Modiano’s detective: In search of lost memory

Rhys Tyers

Abstract: This article argues that Patrick Modiano’s The Black Notebook (2003) is influenced by and, at the same time, critically revises crime fiction tropes. Many researchers have identified and discussed Modiano’s fascination with memory and identity (Ward, Scherman, Sanyal) and memory and history (VanderWolk, Hendrix, Gratton, Prus) as well as the fact that the author consistently uses devices and tropes from detective fiction (Cooke, Kawakami, Botta). The connection, however, between Modiano’s work and metaphysical detective fiction has not been explored with regards to The Black Notebook and, as a result, this essay seeks to highlight this connection. The writer of metaphysical detective fiction (in this case Modiano) uses the tropes of detective fiction to conduct investigations into more personal mysteries like our relationship with identity and memory rather than simply looking for a solution to a crime. Thus, this paper will investigate how Modiano explores the impossibility of knowing the self through writing by examining the author’s use of the tropes of detective fiction. The novel under analysis, The Black Notebook, employs the themes of the metaphysical detective narrative to further highlight our problematic relationship with textual closure, memory and space, textual curation and intertextuality.

Subjects: Popular Culture; Literature; Postmodernism Literature; Literature & Culture

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Detective fiction is a genre where a detective works to solve a crime. The detective searches for clues, makes a few mistakes, but eventually solves the crime. Patrick Modiano’s The Black Notebook (2003) is influenced by but, at the same time, critically revises the elements of the traditional crime fiction story. The writer of metaphysical detective fiction (in this case Modiano) uses the elements of detective fiction to conduct investigations into more personal mysteries like our relationship with identity and memory rather than following logical clues and looking for a solution to a crime. Thus, this paper will investigate how Modiano explores the unreliability of memory and our complicated relationship with the past by examining the author’s employment and subversion of the elements of detective fiction. The novel under analysis, The Black Notebook, employs the themes of the metaphysical detective narrative to further highlight our problematic relationship with textual closure, memory and space, textual curation and intertextuality.
Keywords: Modiano; Detective Fiction; Postmodernism

“I get the sense that memory is much less sure of itself, engaged as it is in a constant struggle against amnesia and oblivion” (Nobel).

One of the key aspects of the metaphysical detective genre as highlighted by Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney in their 1999 work, Detecting Texts, is the “absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation” (1). As early as 1971 Michael Holquist published the article “Whodunit and Other Questions,” which argues that the metaphysical detective story is “non-teleological, is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered, and which can therefore be forgotten”. William V. Spanos also remarked, in 1972, that the “formal purpose” of such a subversive genre “is to evoke the impulse to ‘detect’ […] in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime”. The metaphysical detective story can then be defined by a resistance to closure and a subversion of the traditional solution provided in “classical” detective fiction. It is a genre that can be seen as embracing elements of postmodernism such as the problematic nature of knowledge and the endless and meaningless “clues” we face when investigating anything. Nealon explains the metafictional nature of the genre and the relationship between author and reader and reader and text:

The detective novel has both metafictional and metaphysical appeal. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the genre is able to comment upon the process of navigating signs, and also upon the possibility of finding order from the apparent chaos of conflicting signals and motives. The detective and the reader work together, as both try to piece together the disparate signs that might eventually solve the mystery. The reader of the detective novel comes, metafictionally, to identity with the detective, because both reader and detective are bound up in the metaphysical or epistemological work of interpretation, the work of reading clues and writing a solution or end. (Nealon, 1996, 117)

The writer of metaphysical detective fiction uses the tropes of detective fiction to conduct investigations into more personal mysteries like our relationship with identity and memory.

In this context, the work of Patrick Modiano is relevant since this Nobel Prize winning author is obsessed with detective fiction, a central conceit employed in many of his novels. His work is also concerned with what happens when a text is deprived of its final solution. Modiano has indeed been hailed by many critics, including Merivale and Sweeney, as an influential user of metaphysical detective fiction. Novels such as Missing Person (1978), Paris Nocturne (2003), Search Warrant (1997), Dora Bruder (1997) and the novel under consideration in this paper, The Black Notebook (2017) all use a kind of investigation into the absurdity of the world, which is both terrifying and enticing. Accordingly, one may argue that Modiano uses the metaphysical detective story to explore the individual and his relationship with memory.

