

PLAYING WITH SECRET REALITIES. PATRICK MODIANO'S *LITTLE JEWEL*



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Abstract: *Patrick Modiano's novel, La Petite Bijou, translated as Little Jewel, acts as an interplay between memory and absence, an interplay meticulously crafted by the style of the author and by his passion to evoke an unfinished story, full of ambiguity, where pessimism and hope are at odds. Unlike any other writer, Modiano succeeds in making game the domain of gravity rather than the domain of gratuity and of easy playfulness. The irony starts with the title and ends with the last page. Yet the novel does not contain an acid irony and the irony itself is directed at life rather than making fun of the choices of the main character. In the end, Thérèse has learnt that her mother's absence can be integrated as pain, shared pain interconnects people, while a bigger absence from her whole life was only a trigger of her mother's act of abandoning her.*

Key words: memory, absence, trauma, abandonment, game, play, irony, contemporary French novel

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Should a contemporary reader (re)discover a televised interview with Patrick Modiano, decades before his acclaimed Nobel Prize won in 2014,¹ such a reader is greatly surprised by the author's timidity. Modiano's natural verbal intonation shares (and makes room for) brilliant paradoxes. Comparing the past with the present, it looks like Modiano has continuously written indeed a unique grand book made of all the symbolical maps, puzzles, buried emotions he has published in all his novels and stories.

Instead of being assertive as a way to impose his literary universe, Modiano fears more what a (meta)literary discourse loses through publicity and persuasion. Patrick Modiano's universe is so genuinely made of *chemins* of vulnerability that the author cannot take other more technical and artificial routes, for fear they may crash the ingenuity of his characters. Everybody knows the old saying that the journey is more valuable than the destination or the specific outcome. This saying is valid for all

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YKkikvlpLQ&t=14s>

people in times of rush, when the illusion of reaching more rapidly the destination looks like a new most sought-after prize. But Modiano's main characters are unique. There is a side of them either oblivious to some survival instincts or disengaged from temptations of testing the evil. Sometimes it is mere neglect or mere inertia. But other times it is pure ingenuity, as in the case of a girl once named *Little Jewel*, the eponymous heroine of the novel with the same title.

Thérèse Cardères is a 19-year-old young woman, daughter of Suzanne Cardères, alias Sonia O'Dauyé. The young lady is narrating her emotional life focused on an encounter that troubles her: a silhouette at metro station Châtelet, dressed in a yellow coat (*un manteau jaune*) seems to be her mother whom she had not seen for twelve years. Her mother's presence in the girl's infancy is strikingly powerful, yet the reader discovers that the mother preferred to retreat inside her solitude, showing absence when she was missed. Not even one gesture of affection happened, except the moment when it was played, as required by a film director. Mother was acting in a film, called *The Crossroad of the Archers* and in that film her daughter was acting too, playing the same role, that of a little daughter. The daughter had one line to say, her role was not the main one.

Let us not forget that Patrick Modiano's mother was a Flemish actress and his father was an Italian Jew, with complicated decisions of survival and collaboration during the WW2. (Magda Ciopraga in Angela Ion, 2012, p. 1060). Instead of having a little boy as the alter-ego of Modiano, he entrusted the little girl to be his narrator, with certain autobiographical aspects. However, all these aspects are fused together in the genuine and complicated soul of a little girl, a certain introvert with little openness for other meaningful relationships.

Memory and absence

Modiano's novel, *La Petite Bijou*, translated as *Little Jewel*, acts as an interplay between memory and absence, an interplay meticulously crafted by the style of the author and by his passion to evoke an unfinished story, full of ambiguity, where pessimism and hope are at odds. Yet they are equal in this game, equality suggesting that Modiano's style of writing prefers sometimes equivoque to clarity. After all, when equivoque wins, this is not a real victory, it means neither of the two terms could win, this is a game through which irony is either rediscovered or incentivized. *La Petite Bijou* speaks about death and absence in different terms. Death and absence are inter-related. Could absence provoke death or could death be taken as an absence? This is the story told by Thérèse when she decides to turn her own life into an absence. This is her only fight. Nobody is involved in this fight with the exception of her mother. Suzanne or Sonia, her mother, was talented as a dancer and she kept this grace in the way she walks. That is why Thérèse thinks she can recognize her own mom when

wearing the yellow coat. But, in retrospect, her mother's story is punctuated by what her friend, Frédérique, said about her: 'A wounded racehorse on the way to the abattoir.'

