motifs, all the spatial and temporal details related to Modiano, come from an art of composition of almost mathematical precision. The technique of the musical counterpoint and the ternary structure give a special rhythm, a kind of "*petite musique*" to his writing, which often has the effect of an incantation.

Paris: space and memory

In his speech to the Swedish Academy, when awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, "*pour son art de la mémoire*", Patrick Modiano evoked - not without a certain nostalgia - the main stages of his biography and the milestones of a work that made him famous, emphasizing the importance of Paris in the construction of his identity: "Paris, my native city, is linked to my first impressions. They were so

strong that ever since I have never stopped exploring the mysteries of Paris.” (Modiano 2014: 24-26) Indeed, from the appearance of his first novel, *La Place de l'Étoile* (1968) to the recent *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier* (2014) this *ville-lumière* - generator of so many innovations in thought and art - appears as a landmark of identity, as a self-forming space, an oneiric, highly metaphysical city, without which Modiano's *oeuvre* would not have been born. As pointed out by the speech mentioned, the writer has been exploring Paris for more than 40 years. This city appears to him as an artefact shaped by time; memory labour is therefore essential in discovering hidden, almost lost meanings, because Paris appears to him as a puzzle which he “composes, decomposes and recomposes incessantly.” (Commengé 2015: 10) Throughout this process, the traumatized memory becomes an important segment of Modiano's work (especially the so-called "trilogy of the Occupation") as it refers to the Paris seized by Nazi troops, symbolically deprived of light, during the blackout, at night.

In the essay *Poétique de la ville*, Pierre Sansot makes a statement that seems fundamental to the understanding of the author's relation to the Parisian space: “The real urban space is the one that changes us, we will not be the same when leaving it” (Sansot 2004: 52). Of all urban areas present in the Modiano's fiction - where cosmopolitan characters often live clandestinely and spend great vacations on the Côte d'Azur or in other luxury resorts on the Atlantic shore - Paris appears very often as a self-matrix space. Paris, depicted either during the occupation period or in the sixties, is much more than a background to the story. Arrondissements, squares, boulevards, monuments, buildings, shops, cafés, bookstores, restaurants, all of these occur with geometric precision in Modiano's novels, as producers of meaning.

So, Paris appears in Modiano's work as a space of identification, a *locus amoenus* with which the self finally mingles, as it happens to Ambrose Guise, a Parisian disguised as an Englishman, after 20 years on the banks of the Thames:

I was becoming one with this city, I was the foliage of trees, the reflections of the rain on the sidewalks, the hum of voices, dust among the millions of street dust particles ... In that time, Paris was a city that corresponded to my heart beats. My life could not exist anywhere but in its streets. It was enough for me to walk alone, at random, in Paris, and I was happy. (Modiano 1985: 119)

Modiano's Paris cannot be otherwise than divided, so as to better correspond with the self-rupture, a classical identity *Spaltung*: the Seine separates its right bank forever, *Rive droite* (especially the sixteenth and seventeenth arrondissements associated with the terror of the occupation) from the *Rive Gauche*, where universities, bookshops and cinemas can be found, a space where time seems to be suspended.

Rive droite is the territory of all embezzlements, here are the Cimarosa Square, place d'Alma and rue Lauriston, headquarter of the Gestapo and other pro-German gangs during World War II. In “the trilogy of the Occupation”, this Paris is evoked through a *sui generis* reconstitution of the atmosphere of the forties.

La Place de l'Étoile (1968), the first part, is simply Raphael Schlémilovitch's inner monologue, in which this young Jewish writer – forced to wear the yellow star by the Vichy government – is trying to define his identity, relating most often parodically to the great French literary tradition. In the novel *La Ronde de nuit*, the central hero is caught in a double play; his identity is split between two camps, two spaces. On the one hand, he is designated as “Swing Troubadour”, a member of a pro-fascist gang, the main holders of shares on the parallel market during the Occupation; on the other hand, the narrator becomes “La Princesse de Lamballe”, an agent infiltrated in a network of resisters. The symbol of French collaboration is played here by a former prisoner of common law – Le Khedive – a grotesque figure, in which Modiano outlines a real character, Henri Lafont, tried and shot after the war. Finally, the double agent leaves Paris, which he calls “*Mon terroir. Mon enfer. Ma vieille maîtresse trop fardée*” (Modiano 1969: 154). Lost between two identities, Swing Troubadour /Lamballe proves to be a victim of circumstances and decides his exit from the stage and from life in a discourse that has the structure of a dream or of delirium.

