

Chronotopes in Patrick Modiano's Fictional Writing of History

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In France, the official memory of the years of collaboration with the Nazi occupants during World War II, has been much debated in recent years, due, in part, to the fact that the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Patrick Modiano in 2014. In support of their decision, the Swedish Academy stated that: "The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2014 is awarded to the French author Patrick Modiano [...] for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation." (Nobelprize.org 2014).

Most of Modiano's novels (around 25 in total) are in some way linked to WWII or to the post-war years of the author's childhood, be it his works of *autofiction*, in which he and his family and their friends and acquaintances participate in the more or less fictional events; or be it the novels in which other characters dominate, for instance female first-person narrators. One novel, however, holds a unique place among Modiano's literary works: the novel *Dora Bruder* from 1997, published in English in 2000 under the title *The Search Warrant*.¹

In this article, I shall examine some extracts from this particular novel, but let me first comment briefly on the features that distinguish it from Modiano's other novels. In fact, the novel entitled *Voyage de noces* (1990) (English edition: *Honeymoon*) is strongly linked to parts of the yet unpublished *Dora Bruder*, although all of the names and most of the concrete events are completely different in the two novels. However, in retrospective, after the publication of *Dora Bruder* in 1997, it is easy to

1 My edition of the *The Search Warrant*, (in the following quotations referred to as SW) was published by Harvill Secker (London) in 2014. The translation from the French is by Joanna Kilmartin.

see how the two novels are linked. They have their common source in one special experience in the author's life, which he describes in the opening lines of *Dora Bruder*:

Eight years ago, in an old copy of *Paris Soir* dated 31 December 1941, a heading on page three caught my eye: "From Day to Day." Below this, I read:

PARIS

Missing, a young girl, Dora Bruder, age 15, height 1.55m, oval-shaped face, grey-brown eyes, grey sports jacket, maroon pullover, navy-blue skirt and hat, brown gym shoes. Address all information to M. and Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris. (SW, 3)

Then follows a comment on the area around Boulevard Ornano, where the first-person narrator, presented as identical with the author of the novel, used to visit the flea market as a boy, together with his mother. A little later, he reports that he used to return to this area as a young man around 20 years old, because his current girlfriend was living there:

In 1965, I knew nothing of Dora Bruder. But now, 30 years on, it seems to me that those long waits in the cafés at the Ornano crossroads, those unvarying itineraries—the Rue du Mont Cenis took me back to the Butte Montmartre Hotels, the Roma or the Alsina or the Terrass, Rue Caulaincourt—and the fleeting impressions I have retained: snatches of conversation heard on a spring evening beneath the trees in the Square Clignancourt, and again, in winter, on the way down to Simplon and the Boulevard Ornano, all that was not simply due to chance. Perhaps, although as yet unaware of it, I was on the track of Dora Bruder and her parents. Already, imperceptibly, they were there. (SW, 6)

This is quite an extraordinary way of writing novels, especially of writing what might be considered a documentary novel. Modiano's conception of a novelist's ideal working methods, his theory of *the novelist* (not his theory of *the novel*), includes an important element of what he calls a gift of clairvoyance ("un don de voyance chez les romanciers," *Dora Bruder*, 52). In Modiano's case, this gift, or this faculty, helps him to reveal what

has been hidden, what has been an occult part of the collective memory. More specifically, the collective memory in question is that of WWII in France, where “everybody” was a resistent or at least was not actively collaborating with the Nazis, especially with regard to the denunciation of hidden Jews and other anti-Semitic war crimes...

What does it actually mean that, according to The Swedish Academy, Modiano received the Nobel Prize “for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation?” (Nobelprize.org. 2014). How can we grasp his fictional technique, his very special art of memory? He uses time and place as basic ingredients; for example, in *Dora Bruder*, he visits places (streets, buildings, market places) and tries to reinstate himself as a narrator and the persons he presents as novelistic characters in a past setting—a specific year or time of year that may inspire his visionary art of memory. In fact, *The Search Warrant* is not at all a badly chosen title for the English translation of the novel *Dora Bruder*; throughout the novel, the narrator is searching for concrete information about the Jewish girl Dora Bruder and her parents, all of whom died or disappeared in Nazi concentration camps.

