The Dynamics of Time and Space in Recent French Fiction: Selected Works by Annie Ernaux, Patrick Modiano, Jean Echenoz and Marie Darrieussecq

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by

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“The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.”

Sections from chapters 2 and 5 have been published previously with full details recorded in the body of the thesis and in the bibliography.
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Abstract

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This thesis investigates the ways in which literary texts negotiate spatio-temporal movements and how, through the nature of narrative, they may offer models for expressing the lived experience of time and place. The theoretical framework traces developments in philosophies of time and space beginning with Henri Bergson’s concepts of duration and simultaneity. The desire to portray both of these informs Gilles Deleuze’s study of cinema to produce his writings on the image-temps and image-mouvement which highlight the constant change undergone in moving through space and time which he defines as différence. The transformative nature of our relationship with the space around us and the agency of the body in that transformation is seen by Deleuze as a positive creative force and one which demands a continual deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation evidenced in the literature studied. Henri Lefebvre further interrogates the importance of the body in the production of space and contributes to the debate around the creation of place and non-place taken up by Michel de Certeau, Edward Casey and Marc Augé, whose work on supermodernity articulates concerns about the absence of place at the end of the twentieth century. These theories provide a backdrop for a close reading of the literary texts published between 1989 and 2017. Each of the four authors selected interrogates spatio-temporal connections in their work and, in order to model our lived experience at the turn of the millennium they experiment with form, genre and language and raise questions about the formation, location and stability of the self. Patterns of repetition and rewriting in the works of Annie Ernaux and Patrick Modiano engage with non-linear approaches to narrative and problematize duration, stasis and the construction and accessibility of memory. The novels of Jean Echenoz explore non-places and liminal spaces in ways that suggest possibilities for the future of fiction and Marie Darrieussecq questions the centrality of the body in defining the self and its agency in creating place. My findings suggest that the desire to comprehend and mirror the lived experience of time and space motivates the literary project of the selected authors and that the nature of narrative, in its openness and fluidity, can replicate and respond to some of the anxieties around time, place and non-place at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries.
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Introduction

Interrogations of time and space are nothing new in fiction, indeed, French literature entered the twentieth century on a quest for lost time. However, changes in the experience of time and space towards the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries have generated new literary works that reject traditional boundaries of genre, voice and language and experiment in dynamic ways with narrative. These texts negotiate the presence of the past and the production and destruction of place in ways that express, and perhaps answer, some of our anxieties around our lived experience. Literature can offer a means of articulating and modelling the dynamic nature of space and time.

The spatial turn in French thought coincided with a retrospective pull towards history and, in particular, the legacy of the Second World War and united with a post 1968 democratisation of art. The 1970s, a decade often criticised as something of a desert in French literary terms, saw the development of villes nouvelles and the expansion of the banlieue and altered the geography of the capital. It also ushered in a period of reflection on the Occupation, a rewriting of accepted histories and a growth in autofictional works. Political change came too at the start of the 1980s and the Mitterrand era which, according to Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize can be examined through a return to history, a return of the self-aware subject and a return to story-telling. The four authors chosen as the basis of this study negotiate each of these returns in their texts, incorporating life-writing, first-person interventions, past events and linguistic inventiveness into their self-conscious narratives.

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Into the 1990s, increased accessibility and speed of travel and the globalising force of commercial expansion and replication triggered new debates around place, space, identity and belonging. Marc Augé, in his *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, identifies troubling excesses including an individualisation of reference points, the contraction of space and an acceleration of events. The concept of *non-lieu* would become a familiar and challenging one for theorists and writers and it calls into question spaces and connections in the urban fabric and with a cultural past that form an important part of the narratives studied in this thesis. Concerns are raised about a lack of stability and centrality and this is mirrored in artistic productions that blur generic boundaries and reject linear narratives in ways Ruth Cruickshank, writing on *fin de millénaire* French fiction, suggests may be part of a crisis of aesthetics. Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, likewise, highlight the collapse of structures and a ‘multiplication des lieux et des modalités d’expression’ at the end of the twentieth century which is, perhaps, illustrative of *l’extrême contemporain*. This fracturing and fragmenting of fiction is discussed too by Barbara Havercroft, Pascal Michelucci and Pascal Riendeau in their exploration of the ‘frontières du roman, limites du romanesque’ which queries the validity of the subject and the space and scope of the novel, recurring themes in the texts by our four selected authors.

Despite the recognition of history and place as problematic in both literature and the socio-cultural experience, theoretical studies and literary criticism tend to treat each separately so that studies of Patrick Modiano will, for example, favour the temporal and those

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of Jean Echenoz the geographic.⁸ This is understandable and reflects accurately the central concerns in each case, often voiced by the authors themselves. This thesis, too, places a similar emphasis on the works by all four authors; however, it will show that our understanding and experience of time and space is interconnected and that its expression requires dynamic narrative forms. The female writers included in this corpus, of course, attract criticism informed by écriture feminine and twentieth-century body politics and while these themes continue to be relevant, especially in the interrogations of the body as agent and the body in transformation as discussed in this thesis, their inclusion is not gender based.

Born in 1940, Annie Ernaux is the most senior of the group of authors identified as the basis of this thesis, however she, like Modiano (born 1945) and Echenoz (born 1947), comes of age during a period of socio-political change that underscores her literary production. There is a heavy presence of history in Ernaux’s work and she charts change at the end of the twentieth century through a writing and rewriting of the self. For Patrick Modiano, ghosts of the Occupation who pre-date his own birth haunt his ambulatory texts and breach traditional boundaries in time and space. Jean Echenoz performs very different narrative excursions and ventures into the fantastical and improbable but it is his daring in situating adventures around or at the threshold of non-places that make his novels particularly pertinent to this study. Each of these three novelists continues to write and publish into the twenty-first century and variations and modifications can be traced in their literary production across time as their negotiations with the involutions of time and space develop. Born twenty years later, in 1969, Darrieussecq’s work also straddles the millennial divide and pushes narrative boundaries into brave new territories. Her fragmented texts and unstable narrators reflect something of the disorientating experience of contemporary life. Each of the authors

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admits to anxieties around time and space and this study identifies common rhythms and repetitions across the corpus as the writers interrogate duration, simultaneity, place, space and the formation and location of the self.

This thesis begins by building a theoretical framework of time-space manipulations traced from Henri Bergson, through Gilles Deleuze, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau to Edward Casey and Marc Augé. It argues for an understanding of the interconnectedness of time and space and recognises the difficulty in articulating this experience. Through a close reading of selected texts by Anne Ernaux, Patrick Modiano, Jean Echenoz and Marie Darrieussecq, it will demonstrate how narrative voices at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries express something of our lived experience and perhaps suggest models for the future.
Chapter 1  Towards a poetics of time and space

Our expression of time has always been spatialised and it is commonly represented by a circle or a line, images from nature, drawn from the apparent arcing of the sun around the earth and from the river as it flows. These two models have given rise to the continuous debate on the shape, direction and movement of time. They represent the two recurrent patterns around which thinkers have built their arguments; the idea of eternal return or of the flow of time from the future through the present to the past. In our measurement of the passing of time we too rely on this geometry, tracking the journey of hands around the intervals of the clock-face and charting chronologies in succession along a timeline.

However, our experience of time is not reflected in these conventional portraits and so the exploration of the nature of time, its relationship to space and its representation continues.

At the beginning of the twentieth century confidence in the explanations of absolute time and space set down by Isaac Newton in his *Principia* in 1686 was shattered by Albert Einstein’s revelation of the general and special theories of relativity.1 Suddenly the constant, universal and unchanging framework accepted in classical physics was being questioned, and usurped by ideas of instability and flux. Rather than defining space and time as fixed, separate entities, Einstein merged the two and allowed for relative, and therefore possibly subjective, perception. Rejecting existing problems in the understanding of time and space, Einstein proposed a completely new and revolutionary universal principle of relativity.

Asserting that his theories were not mere speculation but the result of experimentation and

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physical fact, he urged the abandonment of received notions of space, time and motion. Working from his special theory of relativity, which states that the laws of physics are the same in all inertial reference frames or, in other words, that these laws remain unchanged for bodies at rest or in constant, unchanging motion, he developed the general theory of relativity by explaining gravitational effects in terms of space-time curvature. Several terms and consequences from these theories are useful for our building of a poetics of time and space, most importantly Einstein’s questions on simultaneity, and the scientific term space-time.