Concluding the trilogy, the novel *Boulevards de ceinture* (1972) evokes the Parisian world during the last months of the Occupation (July-August 1944). The period investigated is “cloudy” and its oppressive atmosphere is reconstituted with precision. A group of pro-Nazi journalists is in the spotlight, surrounded by all kinds of starlets of the moment. These are joined by the so-called “baron” Chalva Deyckcaire, father of the narrator. Discreet investigation is undertaken, in order to (re)discover the lost father, in a village near the forest of Fontainebleau, where the Parisian leaders of the moment gather in houses requisitioned or purchased on little money. Modiano denounces the anti-Semitism and collaborationism of the French media during World War II, symbolically embodied by a character like Gerbère, inspired by the figure of Robert Brasillach.

We find, therefore, that an important layer of time structure in Modiano's fiction is associated with *Rive droite*, the space of moral and social disintegration.

The other bank of the Seine, *Rive Gauche*, is inextricably linked to the Eden of childhood. The family apartment, situated Quai Conti, 15, is described by Modiano in *Livret de famille* (1977), a volume consisting of 15 narrative sequences, each turning around a tutelary figure of the narrator's existence. The penultimate section, perhaps more than others, is a return in time, for the occasional visit to the former home of the 15, Quai Conti. It is written in a Proustian manner, revealing some of the most enchanting moments of childhood, especially the passing of a *bateau-mouche* on the Seine:

In this instant the *bateau-mouche* appeared. It glided toward the tip of the island, its projectors pointed at the houses of the dock. The walls of the room were suddenly covered with spots of light that turned on the ceiling. In this same room, the fleeting shadows captivated my brother and me when we would turn off the light to watch the passing of the same riverboat. (Modiano 1977: 174-175)

Metaphor of the fragility and ineffable moments of plenitude, the boat sliding along the border, between light and shadow, is just a weak obstacle against forgetfulness, a bridge between present and past.

In its triple function (referential, narrative and symbolic), “Modiano’s mythical topography” - which was analysed in the volume *Patrick Modiano: une lecture multiple* (1998) - creates a vast network of intertextual relations that establish a specific microcosm, an increasingly fragile memory network.

Maybe that is why in the latest novel by Modiano - *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier* (2014) - the main character, Jean Daraganne, an old amnesiac, finds no other source of refreshment than walking in the streets of Paris. A palimpsest that the narrator does not cease to study, Paris incites to immortalization by writing, which the old scribe does incessantly, in his black notebook.

“Sunken city, just like Atlantis” (Modiano 2014a: 26), Modiano’s Paris is saved by the game of memory and the never-ending energies of art.

References

- Modiano, P. (1969) *La ronde de nuit*. Paris: Gallimard
 Modiano, P. (1977) *Livret de famille*. Paris: Gallimard
 Modiano, P. (1985) *Quartier perdu*. Paris: Gallimard
 Modiano, P. (2007) *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*. Paris: Gallimard
 Modiano, P. (2012) *L’herbe des nuits*. Paris: Gallimard
 Modiano, P. (2014a) *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier*. Paris: Gallimard
 Modiano, P. (2014b) *Discours à l’Académie suédoise*. Paris: Gallimard

Critical sources

- Bachelard, G. (1961) *La Poétique de l’espace*. Paris: PUF
 Commengé, B. (2015) *La Paris de Modiano*. Paris: Alexandrines
 Laurent, Th. (1997), *L’œuvre de Patrick Modiano: une autofiction*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon
 Sansot, P. (2004) *Poétique de la ville*. Paris: Payot & Rivages
 Steiciuc, E. (1998) *Patrick Modiano: une lecture multiple*. Iasi: Junimea
 Van Montfrans, M. (1993) « Rêveries d’un riverain » in *Patrick Modiano. Etudes réunies par Jules Bedner*. Amsterdam: Rodopi