With the help of some dedicated historians and war-crime investigators, especially the famous lawyer and Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld, the author obtains a lot of valuable information, but the issue addressed in this novel nevertheless remains the relation between a visionary narrator and his main character. This novelistic character is constructed on the basis of a historical person, completely forgotten until Modiano came across the search warrant, which he quotes in the beginning of the novel. It should be noted that Modiano has been severely criticized, by Serge Klarsfeld himself and others, for not mentioning the help he received from Klarsfeld regarding the historical facts related to the lives of Dora Bruder and her parents (see Hilsum 2012).

Modiano’s use of time and space in his novelistic technique has clearly some affinities to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope. To quote from Bakhtin’s essay “Forms of time and chronotope in the novel,” in which he covers the historical development of the genre of the novel, from antiquity to the beginning of the twentieth century: “We will give the name *chronotope* (literally ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed

in literature.” (Bakhtin [1981] 2011, 84). As we shall see, many passages from the novel *Dora Bruder* may be read as examples of this “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships.”

Consider, for example, the two first pages of chapter 3 of the novel, with the following quotation from Bakhtin’s chronotope-essay in mind:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible, likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.” (Bakhtin [1981] 2011, 84)

To the narrator of *The Search Warrant*, the project of investigating elements from the story of Dora’s life in Paris and of her deportation is a project involving charging space and time in a way that responds to Modiano’s artistic needs as a writer of fiction. This “fusion of indicators” is not, however, necessarily linked to the “detective” part of the plot, or at least it does not depend upon it. This is evident towards the end of the following quotation, in which the narrator begins to hesitate, finding himself “in two minds”:

It takes time for what has been erased to resurface. Traces survive in registers, and nobody knows where these registers are hidden, and who has custody of them, and whether or not their custodians are willing to let you see them. Or perhaps they have simply forgotten that such registers exist.

All it takes is a little patience.

Thus, I came to learn that Dora Bruder and her parents were already living in the hotel on the Boulevard Ornano in 1937 and 1938. [...] Sometime during the last three or four years before the war, Dora Bruder would have been enrolled at one of the local State secondary schools. I wrote to ask if her name was to be found on the school registers, addressing my letter to the head of each [...]. All replied politely. None had found this name on the list of their pre-war pupils. In the end, the head of the former girls’ school at 69 Rue Championnet suggested that I come and consult the register for myself. *One of these*

*days, I shall. But I'm in two minds. I want to go on hoping that her name is there. It was the school nearest where she lived.*² [...] It took me four years to discover her exact date of birth: 25 February 1926. And a further two years to find out her place of birth: Paris, 12th arrondissement. But I am a patient man. I can wait for hours in the rain. (SW, 9–10)

To me, this quotation explains sufficiently why Modiano did not include the name of Serge Klarsfeld in this novel, either as an extra-textual reference, or as a character in the novel. This is neither a historical novel nor a documentary. It is a first-person novel, told by a *narrateur homodiégétique*, and even more so, by a *narrateur autodiégétique* (see Genette 1971, 253) who plays the central role both in his own story (the way he carries out and comments on his investigation) and in the story of the girl Dora Bruder, who never plays the central role in the novel, even though the original version of the novel is named after her.