Many researchers have identified and discussed Modiano’s fascination with memory and identity (Scherman (1992), Wardi (1985) and memory and history (Cadieu (2017), Gratton (2005), VanderWolk (1997) as well as the fact that the author consistently uses devices and tropes from detective fiction (Cooke, Kawakami, Botta). The only theorist, however, who has drawn a connection between Modiano’s work and the metaphysical detective genre is Anna Botta, though she focuses exclusively on Rue des Boutiques Obscures (1978) (published as Missing Person in English). Akane Kawakami also discusses Modiano’s use of detective tropes and postmodernism, though there are no direct links to the metaphysical detective narrative. I draw on Botta’s and Kawakami’s work in this analysis as they both successfully make the case for viewing Modiano through his manipulation of detective narrative conventions. Although neither of the theorists focuses on the Black Notebook, they make useful connections with regards to why Modiano has employed aspects of the detective narrative to tell his stories.
The novel under discussion involves a writer who discovers a set of “clues” in his notebook and sets off on a journey through the Paris of his past, in search of the woman he loved more than fifty years previously. Jean, the narrator, retraces his footsteps around the left bank in the Montparnasse district of Paris. His quest through seedy cafés and cheap hotels becomes an inquiry into a woman, Dannie, whom Jean loved and who once tried to admit to a terrible crime. Over the course of several voyages between past and present, we meet police detective Langlais, and discover that Dannie may have killed “someone”. As his memories overlap with the discovery of an old vice squad dossier, Jean reinvestigates the closed case of a crime where he could well be the last remaining witness.

Modiano’s novel *The Black Notebook* can be read as a metaphysical detective story. It parodies the detective genre and does not offer narrative closure. Moreover, it is metafictional in the sense that the entire novel is based on a 50-year-old notebook that is incomplete, in parts indecipherable and in others concerned with fictional characters and works. Modiano’s narrative, however, does not focus on the ultimate defeat of the detective, but highlights for the reader the importance of the investigation and the changing identity of the investigator. The crime in the novel is the unretrievable past and our complicated connection with memory and forgetting. Thus, Modiano employs the tropes of the postmodernist detective novel to investigate the unreliability of memory, textual disorientation and our problematic relationship with the past and, as a result, highlights the notion of identity as a multiplicity of transitory, shifting and unstable perspectives. This essay will explore these ideas through an analysis of the author’s depiction of memory, the role of the narrator and the non-solution ending.

1. In search of lost memory
Modiano’s work centres on memory and how we interrogate the past. Botta identifies the quest at the heart of Modiano’s novels: “the past refuses narrativization … the story dissolves into darkness, and sens halts before the incomprehensibility of nothingness” (Modiano, 2017, 222). This highlights the importance of the investigation over the discovery. Jean is not enlightened by the end of the novel, but the investigation has been worthwhile as it has shed valuable light on his past and his time spent with Dannie. His memories and the inescapability of the past haunt Jean: “certain dreams—or rather, certain nightmares—can stick with you all the next day. They blend in with your most ordinary movements … fragments of them still adhere to your real life, like a kind of echo or static that you can’t hear” (Modiano, 2017, 141). This “echo” of the past forces Jean to investigate his time with Dannie and, by doing so, shows us the impossibility of accurately investigating memory.