Albeit amplified by vivid memories, the absence of her mother is so painful that Thérèse cannot gather the courage and detachment to see her other life encounters 'maternally', i.e. with empathy. The story of her mother's accident is hidden. Yet it must have been the story that rendered Frédérique's assumption very true. The accident was the severance of destiny. Thérèse was also a victim of a truck accident, but she recovered. This situation must have scared her mother very much, so she decided to send her away, in a way to abandon her. The daughter needed support and empathy, but mother was too immersed in her own pain and when she got scared, she decided to quit as a mother. A different route in which mother could have had some achievements as a dancer would have changed her destiny and the destiny of her daughter. The sad joke about the horse taken to abattoir would have been a nonsense. Mother teaches her daughter about absence in the worst way, because it means taking no responsibility, running from the painful emotions and replacing presence with absence. The daughter wants to fight this absence so intertwined in all her small decisions and all her life aspects. The desire is so ardent that, towards the end of the story, we know that the only thing that could beat this painful absence would be a bigger absence, an unexpected absence as the one of leaving no trace on the face of the world after a suicide.

Therese Cardères, the heroine of the novel, constructs all the thoughts and all the aspects to rediscover her mother, is she or is she not the woman in yellow coat but she cannot gather her courage to talk to the strange woman, she is so afraid of mother's reaction, maybe a reaction of prolonging the absence. At the same time, the protagonist is afraid of her own emotions. Her most anxious dream is that in which somebody from an institution, police or morgue, summons her to recognize the body of her mother. This means that all her mental constructions of the situation must crumble. It is impossible for her to give up the story she augmented with every new turn of the events or with every new painful reminder of absence. The daughter cannot give up the story she has been creating to compensate for her mother's absence, in fact for her mother's act of abandoning her child.

This nightmare appears also because Thérèse has invested now all her life, all her thoughts. Her main job is to babysit for a couple of hours. She has time, but she cannot battle her own emotions, she is forced to give in. The very powerful emotions make her sabotage her purpose, she succumbs. We may wonder what is the best decision?! As a sabotage, she takes no decision at all and she becomes very fearful of staying alone in such moments.

We know nothing about how Thérèse sees her beloved people. Father is never present or known. Uncle Borand, her mother's brother (or half-brother) is kind to her as a child. She would visit the garage again, after the 12-year gap, but she could

hardly recognize anything and she does not have the indications of how to find him. The little girl whose strange, absent-minded parents employed Thérèse as a babysitter, is someone who could miss her. The gracious lady who is her benefactor and who gives her the pharmaceutical treatment offered even to host her in good condition at a vacation house, without asking for anything in return, just because she chooses to be The Good Samaritan. There's also a love interest who gains more importance in her life and who is very gentle in his attempt of making gallant gestures. The polyglot fellow even gives her a poem called Mother, in Hungarian, a poem written by Jozsef Attila. There is nothing phony about this charming translator, he takes an interest in her well-being and her emotions, as if she were another mysterious language he would be eager to learn.

Memory is the anchor in the continuous chaotic movement of thoughts and of everyday activities, for Modiano's characters. We cannot expect cohesion to come from external actions and from a construction of the novel that could see the novel as in the 19th century, a monolith block. Logical construction has little to do with the characters in the absence of memory. Absence creates a vacuum which invites memory to jump in. For Modiano, absence and memory are a unique dichotomy. Together they contribute to the theme of identity. Paris is for the writer a receptacle of identity, an urban identity, as Elena-Brândușa Steiciuc notices. (Steiciuc, 2016, p. 231).