Einstein’s special theory abolished absolute simultaneity. Cautioning against the overestimation of intuition which leads us to believe that we understand simultaneity, Einstein asks what is meant by two simultaneous events in one coordinate system. In classical physics, since time was absolute, events could be plotted along a time axis, and two events occurring at the same point along that line could be said to be simultaneous. In relativity, the destruction of absolute time and space complicates this assertion. While two events happening in the same place at the same time were unproblematic, two events happening at the same time but spatially distant from one another are each relative to their own inertial frames; they can be perceived and understood only from their own time and space. However, since all inertial reference frames are equivalent and are equally viable, there is no hierarchy of position and no single observer can have authority, therefore, we cannot truly know the order or indeed simultaneity of events and must conclude that the order of events is relative. This would in turn suggest that there is no common present, no universal ‘now’. This question of simultaneity is one to which we will return.

The second consideration to be taken indirectly from Einstein is that of space-time. Although linked to his theories of relativity and collected in The Principle of Relativity, it was Hermann Minkowski and not Einstein himself who coined the term space-time. In an address

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delivered at the 80th Assembly of German Natural Scientists and Physicians at Cologne in September 1908, Minkowski, after assuring his audience that his views were derived from experimental physics, began poetically, ‘Henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality’. He then went on to explain how one might arrive at a changed idea of time and space, and plotted the results of relativity theory geometrically by extending the usual three-dimensional view of space to a four-dimensional one that includes time. Space-time was the name given to this fusion, to this four-dimensional framework, and it paved the way for many future scientific theories. The idea of time as the fourth dimension has influenced thought and art throughout the twentieth century, and the notion of space-time has made its way into literary theory.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the difficulties in classifying and defining the novel, proposes the word ‘chronotope’ to describe the inter-relationship between time and space in literature.

We have given the name chronotope (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time.

For Bakhtin, time, in the novel, becomes almost tangible and artistically visible. It develops as a character does and ‘thickens, takes on flesh’. Time can then be traced in the novel and its thread is entangled in the turns and events of the plot. It is here, too, in the plot and movement of the story, that space can be defined. In the unfolding of the story, temporal and spatial indicators merge and this intersection of axes characterises the artistic chronotope.

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However, Bakhtin uses the chronotope not to explore the representation of time and space, but in order to classify novels according to their methods of ‘fixing’ time and space.

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time.\(^5\)

Therefore, while the idea of the chronotope might be useful in our understanding of literary manipulation of time and space, Bakhtin’s definition and application are not. Having asserted the inseparability of time and space, in the introduction to his essay he prioritises time and continues his assembly of a historical poetics focused mainly on temporal indicators. Nor do his generic case-studies fit the broader field of exploration – the study of time and space – undertaken in this thesis, while choosing examples from novels does not in any way claim that the evidence is appropriate only to that genre. Moreover, our exploration focuses on time and space in movement and not as a fixed schema in the writing. It is, at times, difficult to differentiate between Bakhtin’s chronotope and his description of plot, since spatio-temporal conjunctions are present on many levels within literary texts. Therefore, we must reject the term ‘chronotope’ because of its Bakhtinian connotations and keep, instead, time-space to indicate the inter-dependence of the two concepts. However, more useful terminology is to be found in French philosophy and literary theory, in the works of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze.

While Bakhtin formed his chronotope from mathematical terms in relativity theory, Bergson engages directly with the work of Albert Einstein to develop his philosophy of time. Impressed by Einstein’s revelations, Bergson sought a similar shift in philosophical thought and undertook to examine the possible application to human perception. He commended Einstein’s work as presenting ‘la conviction qu’il nous apportait pas seulement une nouvelle

\(^5\) The Dialogic Imagination by M.M. Bakhtin, ed.by Michael Holquist., p.85.
physique mais aussi certaines manières nouvelles de penser’. However, his concern is primarily time, and he makes a distinction between lived time and measured time. Rather than embracing space as part of time, he is eager to free time from such contamination. Bergson defines time, free from spatial considerations, as *durée*, or duration.

**Duration**

Mentioned for the first time in his *Essais sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Bergson is careful to acknowledge that there are two possible conceptions of duration, only one of which is entirely uncontaminated by space. The first is of less interest to the philosopher but is also less problematic than pure duration, which can only be understood intuitively. It is important to note that here time cannot be static; it cannot be frozen or ordered; there is no chronology or obvious succession; time is dynamic and in perpetual motion. This flux complicates our perception of time because we too are caught up in the movement. Time is part of us and we are part of time; it is within us and we flow with it, which means that our only true reflection on time must be from within it: ‘l’être vivant dure essentiellement’. Unlike Einstein’s examples of relativity, in which a subject may observe from an inert framework, no such state of rest exists in Bergsonian philosophy. In his essays on consciousness, Bergson focuses on this interpenetration of time and ourselves, but this very embodiment begs to be spatialised and suggests that the space of the body may be a useful measurement of time. However, Bergson argues that our vision of time is skewed by conscious thought and that, in an echo of Kant, it can only be perceived intuitively.

Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, declares that time and space are a priori forms of empirical intuition, internalised and infinite. Of time he says that it is

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nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuition of our selves and our inner state. For time cannot be determined of outer appearances; it belongs neither to a shape or a position etc., but on the contrary determines the relation of representations in our inner state.⁹

For Bergson, our basic thought process is synonymous with duration, ‘penser intuitivement est penser en durée’.¹⁰ So our experience and our conscious understanding of duration are two different things. Human perception of time relies on spatial terms and markers, and cannot hope to describe pure duration. Once we step outside our intuition and attempt to view or rationalise our experience of time, we are forced to adopt spatial co-ordinates. As soon as we try to talk about time, we order it; we put events into sequence and position past experiences in relation to an imaginary fixed moment in the present. For Bergson, this does not truly describe time, since we are in constant motion and can have no point of rest. Unfortunately, the very word ‘duration’ holds an integral notion of extension which we are tempted to visualise spatially. Bergsonian duration is progress but, stripped of spatial markers, it is directionless. The idea of motion without linear direction evokes the image of circularity which, doubling back on itself, we read again in terms of spatialised time, judging circular motion in respect to the clock. It is therefore more useful to think of duration in terms of movement rather than spatial distance, to understand it as the opposite of a fixed point and to think of time as a constant and endless flow. The problem thus far seems to be one of representation. According to Bergson, we intuitively sense the nature of time but are unable to verbalise or even visualise that nature. Quite forcefully, Bergson underlines the difficulty in expressing time, and this complication in reproducing lived experience makes our study of literature all the more important. Faced with this apparent impossibility, the philosopher himself endeavours to clarify duration using the metaphor of music.

Bergson describes melody as an interpenetration of notes, a musical phrase in which we cannot decipher the beginning or end of each note but hear them linked into one another. He urges us to efface the difference between the sounds we hear and even the characteristics of the sound itself, so that we remember only its fluidity,

n’en retenir que la continuation de ce qui précède dans ce qui suit et la transition ininterrompue, multiplicité sans divisibilité et succession sans séparation, pour retrouver enfin le temps fondamental. Telle est la durée immédiatement perçue, sans laquelle nous n’aurions aucune idée du temps.  

This metaphor is not entirely satisfactory since, although we may perceive the notes as fused, there is indeed succession in the execution of the piece. We are also confronted with the problem of representation, since music is transcribed spatially and written according to horizontal and vertical conventions to indicate sequence and simultaneity respectively. However, we should keep in mind the idea that Bergson proposes succession without distinction. Time or duration cannot be split into moments or sections; it is made up of interpenetrating elements, notes fondues. In fact, taking the metaphor further, he suggests the interdependence of each element and the whole, with each note carrying the whole of the melody and the melody growing constantly with each note. When we apply this notion to duration we discover the creative force which Bergson names l’élan vital.