Part of Jean’s frustration relates to the multiplicity of clues and possible interpretations that live in his memories. Jean starts his investigation and is met with myriad issues: “The pages of my notebook contain a succession of names, telephone numbers, appointments and also short texts that might be something to do with literature” (Modiano, 2017, 5). If we were to face an investigation into our own pasts, we would be met with the same obstacles. As Evert puts it, “Clues are given that are in fact irrelevant to the mystery. Clues that may be relevant go unheeded, and ‘significant’ coincidences mean nothing more than another turn in the maze” (Merivale, 1999, 179). The detective, after all, must fulﬁl a key narrative function, that of recognising relevant information and acting on the knowledge. However, as Kawakata has pointed out “Modiano’s detectives are never quite as reliable as Holmes or Poirot, either as detectives or as narrative functions” (95). The ﬁrst paragraph of the novel describes the voice of the past as being “A toneless voice” (Modiano 6) and that “Names come back to me, certain faces, certain details. No one left to talk with about it. One or two witnesses must still be alive. But they’ve probably forgotten the whole thing. And in the end, I wonder if there really were any witnesses” (Modiano, 2017, 6). There is a sense that the solution to the crime will not be the focus of the novel from the first page. And as the novel progresses, Jean faces temporal distortion that will further limit and disorientate his investigation.
The temporal structure brings to the fore the postmodern features of the novel as well as sheds further light onto the central themes of memory and identity. As the clues start mounting, Jean starts to realise that time is not linear and that “Everything gets jumbled in your mind, past, present and future; everything is superimposed” (Modiano, 2017, 74). His investigation, instead of unlocking the past, has merged it with his present as well as recasting his past in a new light. Our search for lost time or lost memory means we become “lost” ourselves. Traditionally, detective stories follow what Kawakami calls the “present-past-present circle” (Kawakami, 2000, 99), where the aim is to return at the end of the novel to a present status quo. However, in The Black Notebook, past, present and future converge during the investigation and, as a result, the present-past-present circle is never completed. Jean moves between different timelines and goes back and forth almost at will highlighting temporality and the influence of postmodernism on the text. He also circles both the conspicuous omissions in the narrative as well as the central characters, locations, events, as well as their duplicates (for example, the almost indistinguishable hotels and cafes Jean patronizes). The crime of memory and forgetting becomes immediate during the investigation and influences the detective’s present, which, in turn, has ramifications for his future. Memory, it seems, alters time and in a sense recasts it in a different form.

Jean also faces the problem of definition. This relates to his notebook, but also to the novel we, as readers, are experiencing: “But what category should they be listed under? Private journal? Fragments of a memoir? And also hundreds of classified ads copied down from newspapers. Lost dogs. Furnished flats. Employments sought and offered. Psychics” (Modiano, 2017, 5–6). Modiano challenges the readers’ retention of the text as they are perusing it. As a result, the investigation is off to a false start as the narrator cannot clearly articulate the genre he is attempting to present. In addition, the original events that were recorded in The Black Notebook were not clear at the time of inclusion. How can memory deal with an event that lacked clarity in the first place? Jean relies on his notes from the past. After 50 years his memory needs starting points. His notes, however, will always be misleading as there are just as many omissions as inclusions: “Yes, I’ll copy it down when I have time” (Modiano, 2017, 32). But he doesn’t have time or he forgets and another clue is lost. The Black Notebook is a “version” of Jean’s memory. It draws attention to the fact that memory is unreliable because there will always be something missing:

Leafing through the black notebook, I experience two contradictory feelings. If these pages are lacking in precise details, I tell myself it’s because nothing surprised me back then. Youthful unconcern? But I read certain phrases, certain names, certain indications, and it seems to me I was sending out coded signals to the future. Yes, it’s as if I wanted to leave clues, in black and white, that would help me clarify at some later date what I’d been living through at the time without really understanding it. Signals keyed blindly, in total confusion. And I’d have to wait years and years before I could decipher them. (Modiano, 2017, 34)

But he is unable to decipher them. His notes, taken as they are, 50 years after the fact only add more doubt and confusion. This doubt is cast on the status of apparently reliable information which serves to intensify the disorientating effect already created by the confused assemblage in which we find the other facts.

Another idea that Modiano explores through his investigation is the selective and random nature of our memories. There seems to be no clear reason why some memories are given priority over others and why some memories disappear while others remain: “Curiously, that sentence has lodged in my memory,” Jean notes (Modiano, 2017, 82). This is important because it highlights what has “not” been remembered or retained. The black notebook that Jean draws from in his investigation is just like that. It contains facts, book titles, names, quotes and various other seemingly unrelated “texts”. Jean is lost in a labyrinth of his own creation. His “frustration” comes from his inability to reconstruct that enormous rhizome’s “thousands and thousands of paths” (Botta, 1999, 220) into one distinct line, to extract from his positional being an identity that can be known as an object, separate from the investigating subject and susceptible to a linear
narration. As Kawakami posits “Modiano’s narratives proffer facts and detail in a way similar to detective fiction, at suggestive junctures of the narrative, which prompts the reader to keep them in mind. But on closer examination, these facts turn out to be irrelevant to the mystery, or related but only by coincidence” (Kawakami, 2000, 95). In relation to the novel, Jean muses on the inconsequential things that he remembers and how memory and identity are unstable:

Room 5 was available. I remember that number, 5, I who always forget room numbers, the colors of walls, furniture, and curtains, as if it were preferable that my life from that time should gradually fade away. And yet, the walls of room 5 have stuck in my memory, as have the curtains. (Modiano, 2017, 27)

These “facts” are mentioned in the narrative, but they prove to have no significance or relationship to the investigation. It merely shows that we often remember unimportant or superficial details. Investigating the past leads to a proliferation of clues and disorientation, which, in turn, calls attention to identity in a state of constant change.

Jean finds himself positioned at the intersection of a complex and ever-changing relationship with his memory and his identity. As new evidence is introduced, the parameters of the investigation are widened. However, the fact that the investigation started on uncertain ground means every new “clue” has the potential to alter the detective (in this case Jean) and recast his identity. The notebook brings back memories but the memories often take on a life of their own and contradict and clash with the “facts” of the notebook: “All these details return to me fitfully, in a jumble, and often the light grows dim. And this clashes with the precise indications in my notebook. Those indications serve me well; they lend coherence to images skipping so hard that it’s as if the film is about to break” (Modiano, 2017, 15). Jean relies on the “indications” in his notebook, but he also realises how disorientating and fragile they are.

The nature of the investigation and its reliance on memory and identity forces the narrator to be a detective/philosopher: “hot on the heels of existential and metaphysical conundrums, new Sherlock Holmeses who have turned the magnifying lens on themselves” (Botta, 1999, 217). Thus, we learn more about Jean’s relationship with himself, his memory and his identity than he can ever hope to find out about Dannie’s involvement in a “nasty incident” almost 50 years before. The investigation becomes the search for the self through the other: “I had a strange sensation. Not that time had passed, but that another me, a twin, was prowling around there, a me who hadn’t aged, and who was still living—down to the smallest detail, and until the end of time—through what I had experienced over a very short period” (Modiano, 2017, 7). Modiano plays with the idea that there are multiple versions of the individual. This is another barrier to the investigation: the Jean who is trying to decipher the information in the Black Notebook from 50 years earlier is not the same Jean who wrote it: “Could I possibly have left behind a double, someone who would repeat each of my former movements, follow in my old footsteps, for all eternity? No, nothing remained of us here” (Modiano, 2017, 8). Dannie only exists in the novel through Jean’s memories of her and his imprecise jottings in the Black Notebook and, as a result, she, too, has multiple versions. As Jean engages again with the past, he creates Dannie in a new light which calls attention to the unreliable nature of memory.

Textual curation is also evident in the novel, which limits and further distorts the memories of the narrator. The following passage is obviously not a direct memory of Dannie. Rather it is a piece of information the narrator has been given at a later point and chooses to suppress in the present:

... I was leafing through Langlais’s file and again came across one of those onionskin sheets containing these very precise details: Two projectiles struck the victim. One of the projectiles was fired point blank. The other was fired neither point blank nor at a short distance ... The two slugs corresponding to the two spent shells were found ... “But I don’t have the heart to transcribe the rest. I’ll come back to it later, someday when the weather is clear and the sun and blue sky dissipate the shadows. (Modiano, 2017, 104)
We curate our pasts through emotional response, laziness, ability and other equally human reasons. Between the text and the interpretation will always “fall the shadow” (Eliot). And, even though we have the most sincere intentions with regards to communicating what we know, there are inevitable barriers and impediments that cannot be avoided. Memory gaps force us to recast our pasts and, as we do so, we experience temporal distortion along with the narrator.

