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Patrick Modiano: 'A Marcel Proust of our time'?

The winner of the 2014 Nobel Prize for Literature was, in more ways than one, *Patrick Modiano*. Typically, the publicity-shy novelist had crept in under the radar, despite a late surge in the betting, and had even proved hard to locate once the decision had been taken. In terms of his artistic achievements, however, the Nobel Academy had no trouble in pinning him down. He was, their spokesman, Peter Englund, asserted, a 'Marcel Proust of our time'.¹ It is the aim of the present article briefly to explore this notion, and to evaluate just how apposite an assessment it is.

That Modiano is interested in Proust, there can be no doubt. As he has revealed: 'J'ai commencé à lire *A la recherche du temps perdu* à seize ans, je l'ai fini à vingt',² and the impact of this reading was never to be forgotten. By the age of seventeen, he had already usurped the pen of his predecessor, forging dedications by him,³ and this early emulation then became much more extensive in his first novel, *La Place de l'étoile*.⁴ In this work, where he humorously pastiches a wide variety of writers — Proust to the forefront — in much the same way as the future author of *A la recherche du temps perdu* had done decades earlier,⁵ Modiano again slips into the master's skin, this time through the intermediary of his narrator, Raphaël Schlemilovitch. It is not for nothing that Schlemilovitch eventually starts to write 'la première partie de [s]on œuvre [...]: *Du côté de Fougeire-Jusquiamès*' (p. 92), nor that his text regularly alludes to events from *A la recherche*, most notably Marcel's bedtime kiss (p. 12) and the sight of Mme de Guermites in the church (pp. 88-89),⁶ as well as to important Proustian images and leitmotifs, for example the magic lantern (p. 92) and 'la fée' (pp. 92, 94).⁷ Indeed, Modiano will even refer to his equivalent of Mme de Guermites as 'la fée Mélusine' (p. 92), in another overt borrowing from Proust.⁸

This is by no means the only direct quotation from *A la recherche*. In her impressive study, Annelies Schulte Nordholt has detailed four others, more considerable, if sometimes slightly adapted.⁹ There is, in fact, additionally, a fifth: ‘L’énergie et le charme d’une cruelle petite fille de l’aristocratie française qui, dès son enfance, monte à cheval, casse les reins aux chats, arrache l’œil aux lapins...’ (p. 91).¹⁰ Given the weight of all this evidence, it is little wonder that Schlemilovitch will later be chided: ‘Vous vous prenez pour Marcel Proust [...?] Vous n’allez tout de même pas gaspiller votre jeunesse en recopiant *A la recherche du temps perdu*?’ (p. 94).

Never again will the influence of Proust be as blatant as it is this initial book. However, in Modiano’s subsequent novels, a certain Proustian ‘feel’ will still be in evidence. This is perhaps best seen in the recurrent *modianesque* themes, which are also those of *A la recherche*: time, loss, identity and memory. Each of these is well illustrated by *Rue des boutiques obscures*,¹¹ in which an amnesiac tries to re-establish links with his past life and his past self, but much the same could be said of any of the Modiano’s works. Witness this allusion to the ravages of Time, or what Paul Ricoeur has called ‘*le changement qui défait — oubli, vieillissement, mort*’,¹² in *Dimanches d’août*: ‘Cet homme ne ressemblait pas à celui d’il y a sept ans. [...] Décidément, il parlait de quelqu’un d’autre que de Sylvia [...]. Peut-être avait-il oublié des pans entiers du passé.’¹³

Of all the Proustian themes feeding into Modiano’s works, however, it is arguably the concern with remembrance that most strikingly stands out. The Nobel Prize was, after all, awarded in recognition of the ‘art of memory’ displayed by the novelist,¹⁴ an art which manifestly seems to be based on the two types of recollection found in *A la recherche*. On the one hand, voluntary memory, as evidenced by this extract from *Rue des boutiques obscures*: ‘Maintenant, il suffit de fermer les yeux. Les événements [...] me reviennent, par bribes, à la mémoire’ (p. 176). On the other, involuntary memory, again well illustrated in the same

novel, where two *déclics* see part of the narrator's past come back (pp. 103, 104), or, more figuratively, by *Chien de printemps*: 'Il faut croire que parfois notre mémoire connaît un processus analogue à celui des photos Polaroid. Pendant près de trente ans, je n'ai guère pensé à Jansen. [...] Son souvenir était resté en hibernation et voilà qu'il ressurgit [...].'¹⁵