Bergsonian duration is mobility and movement, a ‘création perpétuelle de possibilités et de réalités’, and a ‘jaillissement ininterrompu de nouveautés’. It is a constant renewal and a continual rebirth. Rather than expressing the passing of time, however, this dispels notions of past and future and promotes the idea of a constant present. Just as the note carried the entire melody in Bergson’s metaphor, so each moment encapsulates all of history, each moment is all time. Without succession, there is a layering of events. Time thickens, as Bakhtin said, but, according to Bergson, not in any spatial sense. In fact, the perpetual rebirth

11 Bergson, Durée et simultanéité, p.42.
12 Henri Bergson, Essais sur les données immédiates de la conscience, p.74.
evokes two images, each of which, as warned, falls into spatial models for what Bergson claims to be purely temporal. On the one hand, a constant present is like a freezing of time, leaving us with a single, specific moment which shudders like a stuck record. Clearly we need to remember the progressive nature of duration and imagine a spiral effect, with a recurrent pattern that does not retrace its own orbit. In this way, we have an idea of repetition, growth and change. Each moment is a rebirth, but one which carries with it all that has passed. Each moment is a ‘jaillissement de nouveautés’ and is, therefore, new and different to what has gone before. But not only does each rebirth add to the whole of duration, it actually alters all of time. Duration, then, is always new, it undergoes a continual evolution and there can be no fixity or definition of the past because it is forever moving and changing and morphing with each new moment. Time is a creative force, and the past, encapsulated but unrestricted in the present moment, is constantly being rewritten. Thus duration does not prevent memory but refuses chronology since it does not differentiate between present and previous states. Duration cannot be divided into segments, and so there can be no ordering of events: ‘il suffit qu’en se rappelant ces états il ne les juxtapose pas à l’état actuel comme un point à un autre point’.13 However, the states are plural and undergoing constant change, and so duration is multiple and heterogeneous.

Bref, la pure durée pourrait bien n’être qu’une succession de changements qualitatifs qui se fondent, qui se pénètrent, sans contours précis, sans aucune tendance à s’extérioriser les uns par rapport aux autres, sans aucune parenté avec le nombre ce serait l’hétérogénéité pure.14

In *L’Évolution créatrice*, Bergson takes this recurrent force and applies it to nature, giving it the name *élan vital*. It has, obviously, a positive transformative power, and underlines *change*

13 Bergson, *Essais sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, p.76.
14 Ibid., pp.74-77.
as an essential element of duration, and therefore an essential component of intuition.\textsuperscript{15} This creative evolution calls to mind the notion of eternal return – not the pessimistic Nietzschean model in which constant repetition does not allow for variation, but the classical phoenix-like rebirthing of the world out of chaos. In this sense, duration can be understood as a constant ‘becoming’: ‘Plus d’états inertes, plus de choses mortes; rien que la mobilité dont est faite la stabilité de la vie’.\textsuperscript{16} All life is in flux and, as duration progresses, it is constantly renewed and changed. While Bergson refuses chronological memory and the comparison of one instant to another, it is through memory that we sense change and build an understanding of the movement of time. In order for memory to function, however, we have to have a simultaneous perception of duration.

\textbf{Simultaneity}

Succession presupposes simultaneity and, therefore, distinction. We continue to visualise duration through extension, placing elements alongside one another instead of united with one another. This means that we have a simultaneous, as opposed to contemporaneous, perception of duration. It is on the subject of simultaneity and different understandings of the multiplicity of time that Bergson directly confronted Einstein. \textit{Durée et simultanéité,} subtitled ‘A propos de la théorie d’Einstein’, was written in response to relativity theory for the purpose of testing how compatible the concept of duration was with new scientific findings. While the theory of relativity discusses the simultaneity of two instants, Bergson explores the simultaneity of two fluxes. ‘La simultanéité serait précisément la possibilité pour deux ou plusieurs événements d’entrer dans une perception unique et instantanée’.\textsuperscript{17} We can observe a range of simultaneous progressions even if we represent them successively. Bergson, in


\textsuperscript{16} Bergson, \textit{La Pensée et le Mouvant,} p.141.

\textsuperscript{17} Bergson, \textit{Durée et simultanéité,} p.43.
Durée et simultanéité, uses the example of the person, sitting by a river, watching a boat glide by. We can interiorise this whole and allow it to appear as one rather than three distinct movements. For Bergson, there is a simultaneity which encloses all of these fluxes and which allows, in contradiction to Einstein, for a universal duration. Bergson does not, however, find that his idea of a universal time is incompatible with the general and special theories of relativity. It is perhaps surprising that Bergson, always so wary of ‘points’ in time, here refers to the instantaneous. The instant, determined by Aristotle in his Physics IV, was defined as the limit between past and present, viewed either as a division or a link, and was problematic since it was apparently the only time that truly existed.\(^\text{18}\) In Bergsonian duration, the instant is the imaginary but impossible point at which duration stops if duration could be stopped. While stressing that all change is indivisible, Bergson admits that the separation of time into moments is natural, and that it may indeed be more useful to study specific states rather than the constant flux which transforms them.

Rien de plus naturel, je le répète: le morcelage du changement en états nous met à même d’agir sur les choses, et il est pratiquement utile de s’intéresser aux états plutôt qu’au changement lui-même.\(^\text{19}\)

Memory requires a simultaneous perspective on duration because we perceive several durations at the same time. This is conscious thought rather than intuition, and is therefore opposed to pure duration, which Bergson defines as contemporaneous time.

In order to get closer to an understanding of pure duration, it is imperative to study time through motion. Although he reaffirms his belief that duration is immeasurable, Bergson goes on to gauge time through motion. He uses the example of how we register movement when tracing a line across a table top with our finger, and states that this proves that time can


\(^{19}\) Bergson, *La Pensée et le Mouvant*, p.163.
be measured through the intermediary of movement.\(^{20}\) Motion is not an obvious quality of duration because, as Einstein showed in his relativity experiments, if both the body and its immediate environment are in motion, without clear spatial markers this movement can be perceived as rest. However, Bergson encourages the effort, ‘restituons au mouvement sa mobilité, au changement sa fluidité, au temps sa durée’.\(^{21}\) How, then, can we re-evaluate duration through movement? In *La Pensée et le mouvant*, Bergson draws parallels between duration and film: ‘Le film qui se déroule est donc vraisemblablement attaché à de la conscience qui dure, et qui règle le mouvement’ (p.13), and it is in more recent writings on film that we find Bergson’s theories championed.

Gilles Deleuze was profoundly influenced by Bergson, devoting an entire work to his philosophy and referring to him extensively in many of his most important texts. Much of his later writing focused on the medium of film, and it is from his study of cinematography and film montage that he developed two of his key terms, *l’image-mouvement* and *l’image-temps*. Like Bergson, Deleuze is concerned with multiplicity, movement and becoming, and his works not only elucidate but extend the earlier ideas of duration and recurrence. In accordance with Bergson, Deleuze begins with the assertion that time cannot be divided into instants, and cannot be made up of points at rest.\(^{22}\) Time can only be constructed from movement and, by dividing time, we destroy its very nature:

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\text{vous ne pouvez pas reconstituer le mouvement avec des positions dans l’espace ou des instants dans le temps, c’est-à-dire avec des «coupes» immobiles…Cette reconstitution, vous ne le faites qu’en joignant aux positions ou aux instants l’idée abstraite d’une succession, d’un temps mécanique, homogène, universel et décliqué de l’espace, le même pour tous les mouvements. Et de deux manières alors vous ratez le mouvement. D’une part, vous aurez beau rapprocher à l’infini deux instants ou deux positions, le mouvement se fera toujours dans l’intervalle entre les deux, donc derrière votre dos. D’autre part, vous aurez beau diviser et subdiviser le temps, le mouvement se fera...}
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\(^{20}\) Bergson, *Durée et simultanéité*, ‘le temps qui dure n’est pas mesurable’, p.47 and, ‘il est donc vrai que le temps se mesure par l’intermédiaire du mouvement’, p.48.

\(^{21}\) Bergson, *La Pensée et le Mouvant*, p.8.

\(^{22}\) This is reminiscent of Zeno’s paradoxes which have proven to be the stimulus for much reflection on the nature of time. Zeno’s paradoxes asked, for example, whether the flight of an arrow was made up of a succession of points of the arrow at rest.
toujours dans une durée concrète, chaque mouvement aura donc sa propre durée qualitative.²³

For Deleuze, like Bergson, movement must be gauged from within and, as with duration, there can be no discernible difference between the action and the agent. Movement or duration becomes a transformation, a qualitative change. To move is to become ‘other than itself’ which, in Deleuzean terminology, is known as différence.

