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## Translating from Memory: Patrick Modiano in Postmodern Context

### Abstract

In this essay I have attempted to renegotiate the relationship between the work of Patrick Modiano and the conditions of literary production designated by "postmodernism." Contemporary French reviewers and critics have greeted with guarded praise Modiano's efforts to write in a language and about events that belong to another writing. Following their lead, this essay first explores the tension (often lost on American readers) created by the possibility that the historical referent of Modiano's texts—not only Modiano's personal past but the horror of the Occupation—might now exist only as a weightless narrative "effect." As such, it is a part of style somehow comparable to and manipulable by a postmodern, purely textural hermeneutic. As many critics have pointed out, Modiano reveals his awareness of this problem through his obsessive thematizing of "memory." My argument here is that by employing a specifically *translational* mode of writing that would co-opt the "loss of loss" characteristic of postmodernism, Modiano is able to renew our sense of the jagged reality of history as always remembered by a finite subjectivity. I demonstrate this translational mode in an analysis of Modiano's *Rue des boutiques obscures*, in which we find not only the patently postmodern and self-referential detective story form, but the textually invoked subject of that form, presented as "translations" that imply historically lost but nonetheless palpable, real, and at times horrible, antecedents.

### Keywords

Patrick Modiano, postmodernism, language, American readers, Occupation, hermeneutics, memory, translational mode, *Rue des boutiques obscures*, detective story, translations

## Translating from Memory: Patrick Modiano in Postmodern Context

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Although to date the work of Patrick Modiano has been most profitably read in the United States as a French species of second-generation World War II “survivor” fiction alongside the writings of Christa Wolf, Elsa Morante and Art Spiegelman, his audience here remains remarkably small. Very few of his works have been translated into English, and with his recurrent (some would say obsessive) return to the same narrative site—France during the Occupation—Modiano seems to present a time and place hardly as memorable to Americans as to its more immediate cultural survivors. Yet the problem rehearsed time and again in Modiano’s texts is that he cannot “remember” that period either (that no one in his generation can), and even if Modiano has himself referred to Occupied France as the “natural landscape” of his work, to categorize that work according to an unproblematized historical “referent” is certainly not adequate.<sup>1</sup> Colin Nettelbeck and Penelope Hueston are correct in pointing out, for example, that Modiano’s perspective is not that of the historian, but that of the novelist, and they do well to emphasize that between his work and its historical object lies a poetic distance of which he seems most constantly and painfully aware. What they fail to do, however, is to situate that distance itself in specific conditions of literary production that characterize a historical period. Those conditions, which might no longer deserve the adjective “historical,” are postmodern, and it is as a particularly unstable isotope of this cultural chemistry that the figure of Patrick Modiano must be introduced.

What seems to have complicated the task of introducing Modiano as anything, even in his own country, is less his return to a past he is “too young to know” than his apparent return to the forms of the classic French “récit” of the 1920s and his obsession with the weary and well-trod theme of “memory.”<sup>2</sup> Once this last has been recognized, we might expect the next move to involve some comparison with memory’s cultural representative in the French context (the enormous figure of Proust), and hence to voices more closely associ-

ated with the memory of the Occupation, Vercors, or the later Céline of *Un château l'autre*. Yet, I would argue that we can learn more about Modiano's project by reading it in the fashion invited by Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* than by comparing his work to that of the former figures, that it is exactly the problem of historicizing "style" in Modiano that makes moves to Proust or Céline decidedly *faux pas*.<sup>3</sup> For between the accounts of Céline and other first-generation survivors and the texts of Modiano, there lies not only the space of a generation—the difference between recording lived experience and imagining through narrative how a past experience might have been endured—but also a decisive change in the conception of the usage of language as the medium of historical translation. Of course this is not to assert for the former authors' works some unmediated relation to history through a naive or unproblematized conception of language, for their texts are marked heavily by the high-modernist realization that although something (or everything) is always lost in the attempt to translate history through language, it is nevertheless through language that we must translate it. What has changed, or what has itself been translated in postmodernism, is the conception of the undeniable distance between language and the object it describes. That is, the historical loss that generates the energy of first generation "survivor" fiction in its attempt to record the Real (the torture that can never be recorded) has in its second generation become acceptable, "readable," and marketable.