Hand in hand with this ongoing development of the key Proustian themes, Modiano continues to allude to various other aspects of *A la recherche*. In *Du plus loin de l'oubli*, for instance, he references the famous opening of Proust's *roman fleuve* when his narrator mentions his hotel room: 'J'avais mal dormi ces nuits-là. Je me réveillais et je ne savais plus où j'étais. Il me fallait un long moment avant de reconnaître la chambre.'¹⁶ Elsewhere, it is the evocative nature of names that is reworked (as in 'les noms, comme celui, pourpre et scintillant, de: « Rubirosa »'),¹⁷ or images such as the (train) journey and the aquarium.¹⁸ Modiano will even hark back to the scene where Vinteuil's daughter has a sexual encounter in front of her father's photo.¹⁹ In fact, it is possible to take any book by the 2014 Nobel prize-winning author and find echoes of his illustrious predecessor. This is why *Quartier perdu* can be seen to be so noteworthy. The narrator ends up writing about his lost past in Proust's old flat at 45 rue de Courcelles in Paris, and although the latter did not start work on his magnum opus until he had moved to the boulevard Haussmann, the suggestion here seems clear: if Modiano is no longer simply copying *A la recherche*, as he playfully did in *La Place de l'étoile*, his post-1968 works still consistently hark back to it.

There are, however, a number of telling differences between Modiano and his literary 'mentor'. For example, Proust's novel is famously cohesive. The two *côtés*, initially assumed to be quite separate, are eventually revealed to meet, while the 'temps perdu' will reassuringly be 'retrouvé'. This is not the case for Modiano. As he has said: 'Au fond, j'ai toujours douté qu'on puisse ressusciter le passé... enfin, comme la madeleine de Proust... la seule chose...c'est qu'il y a par-ci, par-là, des zones mangées par l'oubli... restent des

fragments... des traces...'20 Ultimately, then, for Modiano, there is no cohesion. His readers are presented, to use Peter Englund's words, with 'the problems of reaching back; not reaching back, not understanding'.21 It is in this context that the intertextual nature of Modiano's writing takes on added significance. As well as bolstering the author's thematic concerns — such a strategy embodies literary *memory* — it simultaneously ensures that his works are non-totalising, regularly sending readers outwards, in search of at least part of their 'meanings'.

A second striking difference between the two novelists relates to the length at which they express themselves. Proust is famously the writer of intricate sentences, which sometimes span entire pages, and which result in one of the weightiest tomes of all time. Modiano, on the other hand, by his own admission, has constantly sought to 'condenser le plus possible', because: 'A une époque où le lecteur dispose de moins en moins de temps, il faut lui permettre de lire d'une seule traite.'22 This is why, as Peter Englund rightly stresses, his books are accessible and readable.

Taking these two obvious differences together,23 it might be said that whereas Proust creates a novel having all the monumentality of a cathedral, Modiano produces works which are more akin to a bird's nest, constructed from heterogeneous scraps and fragments, embodying impermanence, and in which a number of visible gaps remain.