The investigation is never secure and, without the promise of a definitive solution, the text questions its own processes and certainty. For instance, Jean recalls questions posed almost 50 years before, though he chooses to offer a response from the present. Dannie tries to warn Jean about his obsession with understanding: “You still ask way too many questions …” (Modiano, 2017, 102); however, even 50 years later, Jean is still asking the same questions. Dannie may be changing through his investigation, but Jean needs to be careful. He investigates her to find out more about her and not to disfigure the memories he has of her. Jean responds from the present: “I think she was wrong. It’s only today, dozens and dozens of years later, that I’m trying to decode the signals that this mysterious correspondent has sent me from the far reaches of the past” (Modiano 103). And yet, the memories that we think we possess change and adapt: “… as if memories, rather than being fixed, dead images, lived a life of their own over the years, like a kind of plant life” (Modiano, 2017, 104). We examine the past too late. By the time we are ready to investigate, things have shifted or have become irretrievable. Modiano posits that investigating our pasts will not necessarily clarify what has occurred there, but it does provide us with insights into our “present”: “And writing it today, half a century later—or even after a century: I’ve forgotten how to count the years—I momentarily escape the sense of emptiness I feel” (Modiano, 2017, 93). In the end the imprecise nature of memory is not the greatest fear—it is the fear of no memory at all: “I sometimes felt I had lost my memory and couldn’t understand what I was doing there” (Modiano, 2017, 93). The Black Notebook ultimately provides Jean with a device to “shore these fragments against [his] ruin” (Eliot, 1932). He understands that he cannot truly understand the world and all of its connections, but as long as he has consciousness, memory and a way to record his experiences, life is bearable. Our identities are slaves to our memories. Thus, our identity is made up of a profusion of ever changing and unreliable points of view.

2. The narrator & the author
In Modiano’s novels, the narrator is always at the heart of the mystery. He is on a quest to better understand his past; however, he justifies such an investigation by instigating a search for the self through the other. In the case of the Black Notebook, Jean tells us he is searching his past for Dannie, though we soon discover that the real target of the investigation is Jean himself. This is highlighted through Jean’s examination of the struggle between the former self and the current self: “Those names lay dormant in my memory, but they hadn’t been erased. And last night, a buried memory resurfaced” (Modiano, 2017, 41). Jean has moments of insight into the past, but they are fragmentated and indecipherable pasts rather than true insights into the present. Moreover, “by integrating both autobiographical and fictional material the narrator provides the reader with a series of ‘clues’ that require categorization” (Cooke, 2005, 112). Jean records facts in his note-book; however, he also records lines of poetry, titles of novels and author’s names: “When I remember certain moments of my life, lines of poetry come to mind and I often try to recall the names of the authors. The café in Place Monge, on those evenings, is associated with the line: “A dog’s sharp claws scraping the pavement at night …” (Modiano, 2017, 17). The traditional detective narrative generally begins with a collection of facts brought to the investigator (very rarely does the investigator investigate himself) which describe an order of narration that is the client’s experience of the facts. With regards to The Black Notebook, it is a disorganised assemblage of information which the narrator (as the detective of his own life) feels incapable of communicating coherently. In the Black Notebook the narrator, Jean, investigates a crime that was allegedly committed almost 50 years before by an old girlfriend, Dannie. However, this is no ordinary investigation. Modiano’s novels are retrospective but also temporal narratives, which start in the narrator’s present and involve an inquiry which takes the narrative back into the past; however, the narrative fails to safely return
and reestablish the previous state of affairs. Although the effect of this technique is disorientating, it helps us to better understand Jean’s confusion and preoccupations. The detective narrative promises to return to the present, but Jean is unable to do so. He may not even be able to successfully go into the past. Jean, our narrator, acts as a guide, but he is limited by memory, incomplete information and bias, which makes his investigation into the past all but impossible.

Jean attempts to read the people among whom he had drifted 50 years earlier; this also includes the earlier “version” of himself. He struggles to resolve the enigma of Dannie’s identity from the evidence he has saved, but even after the detective Langlais gives him her police file, he comes to understand that, in the end, his efforts are futile. The evidence Jean finds is undermined by his reliance on memory: “I never again saw any of the people who flit through the pages of this black notebook. Their presence was fleeting, and I could easily have forgotten their names. Simple encounters, perhaps accidental, perhaps not. There is a time in one’s life for that, a crossroads where one can still choose from several paths” (Modiano, 2017, 20). The Black Notebook contains the necessary information for the investigation; however, many of the “clues” are people who are unable to be interviewed and who have disappeared into history, never to be heard from again. This sensibility can be revelatory: “Yesterday I was alone in the street and a veil fell away. No more past, no more present—time stood still. Everything has recaptured its true light” (Modiano, 2017, 47). But what this “true light” reveals is often ambiguous. It can lead Jean to question the very reality of his life, but it can also function as a way for him to connect with the postmodern world.