A precise map of Thérèse's errant motions could be traced. But as the maps of her present and especially past memories gets more precise, the overwhelming absence wraps the map. Absence becomes the ultimate clarity. How can be maternal absence beaten off from her life, banished for good? Not through the war of confrontation. Through another bigger absence from everything. Through a bigger more encompassing absence in the last scene of the novel.

For Modiano, memory has the effect of being a deeper reality than the present time. Present is not the time of reactions, but of overreactions and sometimes of a baby-step in the direction of connecting with another human being. Thérèse, a 19-year-old French young woman, sees a woman dressed in a yellow coat and she is sure that it is her mother, although she had received the information that her mother died in Morocco years ago, when she was just a child. She decides to follow the woman. One part of this game is healthy, her emotions are involved and she needs to confront the woman. The other part of her self is absolutely not healthy, the young woman becomes a female sniper in a figurative sense, she sees but refuses to be seen and to be unmasked. In this unhealthy part of the self, memory is replaced by obsession.

It must have been about twelve years since anyone had called me Little Jewel. I found myself at Châtelet metro station at peak hour. I was in the crowd heading along the endless corridor on the moving walkway. There was a woman wearing a yellow coat. The colour of the coat caught my eye and I observed her from the back on

the walkway. Then she headed down the corridor marked DIRECTION CHÂTEAU DE VINCENNES. Now we were all squashed against each other in the middle of the staircase, waiting for the barrier to open. She was standing next to me. I saw her face. She was so like my mother that I thought it must be her.

I remembered one of the few photos I have kept of my mother. It's as if a searchlight trained on her face had made it loom out of the darkness. I've always felt uneasy looking at this photo. Every time it appeared in my dreams, it was like an identikit photo that someone was showing me—a police superintendent, an employee at the morgue—so that I could identify this person.

I did not say a word. I knew nothing about the woman. She sat down on one of the benches in the station, away from the people jostling on the edge of the platform while they waited for the train. There was no room on the bench next to her; I stood to the side, leaning against a vending machine. Her coat had no doubt been fashionable at one time and its colour gave it a touch of flair. But the yellow had faded almost to grey. (Modiano, 2016: 1-2)

Modiano's auctorial games and the irony of human existence

We tend to associate playing with fun. But Modiano knows how to use playing and attach irony to it. The very title of the novel proves it. Another subverted irony is the use of another Thérèse, older than herself, a kind of surrogate sister with maternal attitudes. This happened when Thérèse Cardères was at a boarding school. Then another little girl appears, with both parents acting very strangely in their own rented location, as if they were only camping. They want to help their little daughter, but they do not prioritize her, she is left with their absence and a new, understanding babysitter, Thérèse. But sometimes the babysitter is afraid of her own powerful destructive emotions that she has to find excuses about not doing her duties.

Unlike any other writer, Modiano succeeds in making the game the domain of gravity rather than the domain of gratuity and of easy playfulness. The irony starts with the title and ends with the last page. Yet the novel does not contain an acid irony and the irony itself is directed at life rather than making fun of the choices of the main character. Mother changes names so as to be nicknamed by her friends the Death Cheater. But this nickname is ironically severe if we consider Thérèse's ultimate act provoked by her mother. Suzanne or Sonia cannot keep her nickname straight in the face of destiny, by preventing her daughter's suicide. Fortunately, her daughter breathes again due to another irony of destiny.

Secret is the element that allows the writer to play with the reader and to use irony. We do not know mother's secret or whether she is alive other than in memories of the people who knew her. The lady who stays at the fourth floor has one of her mother's names, only one letter is slightly different. Is that enough to move all the obsessions around the wrong person actually? Or is her mother, indeed, and the daughter pays the rent for her mother's recent month of staying.