I do not agree with scholars like Jeanne Bem, who criticize the author of *Dora Bruder* for his use of the term “novel” in connection with this book.³ However, I share her view on the generic ambiguity of Modiano’s project in this book, and I fully support her view that *Dora Bruder*, like all great works of fiction, investigates the limits of what literature can do.⁴

One should note what the narrator says about being “in two minds.”⁵ He does not really want to know whether or not the name of Dora Bruder is to be found in the register of the school at 69 Rue Championnet, or perhaps he prefers not to know exactly for the time being, because his presumptions, or his hopes, may turn out to be wrong. This hesitation is clearly part of the fictional project. It also highlights the essential difference between the narrator of the novel and its author, Patrick Modiano. It is impossible for the reader to know whether the author has checked

2 The emphasis is mine. I shall come back to this passage, which goes like this in the original version: “Un jour, j’irai. Mais j’hésite. Je veux encore espérer que son nom figure là-bas. C’était l’école la plus proche de son domicile.” (*Dora Bruder*, 14).

3 “Aussi pensé-je que l’auteur a tort de faire suivre le titre *Dora Bruder* du mot ‘roman.’” (Bem, 1999, 222).

4 “*Dora Bruder* est un objet littéraire déconcertant qui, comme toute grande oeuvre, explore les limites de la littérature.” (Bem 1999, 222).

5 In the French original: “Mais j’hésite” *Dora Bruder*, 14 (see note 2). This phrase could also be translated as: “But I hesitate,” or “But I’m not quite sure.”

the school register before or after the publication of the novel in 1997. However, the narrator never did, even if he informs the reader that “One of these days, [I] shall.”

Let us consider how Modiano explains this kind of hope, presumption or clairvoyance:

Like many writers before me, I believe in coincidence, and, sometimes, in the novelist’s gift for clairvoyance—the word “gift” not being the right one, for it implies a kind of superiority. Clairvoyance is simply part of the profession: the essential leaps of imagination, the need to fix one’s mind on detail—to the point of obsession, in fact—so as not to lose the thread and give in to one’s natural laziness. (SW, 47)

In order to be able to write the novel *Dora Bruder*, Modiano had to approach his “point of obsession” by means of a detour, as it were, through another novel, based on characters without any direct connection to the historical person Dora Bruder, but with much the same destiny. Fundamentally, this other novel represents the same “point of obsession” as that which dominates the novel *Dora Bruder*:

In December 1989, after reading the announcement of the search for Dora in the *Paris Soir* of December 1941, I had thought about it incessantly for months. The precision of certain details haunted me [...]. At the time, the emptiness I felt prompted me to write a novel, *Honeymoon*,⁶ it being as good a way as any of continuing to fix my attention on Dora Bruder, and perhaps, I told myself, of elucidating or divining something about her, a place where she had been, a detail of her life. (SW, 48)

Thus, to get close to the Jewish girl Dora Bruder, killed by the Nazis during World War II, Modiano uses primarily a literary tool. Even as he continues his “detective” investigations into the whereabouts and movements in and out of the Paris of Dora and her family, he starts writing a novel, with an invented story and other main characters, but with a focus on Dora and her destiny. Evoking the work on the novel *Honeymoon*, and quoting a few lines from this novel in which the main characters

6 *Voyage de nocces* (Gallimard 1990).

leave the metro station *Nation* in Paris and experiences a big snowfield, Modiano, through his narrator in *Dora Bruder*, produces an astonishing meta-literary comment:

Today, it occurs to me that I had to write 200 pages before I captured, unconsciously, a vague gleam of the truth. [...] These back streets lay behind the Rue de Picus and the Holy Heart of Mary, the convent from which Dora Bruder made her escape, one December evening when it probably had been snowing in Paris. That was the only moment in the book when, without knowing it, I came close to her in time and space. (SW, 49)

An examination of Modiano's explanation of the novelist's clairvoyance (quoted above) as "the essential leaps of imagination" which helps the novelist capture, unconsciously, "a vague gleam of the truth," may enable us to understand how a chronotope is linked to Dora Bruder's escape "one December evening when it probably had been snowing in Paris." The chronotope in fact constitutes the one and only element in the writing process of the novel *Honeymoon* that enables the novelist to approach, with the help of his clairvoyance, the story he really wants to tell. This story would be that of Dora Bruder, or more specifically, that of the narrator's literary research project.