The narration disorients the reader by blurring the line between fact and fiction. The novel is deceptively complex, though the language is generally straightforward and unadorned. Modiano’s narrators are mostly men who resemble the author, and the setting is mostly the author’s familiar city of Paris. Moreover, a central question to be further elucidated is that of the supposed case around which Jean’s investigation revolves. At times, the author implies it is the one Dannie possibly committed, at others it is that of memory and forgetting. An additional possibility is raised in a Paris Review essay on the novel, that the abduction of Mehdi Ben Barka is the elusive crime discussed. Mehdi Ben Barka was a Moroccan revolutionary politician exiled to Paris whose abduction and presumed murder in October 1965 caused a political crisis for the government of French President Charles de Gaulle. The Mehdi Ben Barka case is also referenced in other Modiano novels (Pedigree & Suspended Sentences), which further disorients the reader by blurring the line between fact and fiction (Kaplan, 2017). And, although there are obvious differences among the stories, there are certain shared preoccupations.

The novel becomes a meditation on memory and the complex relationship we have with the past: “Naturally, many signals are garbled, and no matter how hard you strain your ears they are lost forever ” (Modiano, 2017, 7). Time dissolves memory and trying to retrieve it from multiple sources and time periods leads to temporal distortion. As a result, the novel highlights the impossibility of detecting the past accurately. If we have to rely on memory, we are faced with neurotic perspectives that are constantly changing and reemerging. Thus, the investigation is an impossible undertaking, but Jean’s search is a sincere one. He is met with all of the trappings of the postmodern imagination: subjectivity and an absence of stability. However, one could point out that it is not to merely highlight the absurdity of trying to retrieve the past. The text seems to be pointing out the necessity of trying to find meaning in a world that refuses to offer one. As Botta has stated, Modiano is an author whose work is “… characterized by unfathomable pasts and irretrievable identities” (Merivale, 1999, 217), and in his novels, the “mystery” almost always concerns the narrator himself (in fact, the author and the narrator share the same name: Jean). Thus, a narrative symmetry is not achieved within the work, with the collection of bewilderingly incoherent facts at the start of the novel, and their “re-collection” and narration by the detective at the end. The metaphysical detective narrative refuses to allow narrativization and, as a result, the text will always remain open. As the text remains open, the perception of identity as a variety of ever changing and unreliable perspectives is highlighted.
3. Non-solution

A common theme found in metaphysical detective fiction and postmodern literature in general is the non-solution ending. Modiano’s narrators, “while apparently driven by a desire to understand similar to that of the reader, do not reorder events into a coherent picture. The reader, then, is a far more active participant in the creation of the story and the author‘...” (Tani, 1987, 40). The reader, then, is also a police detective, Langlais, who features heavily in the second part of the book. A large number of the stock elements of the roman noir are also to be found in The Black Notebook, which evoke the genre’s distinctive tone such as Dannie as the Femme Fatale, “a mysterious bond with gangsters who lived in the Unic Hôtel, in the shadows of the Montparnasse train station” (Kaplan, 2017) and Jean as the tireless detective. However, the crime at the heart of the novel is not Dannie’s implied role in a murder. As is the way in metaphysical detective fiction, the real crime or investigation is embedded in the narrative and may not appear to be the focus. Thus, in the Black Notebook the “crime” is memory and forgetting and the unreliability of trying to retrieve the past.