While it is in Différence et répétition (1968) that Deleuze fully expounds his theory of difference, he was already grappling with the ideas, and the terminology, in his essays on Bergson.²⁴ The qualitative change Deleuze is describing is a double act as the title of his work suggests. Becoming different is at once a beginning and an end or, rather, a continuation and an end. Movement is an accumulation of changes, so each displacement completes a cycle or actualises a difference while continuing the motion. In order to distinguish between these two, inseparable types of change, Deleuze used the cipher ‘different/ciation’, a composite of ‘differentiation’, the virtual change that takes place within an idea or event, and ‘differenciation’, the actualisation of that difference, how something becomes other than itself. Later he adopted the term ‘differenciation’, with the italicised ‘c’ denoting the fusion of the two concepts. In summary, then, differenciacion is a becoming, a movement of the virtual towards its actualisation and, for Deleuze, can clearly be linked to Bergson’s élan vital. It is a rebirth and is essentially temporal; indeed, it reflects the idea of pure duration since it is heterogeneous time rather than measured time. In Deleuze, differenciacion is perceptible and not intuitive. Differenciacion is a positive creative force, a constant becoming but, importantly, a constant becoming-other. In each progressive but directionless change, each becoming carries the whole movement within it, so that differenciacion affects not just the new becoming but the other from which that becoming is born. We have again, then, an

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eternal return and recurrence which, although continually repeated, is never the same. It is clear that movement requires change and that there are no fixed points in Deleuzean duration; becoming is not opposed to any anterior fixed state but is a continual rebirth from a changing continuum. We are dealing with becoming and difference rather than being and identity, which have been the bases for much Western thinking. The action is positive and liberating because it carries a propulsion towards possible futures. For Bergson, the visualisation of this creative flux is almost impossible. However, Deleuze finds a new way of viewing time and change in the medium of cinema.

In his books on cinema, *L’image-mouvement* and *L’image-temps*, Deleuze proposes a study of film in an attempt to think about time from movement rather than from an apparently fixed and subjective point of reference. Cinema, according to Deleuze, offers us an image of time divorced from ourselves, and therefore allows us the luxury to view time directly. We may be at one remove from our own passage in time, but cinema, in a way Bergson did not think possible, represents the elements of flux and change. In discussing cinema, Deleuze is referring to an ideal and experimental process which does not necessarily follow a narrative, but which exploits the possibilities of the medium. Such cinema, Deleuze believes, can present us with an image of movement itself and time itself. In the movement-image, associated with montage and early cinema, we get an indirect portrayal of time, while the time-image, which Deleuze dates from *Citizen Kane* (1941) by Orson Welles, gives a direct model of time, separate even from movement and distilled to the act of becoming.

The movement-image is the image of constant flux, diversity and multiplicity. It is the ‘ensemble acentré d’éléments variables qui agissent et réagissent les uns sur les autres’, and can be said to correspond to Bergson’s simultaneity, in that several fluxes are perceptible in a

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single instant. It encompasses the multiplicity and heterogeneity of duration but, because movement relies not only on temporal but also on spatial markers, this is time contaminated by space and not Bergson’s pure duration. Duration, instead, can be compared with the time-image in which we get a direct image of time as power or difference or as a reflection of *élan vital*. These terms are not limited to cinema but can, as Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss in *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, be related to literature.26 In written texts, repetition and change can be exemplified in the recurrence of certain words. A word repeated in a new context will change the meaning of that word, but also alter all other instances in which that word appeared; the word gathers meaning and grows, with each new occurrence also changing the possibilities for the word’s future appearance and meaning. For Deleuze, language is not a representation, but another form of becoming. Paralleling the movement-image and time-image in literature, Deleuze differentiates between indirect and free-indirect discourse. While indirect discourse reports speech from an external standpoint, the more complex free-indirect discourse removes the authority and allows us to view the flow of language, making us aware of its creative force. In this way, free-indirect discourse is linked to stream-of-consciousness, which distances language even further and frees words from their subject. In literature too, then, we are confronted with *l’élan vital*, or the power of becoming-other.

Becoming, rather than being, is not a new concept in philosophy and can be traced back to antiquity. For Plato, one could become-other, but there existed an archetype against which this change took place. This notion is completely rejected by Deleuze, among others, for whom the change is not defined in relation to any fixed model. Significantly, Deleuze, in explaining ‘becoming’, reverts to spatial terminology and introduces a sense of displacement,  

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La division se fait entre la durée, qui «tend» pour son compte à assumer ou porter toutes les différences de nature (puisqu’elle est douée du pouvoir de varier qualitativement avec soi), et l’espace qui ne présente jamais que des différences de degré (puisqu’il est homogénéité quantitative).  

Deleuze admits, then, that there are two types of duration, or rather, two types of multiplicity. There is pure duration, on which Bergson focused, free from the ‘contamination’ of space, and through which we experience a qualitative change, a ‘différence de nature’; and a second type, in which duration and space co-exist:

L’une est représentée par l’espace (ou plutôt, si nous tenons compte de toutes les nuances, par le mélange impur du temps homogène): c’est une multiplicité d’extériorité, de simultanéité, de juxtaposition, d’ordre, de différenciation quantitative, de différence de degré, une multiplicité numérique, discontinue et actuelle. L’autre se présente dans la durée pure; c’est une multiplicité interne, de succession, de fusion, d’organisation, d’hétérogénéité, de discrimination qualitative ou de différence de nature, une multiplicité virtuelle et continue, irréductible au nombre.  

Towards the end of *Le bergsonisme*, Deleuze reminds us that Bergson’s quarrel with Einstein revolved around this distinction. For Bergson, Einstein’s time was an impure duration, one which confused time and space. However, Deleuze would argue that this mix is, in fact, necessary as it is evident in real experience. Deleuze introduces another term for this process of becoming, one which affirms the spatial component, and evokes both a sense of origin and displacement, ‘deterritorialisation’. Because of the cyclical motion we have already identified, deterritorialisation is paired with reterritorialisation, but there is never an original or reclaimed territory; each displacement is one of change and creation. A closer examination of Deleuze’s movement-image and time-image clarifies this.

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28 Ibid., pp.30-31.
29 ‘la durée pure nous présente une succession purement interne, sans extériorité; l’espace, une extériorité sans succession’. Deleuze, *Le bergsonisme*, p.29.
The Movement-image

The movement-image, as its name suggests, is dynamic and ever-changing. It is, ‘la chose-même saisie dans le mouvement comme fonction continue’, and therefore attains the ambition of viewing movement from within or, more correctly, of representing movement in movement. The movement-image is a process of différenciation. As we have seen before, each becoming changes not only the new incarnation, but the whole that continually passes through the process of eternal rebirth. Each present moment changes the whole of the past carried within it, and the change must occur simultaneously in time and space.

L’image-mouvement a deux faces, l’une par rapport à des objets dont elle fait varier la position relative, l’autre par rapport à un tout dont elle exprime un changement absolu. Les positions sont dans l’espace, mais le tout qui change est dans le temps.

This leads us to Deleuze’s statement which asserts that ‘c’est le montage lui-même qui constitue le tout, et nous donne ainsi l’image du temps’.

Montage is the collection or succession of movement-images which express a totality in flux. It allows us to perceive not the time-image, but the flow of time – its movement in and with space. As already said, movement suggests both spatial and temporal displacement, and therefore unites the three key concepts of this thesis.

According to Deleuze:

le temps ne se distingue ainsi du mouvement que comme représentation indirecte. Le temps comme cours découle de l’image-mouvement, ou des plans successifs. Mais le temps comme unité ou comme totalité dépend du montage qui le rapporte encore au mouvement ou à la succession des plans. C’est pourquoi l’image-mouvement ne nous donne pas une présentation directe, c’est-à-dire ne nous donne pas une image-temps.

However, in his companion work on cinema, L’image-temps, Deleuze revises and, in fact, reverses this relationship and shows that time is not subordinate to movement but that

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30 Deleuze, L’image-mouvement, p.41.
31 Ibid., p.50.
32 Ibid., p.51.
33 Ibid., p.355.
movement flows directly from time. While montage cinema relied on cuts and physical jumps to portray time in motion, the development of high-quality lenses in the middle of the twentieth century allowed for greater depth of field, and therefore the possibility of a purer time-space relationship on screen, whereby movement could be perceived in a single spatio-temporal frame. ‘C’est ce renversement qui fait, non plus du temps la mesure du mouvement, mais du mouvement la perspective du temps’ (p.34). Therefore, while movement may have subordinated status in the relationship, it is, nonetheless, essential to our perception and understanding of time and space.

To recap, then, our understanding of time is dependent on movement, which is, in turn, dependent on space, since it is through displacement that we measure change. In this way, we unite the three concepts of our thesis: dynamics, time and space. In Deleuzean cinema, this process of change is possible through the succession of movement-images, which is explicitly related to narrative. Literature can successfully represent becoming and change, thus, in the featured literary texts, we will discover complex manipulations of time and space in movement.