Thus with Anne Duchene we might view Modiano's work in two distinct, though related veins: one that emerges from an older sense of historical dislocation (in which the Jewish son desperately tries to approximate "the . . . experience of the war he was too young to know"), and another mode where the same "desolate sense of loss and dispossession" gets recorded in a tone that is "achingly cool." In this second mode the "story," not to say history, scarcely matters; what does matter is Modiano's "technique . . . the delicate superimposing of past upon present, grafting the 'then' on the 'now' in a thin yet infinitely hurtful threnody." Duchene's caveat is that this second mode threatens to destroy our investment in the first, that Modiano's all too often "formulaic" technique is "getting rather dangerously sleek." That is, not only are Modiano's style and subject becoming recognizable, at least in France, but more to the point, his subject threatens to be subsumed by the style that relates it. In the passages we read thinking, "ah! that's Modiano" in much the same way we would

think “ah! that’s Modigliano” (to borrow Duchene’s clever example) we sense that what might earlier have produced a historical desire in the reader (for Barthes, the text’s “writerliness”) has been reified into a seductive *charme*.

In this latter sense, Modiano’s late figuring of the attempt to retrieve past lives and events has been identified with the postmodern sub-genre of fiction designated by “la mode rétro,” a species of nostalgia art grown popular in France over the last two decades in which the writer’s (or architect’s, or fashion designer’s) backward glance into the past has been converted into a “look” which is its own object. Even in its insistent self-reflexivity, the “rétro” work should not be conceived as simply “all style and no substance,” but as a part of an artistic mode which has eliminated the possibility of any reference to substance. While “style” of course will be said to have its own content, what is gone here is the distance that would allow any perspective on that content, any position outside “style” that would not itself become “style” in turn. Baudrillard has called this the text’s “seduction,” the way in which the most “superficial” or “manifest” aspect of discourse has been converted from that which conceals any meaning or truth beneath it into that which conceals the fact that there is nothing “latent” beneath “the charms and traps of appearances” at all (Baudrillard, “Seduction” 149-50). Against “seduction” Baudrillard will place “interpretation,” whose categories of latency and the unconscious have struggled, at least since Freud, to fill the “abyss of appearances” evoked magically in discourse with ritual, aesthetic, or political meaning.

Of course, it may be argued that Baudrillard’s own positing of the seductive quality of texts is itself only another act of interpretation which would confer upon texts simply another *kind* of political meaning. That is, to question the distinction between surface and depth, between manifest form and latent content in general implies a particular strategy which would close the bridge between the (here) written text and history embodied by interpretation, and thus eliminate the relation between any system of written signs and a political unconscious that would enable the dialectical translation of such written texts into a social sphere—a move which could be, has been (and probably should be) “interpreted” as a politically reactionary critical act. But for Baudrillard such counter-arguments rather constitute proof of seduction’s irresistible force. To posit such categories as “history,” the “political,” or the “social” testifies to seduction’s

proper affect (nostalgia), the desire for some reality or ground beneath the play of seductive signs to which signifieds would refer--for an older, more tangible world accessible not just by signs but by persons, in which the "political" could have meaning. Yet all that remains in the postmodern world of the hyperreal is a proliferation of reproductions of reality, in literary terms, a collection of "styles," not as it were in "reaction" to the threat of seduction (for that would imply the possibility of a conscious perspective or distance in a textual landscape that no longer offers any depth), but as an inevitable result of the fact that "originals" no longer exist. Indeed, as we come to suspect interpretative strategies themselves, including Baudrillard's, to be only more "fragile simulation models" attempting to hide the fact that there is no "reality" to interpret (as interpretation itself becomes seductive), readers of "rétro" art are sentenced to wander in a verbal landscape littered with textual objects "solitary and terrible," searching vainly for a *point de repère*.