As may by now be clear, Modiano's relationship with Proust is markedly ambiguous. From *La Place de l'étoile* onwards, his admiration for his predecessor is transparent, and rather like the narrator of this breakthrough text, who carries 'plusieurs volumes de Proust' around with him in his luggage (pp. 124, 132), Modiano never completely discards these literary 'bagages'. Yet at the same time, and again this is evident as early as *La Place de l'étoile*, he rejects the temptation simply to imitate *A la recherche*, and keeps a certain distance between himself and one of his sources of inspiration. But this need for individuality

is not the only motivation for Modiano. He is also aware that, since Proust was writing, the world has moved on. As he has observed:

[L]es gens de ma génération ont une infirmité par rapport à ceux de la génération précédente: notre pouvoir de concentration s'est affaibli. La génération précédente est parvenue à faire une œuvre globale, une sorte de cathédrale. Je pense à Proust ou à Lawrence Durrell [...]. Ces gens vivaient dans un monde où l'on pouvait se concentrer davantage tandis que pour les gens de ma génération, c'est fragmentaire.²⁴

In conclusion, then, it seems hard to disagree with Peter Englund. Patrick Modiano does indeed appear to be a 'Marcel Proust of our time'. But more than that, perhaps. As he has now been consecrated by the Nobel Academy, with international interest in him stimulated as a result, and as his creativity shows no sign whatsoever of diminishing, he is set to be the Marcel Proust of the years to come as well.

1 Mark Brown, Kim Willsher and Alison Flood, 'Nobel prize winner Patrick Modiano hailed as modern Marcel Proust' <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/09/nobel-prize-literature-winer-patrick-modiano-hailed-modern-marcel-proust>> [accessed 21 November 2014].

2 Philippe Lançon, 'Mais qui est Dédé Sunbeam?', *Libération*, 4 October 2007, p. III.

3 Anne Diatkine, 'Interview mystère: « Mon père aurait voulu que je disparaisse »', *Libération*, 24 July 2006, p. VIII.

4 Patrick Modiano, *La Place de l'étoile* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968). For this and all novels cited, subsequent page references will appear in parenthesis after the relevant quotations.

5 Marcel Proust, *Pastiches et mélanges* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue française, 1919).

6 Cf. Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, edited by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 volumes (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1987-89), I, pp. 13 and 171-76 respectively. Future references to this edition will use the abbreviation *ARTP*.

- 7 Cf. e.g. *ARTP*, I, pp. 9-10, or II, p. 311, or IV, p. 503; and II, p. 311 respectively.
- 8 *ARTP*, II, p. 311.
- 9 Annelies Schulte Nordholt, 'Pastiches de Proust: *La place de l'étoile* de Patrick Modiano', *Marcel Proust Aujourd'hui*, 3 (2005), 11-31 (pp. 24, 22, 22 n. 7, and 25 n. 10 respectively). See passim for more links between the two novels.
- 10 Cf. *ARTP*, II, p. 793.
- 11 Patrick Modiano, *Rue des boutiques obscures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).
- 12 Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 3 volumes (Paris: Seuil Points, 1983-1985), III, p. 34.
- 13 Patrick Modiano, *Dimanches d'août* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 15.
- 14 Brown, Willsher and Flood.
- 15 Patrick Modiano, *Chien de printemps* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p. 17.
- 16 Patrick Modiano, *Du plus loin de l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 17-18. See also Patrick Modiano, *Des Inconnues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 68-69, and for both examples cf. *ARTP*, I, pp. 3-4.
- 17 *Rue des boutiques obscures*, p. 176. Cf. *ARTP*, I, p. 41.
- 18 Re. the train journey, see e.g. *Quartier perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 80 and cf. *ARTP*, I, pp. 3-4. For the aquarium, see e.g. *La Petite Bijou* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 153-54, and cf. *ARTP*, pp. 41-42.
- 19 *Des Inconnues*, pp. 63-64. Cf. *ARTP*, I, pp. 158-61.
- 20 Patrice Delbourg, 'Modiano cantabile', *L'Événement du jeudi*, 4-10 January 1996, pp. 71-73 (p. 71).
- 21 Brown, Willsher and Flood.
- 22 Jean-Louis de Rambures, 'Comment travaillent les écrivains: Patrick Modiano', *Le Monde*, 24 May 1973, p. 24.
- 23 For more differences, see Schulte Nordholt, pp. 12, 20, 23.

24 Laurence Liban, 'L'Entretien: Modiano', *Lire*, October 2003, pp. 98-104 (p. 101).