The tropes of detective fiction are apparent in The Black Notebook: there is a crime (in this case a murder), there is a suspect (Dannie), and finally there is an investigation and an ending (though no real solution). There is also a police detective, Langlais, who features heavily in the second part of the book. A large number of the stock elements of the roman noir are also to be found in The Black Notebook, which evoke the genre’s distinctive tone such as Dannie as the Femme Fatale, “a mysterious bond with gangsters who lived in the Unic Hôtel, in the shadows of the Montparnasse train station” (Kaplan, 2017) and Jean as the tireless detective. However, the crime at the heart of the novel is not Dannie’s implied role in a murder. As is the way in metaphysical detective fiction, the real crime or investigation is embedded in the narrative and may not appear to be the focus. Thus, in the Black Notebook the “crime” is memory and forgetting and the unreliability of trying to retrieve the past.

The detective genre embodies various narrative phenomena and, even though it may have aesthetic merit, it continues to be viewed as the genre that offers clear narrative closure (as well as other discernible tropes). Modiano, however, does not seem interested in solving the alleged crime. He is more interested in using the crime as a way to examine his past. The author emphasizes the impossibility of finding tangible clues and answers by highlighting the changes the external world experiences over time: “I often walked on the block where the Royal Saint-Germain and the Hôtel Taranne had been located, but neither one existed anymore, as if they had wanted to alter the crime scene to make people forget” (Modiano, 2017, 94). He has an affinity with the detective story, and his novel adopts certain conventions of the genre. However, he subverts them as well, by playing them off against a narrative structure that defies any attempt at closure and leaves the story’s initial enigma unresolved.

This non-solution forces us to examine the clues more closely and to try to understand what could be more important or essential than the solving of the crime. In this case it is the nature of memory and identity. The crime and the subsequent detection provide us with recognisable narrative signposts that help us digest the story. However, by refusing to provide us with an answer to the riddle, Modiano forces us back into the text to find meaning in other areas. The idea of identity as an obtainable entity that can be realized through both cognition and narration is eventually replaced in the novel by the idea of identity as a multiplicity of impermanent, insecure view points. Jean contemplates the un navigable story for the influence it has on his past and his current identity: “Perhaps the glass was opaque from inside, like a one-way mirror. Or else, very simply, dozens and dozens of years stood between us; they remained frozen in the past, in the middle of that hotel lobby, and we no longer lived, they and I, in the same space and time” (Modiano, 2017, 65).
According to Todorov, “The basic structure of detective fiction involves the interplay between an absent, “real” story (the story of the crime) and a present, derivative story (the investigation) which mediates between the reader and the crime” (Todorov, 1977, 11). The implication of this dual system—one story in search of another—“is that the detective novel is founded on an absence, that is, on a difficulty in narrating” (Botta, 1999, 220). This “absence” in the traditional detective story is another reason why this genre has been chosen to explore memory. Lost memory is not a crime per se, but it is what shapes our identities and how we define ourselves. This “difficulty in narrating” and “absence” is multiplied in Modiano’s novel as time (50 years) and incomplete documentation also hinder the investigation. Jean admits that his note-book is incomplete and recounts a pivotal moment in the past when many pages of the note-book were lost:

I forgot around a hundred pages of a manuscript I was writing from the notes in my black book. Or rather, I had left the manuscript in the living room where I worked, thinking we’d be back the following week. But we were never able to return, and we abandoned … the manuscript there forever. (Modiano, 2017, 43)

Although it is obvious that memory is insufficient to investigate past crimes, Jean continues with his quest.

Part of the fun of reading traditional detective stories is the uncertainty, though there is comfort in the fact that the perpetrator will be revealed by the end of the story: “In traditional detective stories, the power of this ‘mystery’, and with it the ‘impossibility’ of narrating, is limited—it disappears when the investigation comes to an end” (Most & Stowe, 1983, 3). Metaphysical detective fiction, however, plays on the uncertainty inherent in the genre. The search, though, does not end when the narrative has finished and as Jean spends more time with the Black Notebook he continues to find new and surprising revelations: “Among those masses of notes, some have stronger resonance than others” (Modiano, 2017, 7). The relevance of these notes to the investigation, however, is never clear and although they may hold a “stronger resonance” for Jean, they do not lead the narrative to a solution to the crime.