Of course this is no longer theory; this is Modiano. Indeed, what makes Modiano a fascinating figure to theorists of postmodern culture is his flawless figuration of this "hyperreal" situation, the feeling constantly evoked as we follow the endless nocturnal peregrinations of his "lost" narrator that at any moment that figure will disappear, having walked off the text's map into some non-narrative parking lot or empty set, the blank page not yet furnished for its characters' habitation. Yet what makes Modiano more fascinating—and what makes these texts postmodern, precisely—is the uncanny way in which the writer's situation has itself "fallen into" the text, in which it becomes yet another object we find strewn on the textual landscape, giving us the vertiginous sense, as Jacques Bersani suggests, that here the novelist has taken on the quality of one of the double-agents in his novels, thus becoming a "double-novelist" who would offer us two "equally impossible" readings. One is a "realist" reading, "to which everything or almost everything invites us (everything is in this case, almost)," while the other stands to take it all back, a reading that demands that we question whether it is we, or the text, that is being read:

Livres d'un piège et livres-pièges, à chaque fois. Par leurs lacunes calculées, par leurs invraisemblances? Si elles n'affectaient que l'histoire, nous pourrions à la rigueur nous en accommoder. Mais comment supporter qu'elles contaminent le discours tout entier?

comment lire, comment vivre ce mauvais rêve? (Bersani 82)

Books about traps and books that trap us, every time. Through their calculated lacunae, their improbability? If they only affected the story we could accommodate ourselves to them, if necessary. But how do we accept the fact that they have contaminated the entire discourse? how do we read, how do we live this nightmare?

Seductive invitations, double agents, a nightmare that must be endured. Not history, but its postmodern occupation.

It has been suggested that Modiano has thus made Occupied France his “natural landscape” in order to voice his authorial identification or *entendement* with a population undergoing a similar crisis in “authenticity.”<sup>4</sup> Yet clearly, if we are to consider Modiano’s work in the series of dialectical relations that make up the literary period characterized by the postmodern, such critical identifications become problematic. That is, we should be careful not to simply posit his ability to conceive a “modernist project in a postmodern period” without considering the question so effectively provoked in Baudrillard’s work, that it is always possible that we can no longer discern the difference between things like “history,” or “authentic loss” and the weightless “styles” that evoke them.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps this possibility that forces Duchene and Bersani to qualify their praise of Modiano’s work (and it is of course not insignificant that both are members of a culture actually occupied during war). Indeed, both seem to sense that the postmodern culture flooded with simulacra in which Modiano’s commemorative project has been conceived threatens to convert his attempts at identification or sympathy into a kind of stylistic “currency” (the reified presence of popularity) which would undermine or render counterfeit the attempts of all “survivor” fiction to maintain a sense of historicity. Without this sense, it is to be feared the Occupation could be viewed by future readers as yet another construction of what we might call the political “imaginary.”

My argument here, however, is that it is exactly our ambivalent reaction to his peculiarly derivative style that bears witness to a new sense of historicity in Modiano’s work. This is not to locate the mode of Modiano’s writing in some context somehow beyond the postmodern, but rather to put into relief Modiano’s sense of his works’ “impropriety”—a term which describes at once the presumptive pose



of the younger narrating generation (evidenced best perhaps in the tone of Spiegelman's *Maus*) and the way in which Modiano figures the attempt to write in a language that is so painfully "not his own"—and to claim for that sense a resistance to the insistently ahistorical force dominating the "culture of the simulacrum." For Modiano's texts do not pretend to be original, nor do they lay claim to a past that earlier writers registered as "irretrievable," nor yet do they yield up their contents as consumable pastiche. Rather, they insistently urge us to confront the problem we might recognize broadly in the mode of writing called "translation," in an intransitive sense, what Barbara Johnson describes as the process in which the "everyday frustrations of writing assume an explicit, externally projected form" (Johnson 144).<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Borgeesian map of a hyperreal Empire, Baudrillard would celebrate as the prototypic "precession of simulacra" (Baudrillard, "Simulacra" 166), Modiano's texts read as overt translations, even translations of translations, leaving us hardly with the poet's sense of high-modernist desperation and inadequacy found in, say, Pound's last *Cantos* (published the same year as Modiano's second novel), but with the disquieting suspicion that somewhere here we are "missing something," that these shadowy and seemingly two-dimensional figures bear *some* relation to historical sources, even if we have temporarily forgotten what that relation entails.