We have argued so far for the indissociability of time and space but have concentrated our study on time, and must now turn our attention to space. Just as duration has an inherent quality of extension, space itself endures. If space were foreign to duration, no motion or change could take place. Far from exploring the connections between time and space, Bergson rejects spatial terms in favour of a distilled time, but his position is untenable because, divorced from space, we cannot express time or its passing. We have seen that is it necessary to set aside his pure duration and focus on the interlocked time-space of Deleuze’s

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34 ‘Ce n’est plus le temps qui dépend du mouvement, c’est le mouvement aberrant qui dépend du temps.’ Deleuze, L’image-temps, pp.58-59.
35 ‘Here I further add that the concept of alteration and, within, the concept of motion (as alteration of place), is only possible through and in the representation of time’, Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, pp.179-80.
movement-image and time-image in order to reach an understanding of time and space through literary representation. We have explored time in terms of simultaneity, multiplicity, movement and becoming, but similar terms may be applied to an examination of space. At the beginning of our study of Bergson, we recalled Immanuel Kant’s theory of time, and it is helpful to turn again to his *Critique of Pure Reason* for an observation on space:

> Space is a necessary representation, *a priori*, which is the ground of all other intuitions. One can never represent that there is no space, although one can very well think that there are no objects to be encountered in it. It is therefore to be regarded as the condition of the possibility of appearances, not as a determination dependent on them and is an *a priori* representation that necessarily grounds outer appearances.  

Space, like time, is an abstract and infinite presence. Geometrically and geographically, we have succeeded in measuring and documenting it, often labelling and naming it and necessarily limiting it in order to comprehend and represent it. But by this process we strip space of its *élan vital* and create something different: place. However, in Deleuze we also find concepts that illustrate the dynamism and transformative power of space. In *Mille Plateaux*, the title of which signals the multiplicity of spatial extensions, Deleuze and Guattari explore smooth and stratified space and propose an end to binary thinking in the *rhizome* which connects and intersects. Their work suggests spatial practices that we find elsewhere in works by, for example, Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre to whom we now turn.

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37 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.158.
Space

In the introduction to his work on the production of space, Henri Lefebvre liberates space from its geometrical meaning and extends it to include social constructs. He highlights spatial theories from Descartes to Foucault and shifts them from the abstract to a concrete exploration of social space. \(^{39}\) Conscious of the interdependence of space and time, he nevertheless focuses on space into which he sees time subsumed,

Le temps se discerne mais ne se détache pas de l’espace…. Les phénomènes attachés par l’analyse à la seule « temporalité », à savoir la croissance, la maturation, le vieillissement, ne se détachent pas de la « spatialité », elle-même abstraction. Espace et temps apparaissent se manifestent comme différents et inséparables. \(^{40}\)

Tracing developments in the study of space and its attendant terminology, Lefebvre strives for a theory that will unite the fields of physical, mental and social space, and hopes that he will succeed in identifying the system that underlies the production of these spaces. What interests Lefebvre here is the correlation between the words we use to identify a space, our labelling of spaces, and what those spaces represent. Fundamental to his argument is the transformation of space into place through the process of naming, since places must be, ‘marqués et remarqués, nommés’. \(^{41}\) Although not linked to literature in *La Production de l’espace*, this creative verbal force is highly relevant since it suggests an inability to represent not only non-spaces as acknowledged by Immanuel Kant, but the inability to represent space in writing, since its very description corrupts its identity. If we follow Lefebvre’s argument, space requires definition, but in that act loses its being as space.

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40 Lefebvre, *La Production de l’espace*, p.204.

41 Lefebvre, *La Production de l’espace*, p.139.
While Lefebvre concentrates on the function and production of spaces, he also poses important questions about the relationship between space and time. He admits that, ‘l’espace implique un temps et inversement’ (p.140), but, in trying to further decipher this interconnection, to extract and extol the virtues of space, he appears to contradict himself and complicate his definitions. Rather than accepting the involutions of time and space, Lefebvre plays a futile ‘chicken and egg’ game, on the one hand asserting that ‘le temps se saisit dans l’espace, au coeur, au sein de l’espace’ (p.114), and on the other suggesting that it is ‘le processus temporel qui engendre (produit) la spatialité’ (p.153). In fact, this is less of a paradox than it first appears, since the production of space requires an action or a process, and here we find ourselves back in the familiar tripartite equation of time, space and dynamics: ‘Plus que les variances ou constances, ce passage incessant de la *temporalité* (succession, enchaînement) à la *spatialité* (simultanéité, synchronisation) définit toute activité productrice’ (p.87). This action is a constant ‘moving into space’ through a creative force which recalls our earlier examinations of both Bergsonian *élan vital* and Deleuze’s differenciacion; it suggests neither form nor direction but supports both the physical and philosophical notions of perpetual motion. However, according to Lefebvre, this action not only alters the identity of place but the balance between the two concepts of time and space. Whereas with Deleuze, each constructive moment was the result of a destructive displacement, in Lefebvre the production of space in contemporary society is accompanied by the consumption of time. A mark of modernity, he claims, is the disappearance of time in tandem with the appearance of place. While ‘chaque *lieu* porte son âge et la trace, comme le tronc d’un arbre, du temps qui l’a engendré [...] Or, le temps disparaît dans l’espace social de la modernité’,
Le temps, ce « vécu » essentiel, ce bien entre les biens, ne se voit pas, ne se lit pas. Il ne se construit pas. Il se consume, il s’épuise, et c’est la fin. Le temps ne laisse que des traces. Il se dissimule dans l’espace sous les débris qui l’encombrent et dont on se débarrasse au plus vite : les déchets polluent. Cette évacuation apparente du temps ne serait-elle pas un des traits caractéristiques de la modernité?42

For Lefebvre, our comprehension of time is only possible in spatial terms, and he argues that we perceive the results of the movement of time rather than its actual presence; however, time appears to be a finite force, exhausted by its engendering of space and place, and a victim of modernity. This assertion is further complicated by the fact that time is not the only element consumed, since space too is eroded as we move through it and transform it, through definition and description, into place. However, this movement requires duration in such a way that time is not eliminated, as Lefebvre would have us believe, but incorporated into the creation and understanding of place. Furthermore, while Lefebvre here suggests that time is exhausted and finite, he later contradicts this notion by highlighting its cyclical and repetitive nature.

Les cycles dans le temps correspondent à des formes circulaires de l’espace, dotées de symétries. Peut-être les processus temporels linéaires (répétitifs, de type mécanique) correspondent-ils à la constitution d’axes (le long desquels peut se réitérer l’opération).43

So time retains the circular form we have already noted, and space, once again, is explained in geometric terms in order to maintain its abstract nature, since description would transform it into place. Although Lefebvre confirms the inter-relationship we have been examining so far, and extends the creative power of movement through time and space to explain the creation of place, we are still faced with the difficulty of representation first exposed in Bergson’s theories. Bergson lamented the fact that we were unable to fully comprehend the movement of time since we cannot suppose a fixed point outside it and must operate within

42 Lefebvre, La Production de l’espace, p.114.
43 Ibid., p.204.
the flow, but Lefebvre allows for this active participation in the consumption of time and production of space by directing our focus towards the body and its rhythms and motions. The concept would not be alien to Bergson who, although eschewing a study of space, did accept the body as a useful tool for the understanding and measurement of the passage of time. For Lefebvre, an initial comprehension of space comes from the spatial presence of the body: ‘L’espace: mon espace, ce n’est pas le contexte dont je serais le textuel, c’est d’abord mon corps’ (p.213, original emphasis). Space is understood to be not only the physical body but the dynamic interaction between the body and that which surrounds it, so that every moment is a movement ‘into space’ and a creation of new spaces. The body defines space in relation to other bodies and changes space in its passage through it.