In The Black Notebook the story’s initial enigma is never solved. Jean experiences difficulty in narrating the mystery. Thirty-six pages before the end of the novel Jean accepts defeat: “Nonetheless, my search remained fruitless and after a time I gave up. I no longer harboured any illusions. All of it would someday fall into oblivion” (Modiano, 2017, 120). Jean is aware that he is inside a detective narrative, but he is also aware that due to the nature of the investigation, he cannot fulfill the promise of the traditional detective story. Memory is important to investigate, but we can never truly find a solution. Jean concludes the narrative with a meditation on the nature of memory:

She had copied the letter from a tattered novel that we’d bought one afternoon on the quays. I can still hear her telling me, ‘Don’t fret about it, Jean …’ The Bois de Boulogne, the empty avenues, the dark mass of the buildings, a lit window that makes you feel neglected to turn off the lights in another life, or that someone is still expecting you … and every day I tell myself it will be for another time. (Modiano, 2017, 157)

The ending of the novel offers us no insights into the crime, the perpetrator or the investigation. Jean has waited nearly 50 years to begin his inquiries. He tells himself there “ … will be … another time” but we know from reading the proceeding pages that he will never get any closer to a solution. The novel lacks a denouement or a stable reformation of events narrated into a logical pattern of significance. As detective/readers, it is up to us to identify our own “significance”. Cooke suggests that the traditional detective narrative’s aim “is the drive for unity and closure which, in the light of Modiano’s texts, appear respectively illusory and unattainable, both on narratorial and readerly levels” (Cooke, 2005, 35). Through an understanding of the motivations behind using a non-solution we can better understand Modiano’s intention for doing so.
This lack of narrative closure frustrates our expectation of the restoration of the status quo that is the conventional ending to a detective novel. This absence of a reassuring closure is described by Ewert as a postmodern tendency: “the refusal of the antidetective novel to provide closure, and its invocation of fear instead of assurance, is a part of the postmodern reaction against a self-deceptive faith in inductive reasoning and a comforting linear/teleological universe” (Merivale, 1999, 182). Modiano’s novel does not follow the conventional order of detective fiction, although the initial situations are deceptively similar, they tease the reader into a false sense of narrative integrity and then disappoint and disorientate through their thematic and structural lack of solution.

4. Conclusion

Modiano’s The Black Notebook supports and extends the current significance of the metaphysical detective narrative as a vehicle to discuss the nature of memory and identity and its relationship to the individual as well as the conceptualization of identity as unclear and shifting. The acceptance and accolades extended to Modiano (not to mention writers such as Haruki Murakami, Paul Auster, Italo Calvino, Martin Amis and so on) reflect the interest in the genre and its assured future. Through memory we are connected to the world, though that connection is an unable one. The detective narrative provides Modiano with a way to investigate the nature of memory and identity and, through this investigation, we are able to discover essential aspects of our own lives. We are invited to take on the role of reader/detective, which opens the text up to a multiplicity of interpretations. The metaphysical aspects of the text become obvious. There is an analysis of our current state of disorientation and irony, but there is also an underlying sincerity and urgency in the narrative. Modiano believes that we can find significance in our memories, but he harbors no illusions about memory’s reliability.

Looking forward, this paves the way for future writers and artists in general to explore complex and difficult issues by using elements of the detective narrative to stabilise the text. These issues include but are not limited to our problematic relationship with history, postmemory, heterotopia and personal identity. The metaphysical detective narrative seems to have survived postmodernism’s heyday due to its flexibility and varied application, which is supported by its use in popular TV series (Mr Robot, True Detective, Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency, Twin Peaks) and novels (Michael Chabon’s The Final Solution and The Yiddish Policemen’s Union, China Miéville’s The City and the City, and Roberto Bolaño’s The Savage Detectives and 2666).

Some, however, have questioned the author’s commitment to the detective genre. As Kawakami posits, “Indeed, in his complex interplay of parodies, it is possible to discern a curious ambivalence in Modiano’s attitude towards this classic quest” (Kawakami, 2000, 105). However, I believe it is more helpful to conceive Modiano’s appropriation of these tropes as a creative homage to the genre. Modiano’s detective both helps and hinders his quest; however, he will not be deterred as he deconstructs the traditional detective tropes in an attempt to retrieve and reinvent the identity of his narrator. For in the end Modiano’s The Black Notebook and his application of the detective tropes function as “a constant struggle against amnesia and oblivion” (Nobel).

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