Theorists of postmodern (posthistorical, post etc..) culture like Baudrillard might, of course, point out that what I have mistakenly posited as a palpably historical resistance in a mode of writing called "translation" is simply another seductive "style," or at best an example of the last gasp of some ironic mode attempting to conceal the fact that there is no longer any tenor or ground beneath its purely visual vehicle. Yet if what we call seduction would designate the incessant disappearance of the specific historical "grounds" of discourse along with our willful acceptance of such losses, translation would seem to be the mode in which the force of such a movement is co-opted, perfected, and "jammed."<sup>7</sup> For translation is that which exists only *in* and *because of* the historical disappearances celebrated in seduction. Even if the process of translation seems to double that of seduction in its constant reconfiguration of history as an infinitely traceable surface of signifiers, any given translation exists by virtue of a historically determined series of choices, of inclusions and exclusions, made by a writing subject that cannot be imagined outside of history (a fact which might reveal seduction—not interpretation [another name for



translation]—as that which must dissimulate in order to lay claim to truth). Translation, moreover, should be seen not merely as another, more salutary, term for “seduction,” but as the positive pole of a historical and dialectical process of writing over which seduction has lately posed as a negative and empty end in itself. It is by reading in Modiano’s work the symptoms of the (re)emergence of such a resistant mode of writing that we might explain the hesitations and perplexing lacunae of his texts not as a personal, stylistic “signature,” but as the fallout of historicity finally descending over the postmodern world.

A demonstration of Modiano’s move away from seductive pastiche toward this translational mode of writing might begin with an analysis of style in his postmodern adaptation of the detective story form in *Rue des boutiques obscures* (1978). Certainly, we have accustomed ourselves to the vaguely self-serving motives of genius detectives like Doyle’s Holmes or Christie’s Poirot, yet oddly enough, in this work we find a particularly selfless private eye working literally on his own behalf, searching for his own past which he has lost in an acute attack of amnesia. The plot entails his search for a name, for people who knew him by that name, and for evidence that those people are actually remembering the person he was.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the peculiar emptiness of this narrating subject—who walks and talks (trips and stammers) like a realist representation of Lacan’s schema L—the “ratiocinative” nature of the narrator’s search does suggest a now familiar cross-continental identification with the work of Edgar Poe, whose first tales of ratiocination have fascinated the French since they were first introduced to their fictional compatriot, Auguste C. Dupin, in the middle of the last century. Indeed, it might be claimed that the ultimate end of Modiano’s work, like Poe’s, is not the discovery of the whodunit, but rather the discovery of the process of discovery itself. Of course unlike the hale and worthy Dupin, who carried out his search independent of the local “authorities,” the facts in Guy Roland’s “empty” case force him to rely solely on “others” for his information, but his resulting attention to seemingly insignificant details (and the attendant succession of “notations”) persistently invites us to read the novel as a traditional detective story. As he leaves his employer Hutte’s office at the outset of the novel, for example, Guy directs his attention not only to Hutte, whose leaving will “mean a lot to him” (12), but to the parquet floor, the bookcases stacked with directories, and a Russian icon on the wall,

near the window. Only a detective, we might say, would take such particular notice of objects at such a moving moment of parting. And, we might add, only a writer of a detective story whose entangled plot will later involve his narrator's memory of some uncertain Slavic identity would put the icon there in the first place.

Critics have generally pointed out that these ostensibly "significant" details constitute nothing real at all, only a Barthesian "reality effect." While Hueston and Nettelbeck see the entire novel as a narrative "game" that absorbs the reader into an *esprit enfantin* according to which "anything is possible," for Bersani this novel, like all the others, "takes us from nothing and leads us only to itself" (*pièces* 96, Bersani 82).<sup>9</sup> Of course, that fact in no way impedes us from reading the novel as an adaptation of the detective form. As Franco Moretti reminds us in "Clues," the "solutions" of detective fiction are always purely "literary and so non-referential." Furnishing us with the "sensation of scientific knowledge," but "rigorously avoiding the test of external reality," the detective story creates a self-referentiality that ultimately defines it as a "hyper-literary phenomenon" (Moretti 149). Consequently, in Moretti's view, the goal of the detective story is to produce a seductive "distance and delay" of the hermeneutic process that would convince the reader to "buy" it, and that quality has no doubt contributed to this novel's success. Produced only by the various "leads" Hutte has found for him, who present him first with corroborations that bestow significance to detail, followed often by contradictions that negate that significance, the memory Guy gradually acquires is not of events but of other characters who "share" his situation (i.e., the novel itself), and it is finally through the interaction of the various positions in its constellation of characters that the work's collective memory (the plot) will gradually be produced. In this sense, "memory" might be seen as a proairietic device that merely "keeps the action going"—not, as it were, the evidence of any "remembering" subjectivity, but an empty sign of such a subject: as Guy Roland will claim at the outset of the novel, "I am nothing." Without reference to the formal exigencies of the detective form, it is finally difficult to imagine why Guy begins his search for his past at all, for in his complete forgetfulness after an attack of "acute amnesia" he does not even "feel" that he has lost anything.<sup>10</sup>