La capacité inventive du corps, il n’y a pas à la démontrer : il la montre, il la déploie dans l’espace. Les rythmes, multiples, s’interpénètrent. Dans le corps et autour de lui, comme à la surface d’une eau, comme dans la masse d’un fluide, les rythmes se croisent et s’entre-croisent, se superposent, liés à l’espace.44

However, in this flux, while the body remains a point of reference, it is not a static point but instead a ‘point de départ et point d’arrivée’ which we can understand as a constantly differenciated body, a body in constant motion and undergoing continual change.45 The body not only has potential as a temporal and spatial marker but also as a representation of time and space and a possible aide to our understanding of the concepts. If the body, through its movement and duration, continually creates ‘space’, it also has the power to interact with, define and name that space, and, in this process, to turn it into ‘place’. The body becomes the tool par excellence for the study of time and space and Lefebvre, acknowledging a debt to Bachelard, calls this study rhythmanalysis.46

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44 Lefebvre, La Production de l’espace, p.236.
In rhythmanalysis, which is an analysis using rhythm rather than an analysis of rhythm, Lefebvre focuses on the organic aspect of rhythm rather than the mechanical, and is careful to emphasise that rhythm is not to be confused with movement. Rhythm unites the three concepts of this thesis: time, space and the dynamic, or, as Lefebvre would have it, ‘Partout où il y a interaction d’un lieu, d’un temps et d’une dépense d’énergie, il y a rythme’.47 By centring rhythmanalysis in the body and using the body as mode of analysis rather than the subject of the study, Lefebvre places the physical self into the flow of time and space so as to measure time and space from within. Like Bergson before him, he finds music useful as a way of illustrating the concept of rhythmanalysis, borrows musical terms such as mesure and tempo, and, although he does not reference Deleuze, he parallels Deleuze’s work on repetition and difference, recognising both as essential patterns of rhythm:

Pas de rythme sans répétition dans le temps et dans l’espace, sans reprises, sans retours, en bref sans mesure. Mais il n’y a pas de répétition sans différence. Qu’il s’agisse du quotidien, des rites, des cérémonies et des fêtes, des règles et des lois, il y a toujours de l’imprévu, du neuf qui s’introduit dans la répétitif: de la différence.48

Rhythm appears to reflect the spiral motion we have imagined, in which it doubles over on itself without retracing the same orbit, returning always as something familiar and yet slightly different. The familiarity helps us to build a model of the rhythm, and the difference helps us to chart change and, therefore, movement. This, for Lefebvre, is a possible theoretical problem since this movement is not what he hoped to prove and yet it is inherent to both time and rhythm. Lefebvre identifies two types of repetition, the cyclical and linear, explaining that, in reality, the two are indissociable and that it is their interrelationship that constitutes rhythm. Cyclical repetition, he tells us, ‘provient du cosmique, de la nature : jours, nuits, saisons, vagues de la mer et marées, cycles mensuels etc.’ (p.17), while linear repetition

48 Ibid., p.14, emphasis in original.
comes from social practices and human activity. Rhythm is, at once, natural and governed by predictable laws, and Lefebvre proposes a quasi-scientific exploration of rhythm based on concrete examples and case studies. Like Deleuze, he sets out his area of study in terms of binary opposites:

répétition et différence
mécanique et organique
découverte et création
cyclique et linéaire
continu et discontinu
quantitatif et qualitatif.49

However, these terms should not, in fact, be treated as mutually exclusive but, on the contrary, as coexisting categories within rhythmanalysis.

The body itself is made up of biological rhythms such as breathing and pulse, but it also functions according to rational rhythms of social practice. Rhythms can only be measured in relation to other rhythms, so the rhythms of the body are not a hindrance to the measurement of external rhythms, but instead turn the body into a metronome or internal scale against which to decipher other beats. In defining the rhythmanalyst, Lefebvre explains, ‘Il écoute – et d’abord son corps; il y apprend les rythmes, pour ensuite apprécier les rythmes externes. Son corps lui sert de métronome’ (p.32). Far from differentiating between what is internal and external, the rhythmanalyst is encouraged to perceive the ensemble and to allow his physiological and psychological rhythms to blend with the ambient or public rhythms:

Le rythmanalyste ne sera pas obligé de sauter du dedans au dehors des corps observés; il devrait parvenir à les écouter ensemble et les allier en prenant pour référence ses propres rythmes: en intégrant le dehors au-dedans, et réciproquement.50

Clearly everything is in movement and there is no fixed point for the rythmanalyst, who embodies time and space while endeavouring to analyse it. The body becomes the laboratory as well as the probe, and must be simultaneously the subject and the object of study. While

49 Lefebvre, Éléments de rythmanalyse, p.18.
50 Ibid., pp.32-33.
constantly in motion, the rhythmanalyst must also be passively open to the force of rhythms and, in order to fully comprehend rhythm, must be willing to abandon himself to it. Lefebvre wonders if there is an overarching rhythm that gives order to existence, and imagines that through rhythmanalysis the perception and even conception of reality will be altered. In ‘Essai de rythmanalyse des villes méditerranéennes’, Lefebvre with Catherine Régulier shows how this method may be used to analyse a town, and repositions rhythmanalysis in spatial terms outside the body, underlining the relationship between time and space as ‘un temps localisé ou si l’on veut un lieu temporalisé’. Here he brings us back to the creative power of the body in its environment and to the temporal component necessary for the transformation of space into place.

**Place**

Edward Casey, at the beginning of *Getting back into Place*, suggests that we need to ‘get back into place so as to get out of (the binding and re-binding of) space and time’, and posits place first in opposition to its absence. Casey challenges us to imagine a world without place, and highlights the fear that this provokes. In our place-saturated lives, he argues, we cannot comprehend placelessness, and a loss of place evokes feelings of anxiety. Place here, as in Lefebvre, describes shared and social spaces to which we have a connection. This connection, however, is based on time. A space, that empty extension in which movement is possible, becomes a place whenever it gains a history. This is true for collective places which are often named in reference to past events or historical characters, to which we develop a sense of belonging and which become recognisable entities. A space becomes a place through duration, through its enduring existence and the layering of those eternally repeated moments

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that constantly renew it. Place is born of temporal concepts such as tradition, habit and memory, and therefore encapsulates the time-space relationship that we seek to explore. However, the idea of place we are describing here is a collective space, associated with geographically fixed co-ordinates, which imply that place requires stasis.

Place, for Casey (and for Gaston Bachelard and Georges Perec), denotes habitation or habitability. A place is often a dwelling place, and our initial understanding of place is derived, Bachelard tells us in his poetics, from the house, which is used as a starting point for philosophical and anthropological investigations of space.\(^{53}\) Dwelling suggests duration, an extensive time and a degree of stasis, but this is not necessarily how Casey views it. For Casey, the very fact of a person being in a space, no matter how briefly, even passing through, imbues that space with a sense of place. ‘To be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place’ (p.xv). Place, therefore, goes hand in hand with being.\(^{54}\) The use of ‘situated’ and ‘in place’ here is problematic as it suggests fixity but Casey’s term for being-in-place, ‘implacement’, reintroduces the dynamic. ‘Implacement’ is what Casey means by the title of his work, *Getting Back into Place*. It is a movement and a rediscovery of the self and one’s place, incorporating an understanding of return. If, as he writes, the very nature of being guarantees one’s being in place, our existence is a constant process of ‘implacement’ and can, therefore, be related to Deleuze’s notion of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Deleuze’s work with Félix Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* developed new concepts, based on a geometry of lines, planes and borders, and produced a new terminology for the mapping of space. The ideas of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are part of a process of


\(^{54}\) This fusion of being and place can be seen in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) where *Dasein* is literally Place-Being, and in Lefebvre’s *Eléments de rythmanalysis*, where the body or ‘corps-sujet’ is ‘l’être dans le monde’ (p.62).
becoming which involves the continual creation of place. The repeated rebirth we have already discussed necessitates not just a change in time but a movement in space, so we are being constantly deterritorialised, uprooted and moved along in a dynamic motion reflective of Lefebvre’s ‘point de depart, point d’arrivée’, which he situates in the body.

Deterritorialisation, therefore, can be compared to a perpetual erosion of identity and, since our being requires us to situate ourselves in space and find a new place in which to be, there must also be a process of reterritorialisation. In the constant flux of existence we are always simultaneously undergoing a process of deterritorialisation-reterritorialisation, since each moment is a shift in space, time and identity. Deterritorialisation is absolute, and therefore reterritorialisation is not a return to a former state but the creation of a new territory which alters what has gone before and what is to come. In Casey’s words, ‘where you are right now is not a matter of indifference but affects the kind of person you are, what you have been doing in the past, even what you will do in the future’ (p.xv). His ‘implacement’ refers us back to the notion of eternal repetition, and takes into account the creative power of place as a fusion of time and space, but awards place a dominant and formative status in the interaction between being and place, which neglects the reciprocal transformative power posited by Lefebvre: ‘To be somewhere is to be in place and therefore to be subject to its power, to be part of its action, acting on its scene’.