In Modiano's novel *Little Jewel*, the game is to use secrecy so as to offer a unique puzzle of feelings to the reader. But secrecy is not enough. The author is certain about leaving a difficult task on the shoulders of his characters: they must use the auctorial irony so as to bind the scenes together. Of course this does not work out very well. The irony is not a substance meant to fix things like a glue, but to offer a release or to offer a subversion or the necessary sarcasm as a revenge. We can parallel this situation with that of a chess player. Here the author is the master chess player. But he needs some assets. With Modiano's irony at play, Thérèse's story is nothing of fair play and accepted rules as in a normal game. The fair play is dismissed from the first moment. Her mother shows her no affection. The cruellest treatment from her mother is the moment when she sends her away, to be brought up by other distant people, mere acquaintances of the family. The little girl carries a sign around her neck saying her name and the address where she was sent to. This has a horrible impact on the little girl and on what she can achieve in life.

This painful memory is something that cannot be discarded. Like on her birth certificate that contained also her mother's real name, Cardères, the girl is bound to carry her own name and address indication like some strange burden. But this is also her identity. Had she disobeyed the rules and had she thrown away her name indication so as to escape humiliation, would Thérèse have had a better life? Certainly not, other dangers could have appeared. But discarding would mean that she follows the steps of her mother and this is what she does not want to do. Her mother was lying many times about her identity. The grandparents are not referred to, there is no common memory that could link our heroine to the root of her family through grandparents.

Patrick Modiano's commitment to literature is existential. Success has little influence on his credo. The buried emotions of his characters are always real. They stem from his autobiography, but his writing is not designed to elucidate such emotions or to show the reader the triumphalist way of curing them. The anxiety of passing through life stages and the ways in which a writer can make existence more problematic, not necessarily more pessimistic, are the hallmarks of Modiano's literary universe.

The opposite effect of the *society of spectacle* (in Guy Debord's terms) is to be met in Modiano's stories. Life is an *accumulation* of foreign spectacles (Debord, 2014:2). They witness the spectacle of the world but they can never be absorbed by it. Not even the "antagonists".

Mother in *Little Jewel* manifests like a beloved antagonist. The episode with the dog is the peak of fury. The thoughts reach that boiling point when the thought of punishing somebody with the desire to see her dead crosses Thérèse's mind. It will not happen. But the last act of this novel, the last act in full conscience is the suicide of Thérèse. Using the pills received from her benefactor, the lady who is a pharmacist.

There is also an act of betrayal in this suicide. The fact that mother cannot be made to be less absent, cannot be made to care or to be more affectionate is a late discovery of Thérèse. The voyage has granted the young woman a big story, told in/by her mind, a story of compensation. Through her suicide, the compensatory role reaches its end. There is no way to be there in the world and serve at something. All traces are gone, this is what Thérèse desires.

The last words of the novel are under the sign of irony. After playing all these years with malevolent irony, this time the switch of the narration includes something positive. Death does not come. The aquarium-like walls are due to the fact that there were no spare rooms at the hospital. Therese is in the chamber of premature babies, at a section of maternity, with her life in danger but alive, breathing and understanding what a new beginning means.

Even on the verge of suicide and in breathing again, there is no renunciation to authenticity on behalf of Thérèse. Feeling about in the depths of labyrinth, authenticity is Ariadne's thread. No even and no distortion take it away from Thérèse. Losing authenticity would mean condemnation to the obscurity of life, an obscurity impossible to be conquered. Keeping in touch with the raw and unbearable parts of one's existence makes room for obscurity, well interwoven in the texture of Modiano's novels. Yet the writer knows how not to make the desire to keep authenticity a chalice of fear. Modiano's characters thrive in finding the light within obscurity, as if this were a dim into which the torrents of memory could find a new flow and recalibrate.

The moment the daughter comes with the memory of the film for which she played a small part, we realize that instead of connecting the mother and daughter, the film only had the premise to set them apart. What interfered between them was another aspect of the playing, this time drama playing or acting.

The author turns the game in favor of life, just to revert irony again, in the very last shift of the written rows. It is hard to decipher what has happened through so many quick alternations of the story. Yet, after re-reading the story, one thing is sure: Thérèse has been given a new chance to love. The suicide could have taken her in the realm of death. But the title of the film in which she was near her mother was *The Crossing of the Archers*, a premonitory title. She passed on the other side while still alive, she crossed to the other realm, but the realm did not grasp her, the other realm rejected her, so she must continue her life among the alive people, hopefully with her lessons acquired.