Yet if we shift our attention to the end of the novel, which should suggest that we have gotten somewhere even if we haven't, we notice that the necessary "pay-off" of the detective form, the "revealed

solution” that would demonstrate the identity between the genius of the detective and that of his or her creator is notably absent; indeed, we never seem to find what we’re looking for in these darkened streets, and whatever it is, it seems we wouldn’t know it even if we found it. Beyond this most obviously “missing” piece there are other, perhaps more minor, lapses and inward hesitations that make the work read like a “bad” translation of the form: for instance, would Sherlock Holmes or Philo Vance need a shot of cognac to get up the nerve to telephone a contact (17), or would either conceal his stake-out by simply turning his back on the suspect behind him? (36). What other significance can we confer on Guy Roland’s memory of a character named “Bogaerts” than a certain “style” the novel playfully evokes?

Such lapses begin to support Marja Warehime’s claim that finally Modiano draws us back, resisting our attempts to read ourselves into this novel’s self-enclosed space, first and foremost by weaving into his novel a surfeit of evidence, or “too many dead-ends” (Warehime 339). Oddly enough, we meet the first of these in the novel’s opening line, where the narrator “introduces” himself:

Je ne suis rien. Rien qu’une silhouette claire, ce-soir là, à la terrasse du café. J’attendais que la pluie s’arrêtât, une averse qui avait commencé de tomber le moment que Hutte me quittait. (9)

I am nothing. Nothing but a clear silhouette, that night, on the cafe terrace. I was waiting for the rain to stop, a downpour that had begun the moment Hutte left me.

The image seems at first to facilitate the beginning of Guy’s search; if he is now empty it only now remains to “fill” him with the “memories” the novel will entail. Yet since this paradoxical figure (a “clear silhouette”) bears no outline to “fill in,” the narrative apparatus grinds to a halt in mid-sentence, recovering only by the insertion of stylistic markers that we can more easily fit into the expected detective story atmosphere, a rainy night, a cafe terrace, a *départ*.

In this way, we might begin to sense how *Rue des boutiques obscures* liminally figures the deteriorating but palpable limits of the detective form along with the seductive force historically built into it.<sup>11</sup> For even as Modiano’s borrowing of such a form would allow him a pretext for what could be passed off as coherent, seductive and non-referential (hi)story, the dialectical movement of the text that follows

continuously announces and enacts the fact that these figurations are only temporary, that the “identity” or adequation it seeks will never be found “once and for all.” True, once the novel begins to unfold and Guy begins to take note of details, his “transparent” subject begins to reflect more or less definite shadows and hues. The reminiscences of the barmen Sonachitze and Heurteur, for example, will literally “shed light” on his identity (23). Most important, however, their subsequent doubts retract that discovery, and as we leave the scene and the chapter the situation is “even more obscure” than it had been at the outset. At the same time, however, their identification of the Russian Stioppa de Djagoriew sheds an odd light on the previously “insignificant” detail of Hutte’s Russian icon, a light that will change, not disappear, when Guy discovers his Dominican (?) identity as Pedro McEvoy. Again, even as we are tempted to cite these “discoveries” as the outward display of what is usually kept inside the detective’s head, in an odd way we are made to feel that Guy shares more than the novel’s “situation” with these characters, that we (like the narrator, at each successive point) are getting only one translation of its particular events. In fact, Guy’s search brings him not to characters who have memories, but more often to characters who don’t. Sonachitze and Heurteur recall only vaguely, for example, the “drôle d’époque” the narrator presses them for (“we’re a little hazy on dates, . . . anyway, it all goes back to the Dark Ages”), and Stioppa de Djagoriew finds he cannot identify the faces in the box of old photographs his mother has given him (although he will share them, and his dinner, with Guy). Of course we, too, are forced to “share” the narrator’s situation (seduced, as it were, into our own formal expectations) but as we regroup and change direction, following the narrator through a chain of uncertain “discoveries” that determine for him (and us) what he was seeking all along, we find no neat and tidy representation of a particular object or person, but an allegory of memory itself, produced in the shifting and fugitive frame of reference I have called the text’s “translation.”