The power of place, however, can be compared to the apparently destructive fear of placelessness cited at the beginning of Casey’s text, and we are confronted anew with the difficulty of conceiving of space without recourse to time. Space or placelessness provokes the disturbing sensation of no longer being. ‘Being is everywhere full, Nonbeing is nowhere

55 For an overview of Deleuze and Guattari’s spatial concepts, see Verena Andermatt Conley, ‘Deleuze and Guattari: Space and Becoming’ in Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, States and World-Space in French Cultural Theory (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 95-111.
56 Casey, Getting Back into Place, p.23. It is worth noting here that in his discussion of Aristotle’s Physics, Casey again highlights the power of place, quoting, ‘the power (dynamis) of place will be a remarkable one’.
at all. Since ontological plenitude must be situated, no-place does not exist in or for a plenitudinous world. Being guarantees Place’ (p.x). According to Casey, we build our image of space from its potential as place:

while we can certainly conceive of entirely empty spaces and times – radical vacua in which no bodies (in space) or events (in time) exist – such spatio-temporal voids are themselves placelike insofar as they could be, in principle occupied by bodies and events. Moreover, once bodies are found or even merely posited, they require places in which to exist.57

This last statement inverts the relationship between place and being and contradicts the idea that being guarantees place. Once bodies are found or posited, they require spaces in which to exist, but it is only their occupancy of the space that allows it to become place. Place is dependent on the time-space dynamic rather than the other way round. Bodies do not, in fact, move ‘into place’; they create places through their very motion. However, this notion of place’s predominance over time and space is one that Casey pursues, so, while for us, place is born of the merging of time and space, for Casey the understanding of both comes from place itself:

There is no (grasping of) time without place; and this is so precisely by virtue of place’s actively delimiting and creatively conditioning capacities. Place situates time by giving it a local habitation. Time arises from places and passes (away) between them.58

We encounter here two interesting points. First, that there is no understanding of time without place, which I would contradict in arguing that there is no understanding of place without time since place requires a history, be that only a fleeting moment, a brief presence/present, but, further, that ‘place’ in this context should be replaced by ‘space’. Time, then, does not ‘arise from places’ but is present in them. Second, that place (for which we read space) has a

57 Casey, Getting Back into Place, p.x. Original emphasis.
58 Ibid, p.21. Casey openly admits to lococentrism in his review essay ‘Embracing Lococentrism: A Response to Thomas Brockelman’s Critique’, Human Studies 19 (1996), 459-465, and his fear that the concept of place is not given enough value in contemporary critical thinking is evident in his subsequent work, Fate of Place: A Philosophical History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
creative power, which is linked to the fact that it must be inhabited. If we accept occupancy or inhabitation in its broadest sense and relieve it of any notion of extended duration, it must be true that any space passed through becomes a place. In this way, place is understood to be both greater and more intimate than the historical geographies of modernity. Place does not only pertain to the external world in which we interact, but is also the internalised, the incorporated, the body. The body, as a changing, organic place, is the very incarnation of dynamic time-space. Casey distinguishes these two places – the external and the internal – as the body and the landscape, and posits that implacement occurs between these two boundaries, ‘Place is what takes place between body and landscape... Body and landscape present themselves as coeval epicentres around which particular places pivot and radiate. They are at the very least, the bounds of places’. As his argument develops, the balance between place and being is re-established, and, later in the work, Casey proposes that ‘bodies build places’ since their habitation in a space turns it into a place or dwelling place. Despite these contradictions, the essential remains that the relationship between the embodied being and the space it inhabits defines both the being and the place, and that a search for meaning and identity is a quest to find ourselves a place. According to Casey,

We do so by transmuting an initially aimless and endless scene into a place of concerted action, thereby constituting a dense placescape that, in close collaboration with our active bodies, guides us into orientation. Unplacement becomes implacement as we regain and refashion a sense of place.

While these terms reflect Deleuze’s deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, they appear to suggest extended duration, and, in order to represent the constant movement of the time and space, implacement must be followed by another unplacement and the sense of place continually regained and refashioned. The collective places of the modern landscape have

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59 Casey, Getting Back into Place, p.29. Casey further explores landscapes in Representing Place: Landscape Paintings and Maps (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), and the collected volume, Exploring the Work of Edward S. Casey, ed. by Azucena Cruz-Pierre and Donald A. Landes (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) includes chapters on landscapes, bodies and boundaries.
60 Ibid., p.29.
been successfully represented in literature and philosophy, but it is the fleeting, dynamic nature of places that are ‘passed through’ that have caused anxiety, troubled contemporary thinkers and challenged writers of fiction. There may be another stage between unplacement and implacement: a being in space that is not a being in place, and in which the creation of place may not be possible.

**Non-place**

What Casey terms ‘placelessness’, Marc Augé, in his ethnographic works, has called ‘non-place’. Non-places – spaces which do not hold the cultural or historical identity we expect from social places – are becoming increasingly prolific, and are exactly these spaces of ‘passing through’ that appear to trouble us. As Casey has shown, we have a deep-seated fear of the void, of emptiness and loss of orientation, but, he also suggests, non-places have not yet been coded, and are therefore not yet satisfactorily understood. Non-places beg identification, but our impulse is to contort them into ‘places’, to normalise them by imposing familiar frames of reference which are perhaps neither helpful nor desirable. The treatment of non-places is a recurrent theme in the works of the writers we are about to explore, and the term is useful for talking about the spaces of contemporary society in which we spend an increasing amount of time. Non-place can be used to describe spaces such as motorways and shopping centres, airport lounges and car parks, and can be applied too to the chain stores and identical coffee shops that have turned city high streets into indistinguishable copies of each other. In non-places we apparently undergo a process of deterritorialisation without its attendant reterritorialisation. Augé is perturbed by the dislocating and alienating effects of these non-places, and suggests a shift in ethnographic study from ‘man in society’ to ‘man in solitude’.

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Throughout his work, in a series of short texts including *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (1986) and *Pour une anthropologie des mondes contemporains* (1994), Augé, paying particular attention to ideas of history and individuality, carefully delineates contemporary city life and calls for an ‘ethnologie du proche’, a call which has been answered not only by social scientists and philosophers but by the novelists of recent years.\(^{62}\) Coining the label ‘surmodernité’, Augé explains that:

La surmodernité (qui procède simultanément des trois figures de l’excès qui sont la surabondance événementielle, la surabondance spatiale et l’individualisation des références) trouve naturellement son expression complète dans les non-lieux.\(^{63}\)

Non-places, therefore, are not only opposed to modern places but are extensions of them. However, gorged with information, images and individuality, they lose their cultural, historic and often literary references.

Si un lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu.\(^{64}\)

While we can closely associate the poet with the modern place, non-places often require a bureaucratic identity (such as a passport or boarding-pass),\(^{65}\) and impose a purely functional literature by way of signs and labels. Augé is pointing the way towards a new social study and, in the same way perhaps, a new literary representation is necessary. Non-places are, Augé says, in conflict with cultural indicators and, bereft of landmarks and historical importance, encourage an individualization of reference points.

Non-places are difficult to define and can, apparently, only be described in the negative: by what they are not. They are the absolute expression of supermodernity, spaces in which individuals are isolated, and through which they move (often in a controlled, regulated


\(^{64}\) Ibid., p.100.

\(^{65}\) The idea of passage is highlighted even in the vocabulary.
and uniform manner), almost in a void. Augé admits that ‘La distinction entre lieux et non-lieux passe par l’opposition du lieu à l’espace’ and, at times, describes place and non-place as polar opposites. However Michel de Certeau, who also works with these terms, describes non-place not as a negative place but rather as a space of movement and possibility. Certeau, in his seminal work on ‘l’art du quotidien’, in which he studies urban spaces through the act of walking, relates lieu, a static place or origin, to non-lieu, which is a process of passing through, an act of movement that in fact destroys place. In motion, we cannot be in place: ‘Marcher, c’est manquer de lieu’. He sets up the distinction between place and space as follows:

Est un lieu l’ordre (quel qu’il soit) selon lequel des éléments sont distribués dans des rapports de coexistence. S’y trouve donc exclue la possibilité, pour deux choses, d’être à la même place…Un lieu est donc une configuration instantanée de positions. Il implique de la stabilité.
Il y a espace dès qu’on prend en considération des vecteurs de direction, des quantités de vitesse et la variable de temps. L’espace est un croisement de mobiles. Il est en quelque sorte animé par l’ensemble des mouvements qui s’y déploient.

En somme, l’espace est un lieu pratiqué. Ainsi la rue géométriquement définie par un urbanisme est transformée en espace par des marcheurs. De même, la lecture est l’espace produit par la pratique de lieu que constitue un système de signes – un écrit.

There are four central observations we can draw from this definition: first, the implicit stability of place, or lieu, as opposed to the dynamic time-space relationship we have thus far explored; second, the impossibility of simultaneity of place and the subsequent ordering of place; third, the possible change of space to place and vice versa; and, finally, the correlation between the written word and this transformation, between narrative and the lived experience of space and place.