In his essay *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin asserts that "behind the narrator's story, we read a second story; a story about what the narrator narrates, and also about the narrator himself." (Bakhtin [1981] 2011, 314).

This assertion is particularly true with regard to the novel *Dora Bruder*. There are many elements that link Dora Bruder's name, as well as her Jewish destiny, to Modiano's own family background and his own childhood, one of which is the loss of his brother Rudy when Patrick himself was 12 years old and Rudy 9. Rudy was Patrick's nearest friend and companion throughout a difficult childhood, and probably nothing else has marked Patrick Modiano's as seriously as Rudy's death from leukemia. The family name Bruder, which is German for "Brother," caught the novelist's eye on page 3 of the old copy of *Paris Soir*, and this element must have evoked his own childhood and what is probably his most constant preoccupation throughout his authorship.

The end of the quotation above (“That was the only moment in the book when, without knowing it, I came close to her in time and space” [SW, 49]) is actually a meta-literary chronotope, present and constitutive in the novel *Dora Bruder*, through its intertextual⁷ relation to *Voyage de nocés*. The meta-literary chronotope is not an example of what Bakhtin calls a “major chronotope,” whereas the *chronotope of the road* is a major chronotope according to Bakhtin. The chronotope of the road is quite evident in other contexts in the novel *Dora Bruder*, especially in the narratives of the narrator’s almost endless walks through Paris’ streets, searching for buildings where Dora might have lived or stayed, or other concrete signs of her Paris life. In combination with the meta-literary chronotope, which constitutes the closest or most significant dialogue between two of Modiano’s novels, *Voyage de nocés* and *Dora Bruder*, these *road chronotopes* enable us to go beyond the documentary part of the story, into the literary presentation of the novelist’s faculty of voyance, these “essential leaps of imagination.”

Let us consider one of the *road chronotopes* at the very end of the novel. Once again, it is a wonderful example of how the narrator’s narrative of his search through the streets of Paris brings him to a time and place other than the actual situation in the street where he is walking:

On Saturday 19 September, the day after Dora and her father left, the occupying authorities imposed a curfew in retaliation for a bomb placed in the Cinéma Rex. Nobody was allowed out from three o’clock that afternoon till the following morning. The city was deserted, as if to mark Dora’s absence.

Ever since, the Paris wherein I have tried to retrace her steps has remained as silent and deserted as it was on that day. I walk through empty streets. For me, they are always empty, even at dusk, during the rush-hour, when the crowds are hurrying towards the mouths of the metro. I think of her in spite of myself, sensing an echo of her presence in this neighbourhood or that. The other evening, it was near the Gare du Nord. (SW, 136–37)

This is another example of the novelist’s clairvoyance, combined with the chronotopic effect concealed in the narrative of the streets of Paris and

7 Or *intratextual*, as the reference is to another text of the novelist’s own authorship.

their history. Modiano does not bring anybody or anything “back to life”; he knows very well that World War II is over, and I do not think he would ever want to give new life to anything linked to that war. However, he wants to keep the memory of what happened alive, and I think his novel *Dora Bruder* is one of his greatest achievements in that respect.

If we now return to Bakhtin’s definition of the literary artistic chronotope quoted earlier in this paper, we may see how both the meta-literary chronotope and the road chronotope make it possible for time to become “artistically visible,” and how “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” The extraordinary effect of Modiano’s use of these two forms of the literary artistic chronotope is to carry the reader beyond a mere factual understanding of an individual destiny during the Holocaust. Modiano is so doing both by the intratextual linking of the two novels *Voyage de Noces* and *Dora Bruder*, and by making the narrator’s truly obsessional revival of the streets of Paris on “Saturday 19 September” (see the last quotation above) a space “charged and responsive to movements of time, plot and history.”

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