As I have mentioned, it has more often been suggested that the “situation” these characters share, the source of, or reason for, both the narrator’s amnesia and the search that follows, can be located in the insistently forgotten Occupation of France during the second World War.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is against such readings, which would “solve” the problem posed by the text by displacing the more modest attempts of the incompetent Guy Roland with the more professional detective expertise of a crudely “literary-historical” criticism, that the process of

translation in the text seems to work. Just as the details Guy Roland finds to “fill in” a part of that forgotten period (Chapter 37) seem to confer on the novel a single historic referent, that ground shifts in the memory of other characters, who remember not only the first World War but the War of 1812 and the Bay of Pigs. Even if the general rubric “war” might then seem to be the novel’s more general, though in a certain way fixed, referent, Modiano shifts even that broader ground by introducing figures remembered in wars (Bagration, Troubetskoi, Rubirosa) who are also noted lovers, and thus leads us back to the site of the narrator’s screen memory of his forgotten love, Denise Coudreuse—a complex representation of “betrayal” (what love and war seem to have in common for Modiano) that takes place in the “Bar Hilton,” where Guy sits with a ruddy German, his drunken mistress, an apparently “dead” oriental and the American (his lead and his ally), Waldo Blunt, who plays “Que reste-t-il de nos amours?” (58).<sup>13</sup>

Of course, it is also tempting to see in such a series of narrative dispersions a process of “defamiliarization” characteristic of the New Novelists, whose attempt to completely disrupt the reader’s passive recognition of “character” or “plot” would provoke or renew some sense of the incongruity between “real life” and its glossy and seductive representations in traditional literature. Yet just as Modiano refuses to offer us easily identified historical referents, clearly he still “believes” in character and plot, and further, that to completely “defamiliarize” them (as happens in what he calls the overly “intellectual” work of Sollers and Robbe-Grillet) is simply to skirt the problem posed by writing out “real lives.” What Modiano’s writing shows us, however, is how real lives (as well as historical events like the Occupation) are only available “in translation,” a mode which allows persons and events the force and energy of both their deformed presence and their displacement. In this sense, *Rue des boutiques obscures* refuses to be read as a detective story or historical novel, whose seductive critical solutions (like those of their fictional counterparts) are also “literary, and so non-referential,” but rather demands to be found, a deformed double of the Bottin one finds at Hutte’s detective agency, whose pages direct us to things, beings, even worlds, that have (only recently, it seems) disappeared, and to which they might still bear witness.

### Notes

1. For this and other citations to interviews I am largely indebted to Colin Nettelbeck and Penelope Hueston, *Patrick Modiano: pièces d'identité*, the most comprehensive critique of Modiano's writings before and including *Quartier Perdu*. For the above see 26, and notes 4, 8, and 22. All translations from this and other texts are my own.
2. See Bersani 78: "How can we not recognize, in *La Ronde de Nuit* or *Villa Triste*, the discrete charm of a perfectly French narrative, model 1920, brand N.R.F.?"
3. As Pierre Assouline has pointed out in a recent interview/article on Modiano's career, "auteurs Gallimard" like André Malraux and Raymond Queneau were more than "styles" Modiano might adapt or adopt. Originally his mathematics tutor, Queneau introduced Modiano to the Gallimard circle at their June cocktail parties while Modiano was still in his teens, and later assisted in placing Modiano's first book, *La place de l'étoile*, with these exclusive publishers in 1967. Both Queneau and Malraux were marriage witnesses at the Modianos' civil ceremony. Yet even despite what might be referred to as the *ease* of his "entré en littérature," my point is that his texts—written self-consciously *en retard*—tell a different story. I am grateful to Alice Kaplan for pointing out Assouline's article.
4. Marja Warehime has suggested that the Occupation was "a period of cultural breakdown where originality and authenticity are problematic values," a period that has "an esthetic counterpart in the cultural fragmentation of postmodernism" (343). Thus at the level of literary production at least, Modiano's attempt to become "the author of a unique or "original" body of work" at a historical juncture in which "authorship" (along with the associated *oeuvre*) and "originality" have both become "problematic"—or worse, "irretrievably lost"—might be construed as the basis for his "identification" with the population of France during this period (343). Yet what seems most "problematic" of all is the grand homology that would directly compare specific conditions of the Occupation—for example, the Occupied population's desire for legal, genealogical "authenticity" in a period in which discovered simulation could mean death—with Modiano's search for a literary mode that would somehow reassert the "authenticity" of present-day "literary" acts. While Warehime stipulates that it is the confessed and recorded inability of Modiano's texts to arrive at any kind of historical ground that confers upon them an anachronistic modernist identity, what characterizes the postmodern condition seems to be the way in which this sense of loss or narrative inadequacy has itself been lost, or at least can no longer be identified as lost in the present period.
5. In a recent essay, "Lost in the Hermeneutic Funhouse: Patrick Modiano's Postmodern Detective," Jeanne Ewert compounds the danger of Warehime's homology in a broad gesture characteristic of a new generation