One evening, in the same neighbourhood, near the Gare de Lyon, he had taken me to the cinema. It was my first time. The theatre seemed immense and was showing *The Crossroad of the Archers*, the film in which, a while before, I'd had a small role alongside my mother. I hadn't recognised myself on the screen and, when I'd heard my voice, I'd even wondered if Little Jewel was some other girl, not me. (Modiano, *Little Jewel*: 74)

Therese is present on a level of openness to love, that is why the translator Moreau-Badmaev, a friend and a possible boyfriend, at the same time, appears in her life. She is happy to be meaningful to him, even in small gestures, and she does not lie to him as blatantly as she does with other people. For example, she lies to the pharmacist lady. With this new young man she is in the beginning of love phase, the budding phase, and her fairy tale is distorted, her own mother had distorted her fairy tale, therefore she cannot wait for it to turn magically in her favour and to give her a new meaning in life.

The game and the regain of vulnerability

Thérèse manages to find a trace after this situation of a projected encounter with her mother, a real trace this time. It is possible that the person in a yellow coat was indeed her mother, but it is probable that she was not. The daughter simply goes to one of the former apartments where they used to stay and asks the receptionist of the block of flats. It would be easy for her to have a discussion with the woman at the 4th floor, resembling her mother, yet the daughter cannot overcome her unconscious sabotage. Her fear is too deep-seated. She withdraws. Before she had spent almost all her money to pay her mother's debt for the rent. Thérèse is afraid of her mother's reaction. Her mother was always polite, yet she used to be abusive in retiring, excusing herself when the girl most needed her and also by sending her alone, as if her daughter were a parcel with the destination written on it, to be raised by somebody else. Thérèse cherishes the memory when she was called Little Jewel. This is her secret identity. Somehow this means that her mother might have loved her without showing it.

Thérèse's other secret is falling in love with a young man, a translator who speaks twenty languages and works for a radio department (possibly state-owned). His name is Moreau-Badmaev. His father, a Russian, is absent, too, from his life. His mother is French. A bookaholic, he has created a safe environment at his place, with dim light and radio green lights, safe for daydreaming and working, although he had not even stepped into the kitchen. Moreau-Badmaev refuses to tell his first name, maybe as a way to keep people at a distance. Intuitively, Thérèse knows that she should tell him about her secret name, Little Jewel, because that way she would be in her most charming self. She fails to do that, but towards the end of the novel, she succeeds in disclosing it. As expected, his reaction is to understand her, to see eye to eye with her, to cherish her even more because of this shared memory and to understand in few words what are her ways of harming herself. For him, she is like a new language worth-learning. They navigate through the difficulties of disclosing to each other something relevant but also hidden and they react happily when they reach the right words to describe their emotions and their values in life.

A more embedded secret about her love life is Thérèse's failure to stand up for herself or to react with more awareness to her feelings. A brief episode with a guy called Wurlitzer, met before knowing Moreau-Badmaev covers a huge pain. She accepted the guy just because she wanted an escape from her life, she accepted the compromise of being courted by a rich guy knowing that there will be a price for it, but she was in the numbed state of neither happy nor unhappy. The bitter taste after the inability to show her emotions and to defend them, even if they meant rejecting what she did not want is the price for not being able to see herself as the Little Jewel she once was.