of postmodern criticism. Approaching the text openly *in search of* the “trick corridors and illusory scenes” of a hermeneutic “funhouse,” Ewert reduces Modiano’s work to a surface of critically reified signifiers in which “the Jew, the detective, and the amnesiac” are blended together into “one marginalized figure” (171).

6. For the post-structuralist Johnson, the “everyday frustrations” of writing can of course be traced to the play of differences between signifiers and signifieds; at the risk of reducing Johnson’s position to a formal figure, the present argument works on another level in which *différance* in translation could be seen as the play of differences between texts and their various historical “sources.”

7. I borrow the notion of the text’s “jamming” from Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* (47, 115 and *passim*), where it is described as a voice in the text’s “hermeneutic” code that “declares the enigma it has proposed to be unresolved.” Metacritically, seduction is jammed here not because it discloses, but because it closes or “puts an end to” what is clearly the “infinity” of the text, and “consequently establishes” it in what I have described as the text’s necessary translation.

8. The proairetic device of the protagonist’s amnesia is nothing new to the detective form. In David Goodis’s *Nightfall* (1947, rpt. 1991), for example, James Vanning suffers a type of “regressive amnesia” after killing a man in self-defense that implicates him in several crimes to be solved by the novel’s Detective Fraser. Like Modiano’s narrator, Vanning also does some detective work on his own behalf. I am grateful to Tim Dayton for pointing out Goodis’s novel and the possibility that Modiano is also in some sense translating “from the American.”

9. Both claims seem to be corroborated when we find the figure of the novel as its own “demonstrated” end on the last page, where Guy finds his lost address in Rome: Rue des boutiques obscures, 2.

10. If modern subjects find themselves obsessed with the experience of loss, this is the fate of the postmodern subject.

11. Although Moretti’s article concentrates solely on the detective fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle, whose success with the form coincides with a period of dominant capitalism, it could be argued that the form emerges (and not coincidentally) with the period of emergent capitalism in which Poe was writing. Of course, the art of writing backwards, starting with a desired denouement and creating the necessary circumstances that will seem to “produce” that denouement when read forwards, is as old as rhetoric. But it seems to have been Poe—writing at a historical juncture in which new market relations were making it possible to turn public sensation into cash—who first hit upon the idea of reproducing rhetorically the sensation of violent crimes (i.e., the delay, the chase, the capture).

12. It is important to note how the critical consensus over Modiano’s figuring of the Occupation in his novels divides with *RBO*. While critics such



as Dapri suggest that the Occupation is “too fundamental . . . too personal” to Modiano’s generation for it *not* to enter his work (202), Hueston and Nettelbeck identify *Boulevards de Ceinture*—which immediately precedes *Rue des boutiques obscures*—as the Janus-book in which Modiano opens himself to a “different future” beyond the Occupation.

13. It should be noted that these “narrative dispersions” have an equivalent at the level of affect. Specifically, even as we are tempted to pity, identify or sympathize with what we project as the various “losses” the narrator has undergone, scenes such as this persistently threaten to dissolve into the ridiculous. In his visit to the grieving Stioppa after the funeral of one of the last members of the Russian emigration, for example, Guy Roland and Stioppa can barely fit into Stioppa’s tiny apartment together, much less into the elevator. Later, taking his leave from Stioppa in the fog, with a box of photographs under his arm that might hold the key to his past, Guy suddenly feels like a child coming home from a birthday party.

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