Two other happy encounters compensate for the obsessive behavior stirred by the hypothetical proximity of her mother: a little girl who is her mirror at another age (seven maybe) and a pharmacist on duty, ready to help people like a good Samaritan. She finds a part-time job to babysit the little girl with rich and loveless parents. The young woman at the chemist's understands Thérèse's need for a human connection. The irony is that by giving more to these two encounters Thérèse could have had a healthier replacement of her sabotage tendencies. Patrick Modiano has also unintended ironies. One of them is his style of writing as if to invoke oblivion, the undoing, the deletion or the obliteration. Simona Modreanu exemplifies oblivion and forgetfulness associated with the intention of writing for Modiano (Modreanu, 2015:69). Jacques Derrida in his book, *Writing and Difference*, had many remarks about writing in the old Egypt as opposed to Greek logos, but also about the paradoxes of writing. Writing is *pharmakon* against oblivion. (Derrida, 1998, p. 377). But what if people rely too much on what they surrender to writing and they become careless about it, careless in the sense of separate, not belonging to that piece of writing anymore?

Derrida's problematization appears very distinctly in Modiano's writing. Yes, people could be too detached from their emotions after liberating themselves of these emotions through writing. But what should the novel retain then? It is very interesting how *Little Jewel* is so clear in telling the maps of her tribulations in Paris, yet she walks in a somnambulist way, as if she could barely touch the roofs of the building in Paris. Her emotions keep her floating and her vulnerability is the author's most precious asset. She is somebody's Little Jewel after all. She is the Little Jewel of the writer and of the readers.

Roland Barthes's famous essay "The Death of the Author" states that meaning does not originate in the writer's intention but in the interplay of signs. (Barthes, 1967:5). Is text a generative system? It very much has this quality, nowadays with the AI we see it at work. Therefore, it would be important for the author to keep his secrets quite hidden, because, in this "multi-dimensional space", namely in the text itself, "a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." However, it is Modiano's merit to know how to reveal the secrets of his characters. And it is his

perfect writing, although difficult at the first reading, that keeps intact the vulnerability of his main heroes and feminine protagonists. The secret of the novel *Little Jewel* is related also to the imitation inherent to any child.

Thérèse learns how not to instinctively imitate her mother's steps and dance through life like Suzanne. The child instinctively resorts to the imitation game. Scholars argue that imitation is not a peripheral behavior but the foundation of cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Play, as Huizinga sees it, is an activity that establishes an order in which freedom is expressed inside the limits of constraint. The paradox is essential: autonomy thrives inside declared, accepted regulations. (Huizinga, 1950:9). But, unlike in the case of dictatorship, for example, we can see that children's appointed rules do not have the burden of taking things too seriously. The stakes matter. In case of life threatening rules, even for a game, everything changes. Eugen Fink explains this very clearly: "Play stands opposed to the seriousness of real life, to care and work, to the concern for the salvation of one's soul. it appears as something non serious and non-binding (...)" (Fink, 2016: 21)

Eugen Fink continues to stress the importance on the aspect of the game that can be taken as "non-serious".

While playing, the human being does not remain himself, does not remain in an enclosed domain of his psychic interiority- rather, he extatically steps out of and beyond himself, in a cosmic gesture and interprets the whole of the world in a manner that is suffused with sense. (Fink, 2016 : 44).

Thérèse learns than pain connects herself with other people and there is no use to escape pain. She can re-interpret the cage she is in, in the hospital, the glass-cage used for protection against germs. It is not the cage of glass that keeps her from reaching other people, but the cage in which she can learn how to integrate her pain and make her part of her emotions, because pain means also vulnerability, and the vulnerability is the gift of shared connection through the shared life miracles. Now, at the crossing the archers, but also after crossing through to the other side of life, near death, still breathing in the hospital, at the section of premature babies, she has liberated herself from the need to be like her mother or to be the opposite of her mother.

I was in a big glass cage. I looked around. There were aquariums in other glass cages. The pharmacist must have brought me here. We had arranged to meet at six o'clock in the evening to leave for Bar-sur-Aube. Inside the aquariums, I thought I could see shadows moving: fish, perhaps. I heard the noise of waterfalls, getting louder and louder. I had been trapped in icefields a long time ago, and now there was the gushing sound of them melting. I wondered what the shadows in the aquariums could possibly be. They told me later that there had been no more room, so they put me in the ward for premature babies. For a long time to come, I heard the noise of

waterfalls, a sign that for me, too, from that day on, life was beginning. (Modiano, 2016: 158)

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