68 Ibid., p.173.
In each of these cases, our desire, need and ability to represent place is at work.

Certeau agrees that place incorporates the past, but sees this as an anchoring force and links it to the labelling and ordering of places. As with Lefebvre, it is important not to confuse the label with the experience of place, but for Certeau, while the naming of a place succeeds in stabilising it and rendering it habitable, it must, in so doing, rob space of its dynamism. Space is mobile, place is stable, therefore words trap space. However, it is labelling that limits space, not narrative. Narrative reintroduces movement, like the flâneur in the city, and liberates space: ‘L’espace serait au lieu ce que devient le mot quand il est parlé’.

In fact, the tensions and balance between storytelling and strolling are made explicit with the body as a possible frontier or bridge between the two: ‘les relations du sens de la marche avec le sens des mots situent deux sortes de mouvements apparemment contraires, l’un d’extériorité (marcher, c’est se mettre dehors), l’autre, intérieur (une mobilité sans la stabilité du signifiant)’. Once more, it is the absence and presence of the body, with its actions, rhythms, senses and spatial perceptions, that interacts with and alters the spaces it crosses. However, Certeau also uses the term non-place to describe this un-doing of place and suggests that a place may, in fact, be made up of a collection of non-places. In direct opposition to Casey, the movement of the body through space creates non-places for Certeau, and the non-places we create on our journeys through a city, for example, weave themselves into the fabric of that city. A place can be full of non-places, can be haunted by the possibility of non-place, and has, itself, the potential to become a non-place, in a different, other itinerary.

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69 Certeau, p.173.
70 Ibid., p.156. This dichotomy is further discussed by Mike Crang, ‘Relics, places and unwritten geographies in the work of Michel de Certeau (1925-86)’ in Thinking Space, ed. by Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.136-153.
71 Certeau., p.156.
L’errance que multiplie et rassemble la ville en fait une immense expérience sociale de la privation de lieu – une expérience (…) compensée par les relations et les croisements de ces exodes qui font entrelacs, créant un tissu urbain, et placée sous le signe de ce qui devrait être, enfin, le lieu, mais n’est qu’un nom, la Ville.\(^\text{72}\)

The multiplicity and recurrence of movements across a space can, on the other hand, through their frequency and geographical concentration, create a space we name and define as a place. Recognised social space is made up of the meeting of multiple individual trajectories, and the interconnections of space and place are not static but changing. What, then, is the difference between space and non-place? Space is indissolubly linked to time and motion, but is empty of the human agent. It is our movement through space that creates both place and non-place, ‘le non-lieu…une manière de passer’.\(^\text{73}\) We create place with the association of past, and identity with location, just as Augé describes, and non-place in our passage through place which, as we have seen, can continue to build, destroy and reconstruct place. We can relate this notion to Deleuze’s deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation and see how each new place carries past places and non-places within it while maintaining the potential to transform into yet another non-place or place. The transformative power of time and space remains constant.

Of course, it is not just the physical passing through place which bears this force but the narrative movement of the written text. Every text is, according to Certeau, ‘un récit de voyage’,\(^\text{74}\) tracing, constructing and transforming spatio-temporal models: ‘Les récits effectuent donc un travail qui, incessamment, transforme des lieux en espaces ou des espaces en lieux’.\(^\text{75}\)

Les lieux sont des histoires fragmentaires et repliées, des passés volés à la lisibilité par autrui, des temps empilés qui peuvent se déplier mais qui sont là plutôt comme des récits en attente et restent à l’état de rébus, enfin des symbolisations enkystées dans la douleur ou le plaisir du corps.\(^\text{76}\)

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\(^{72}\) Certeau., p.155.  
\(^{73}\) Ibid., p.155.  
\(^{74}\) Ibid., p.171.  
\(^{75}\) Ibid., p.174.  
\(^{76}\) Ibid., p.165.
We have, therefore, at the end of this discussion, two conflicting ideas of non-place. On the one hand, it is a disconcerting no-man’s land which lacks history and problematises readability and representation; on the other hand, it is a powerful, dynamic force through which we enjoy the freedom of time and space. Since we accept the fusion of time and space, we must concern ourselves with place and non-place, but will look at them not in opposition, but in the fluid relationship suggested by Certeau. Place we can define as a space with a history, a space in which events have occurred, in which people have been and about which stories can be told. Place holds cultural references and has an identity which merges the historic and the geographic. Non-place is mobile and creative, but poses difficulties of representation since, in our attempts to describe non-place, we fix and restrain it, transforming it once more into place.

In the course of this chapter we have compared diverse theories and shown that, despite the priority Bergson affords time over space, and his reproach to Einstein for treating the two concepts together, this would appear to be the only satisfactory manner of understanding time and space. It is evident that there is a fundamental difficulty in representing the lived experience of dynamic time and space, but also that narrative offers us the possibility of carrying out our investigation. In his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Bergson acknowledges the chasm between the human experience of time and our ability to verbalise it. He stresses the fact that time is indivisible and in constant flux, and therefore cannot be ordered or sequenced. Our understanding of time is complicated by our essential duration, which means that we can only reflect upon time from within it. Human perception of time relies on external spatial markers and, in our attempt to rationalise our experience, we destroy duration. Bergson suggests a study of time from within the flux. In his conviction that time is movement, Bergson admits the interdependence of time and space and further spatialises the experience of duration in his observation of the human embodiment of
time. From Einstein he takes the relativity of simultaneity, showing that there is no common
or universal present and that each moment is inseparable from the space in which it occurs, a
theory that supports the relationship between place and memory, further compounded by
Bergson’s *élan vital*, which recognises each element as encompassing the whole so that every
moment carries all of the past within it. This gives us the spiralling effect of the movement of
time as it recurs, grows and changes, and allows for memory, through which we perceive
change, and therefore sense the movement of time, but refuses chronology. Instead, memory
requires a simultaneous perception of time, since we can perceive several durations at once. It
is in the spatio-temporal distance between these durations that we understand the movement
described by Gilles Deleuze: ‘le movement se fera toujours dans l’intervalle’. 77

For Deleuze, movement is a becoming ‘other than itself’, a displacement that
completes a cycle, initiates a new one, and actualises a difference in a process that he terms
der differentiation. In *l’image-temps*, he demonstrates how movement flows from time, and in
the movement-image, represents the flux itself. Although he takes his first examples from the
cinema, he proposes that language is another way of becoming, and that narrative in general
allows us to decipher the artificial though necessary sequencing of moments and events. Each
movement includes duration and distance, but there can be no discernable difference between
the action and its agent. Deleuze reintroduces a spatial terminology to explain the repetitive,
creative impulse of time-space, and expands Bergson’s *élan vital* into *deterritorialisation* and
*reterritorialisation*, which, rather than bringing us back to a familiar spatial moment,
continually renews itself while carrying all past times and spaces along with it. This process,
similar to Edward Casey’s *implacement*, incorporates Henri Lefebvre’s productive movement
into space and alters the identity of each new time-space by imbuing it with pasts, history,
references and labels. The act of naming, linked to the verbal or literary act of describing, is

highlighted by many of the theoreticians as a transformative power and suggests that narrative may not only be a means of representing time and space but of altering it and creating place. Within literature we see all these spatio-temporal involutions at play: manipulations of duration, memory and simultaneity, shifting notions of place and non-place and tensions between stasis and movement. In order to take a closer look at the expression of experiences of time and space, I have chosen four authors – Annie Ernaux, Patrick Modiano, Jean Echenoz and Marie Darrieussecq – whose works engage implicitly with the modulations I have identified above. In each case I have studied the writer’s corpus and then concentrated my close reading on a selection of specific texts published across the turn of the millennium in order to fully appreciate the complexities and possibilities of the time-space models within. An intimate study of these works allows us to determine their usefulness in representing the flux of time and space and, perhaps, leads us to new reflections on this relationship.

For an exploration of narrative as an expression of lived time, I will discuss works by Annie Ernaux, who focuses on problems of stasis and duration and indulges in the very natural desire to fix, stall and freeze time. Obsessed with recording events and preserving the past, her desire to arrest the passage of time leads her to progressively narrow the distance between the event and its written expression in a series of diaries and journals, to the point of merging the act with its description. While the author strives for stasis, her texts refuse it and, within this conflict, Ernaux must tackle the very nature of narrative. She experiments with typography and photography in her endeavour to fragment and divide time (and her narratives) into the instantaneous, but this desire is thwarted by the dynamic inherent in narrative, which means that, instead of portraying stasis, her texts inevitably reflect duration. Ernaux’s works have also confronted models of time and space through the fluid blend of genre she exploits, mixing historical and ethnographic elements with studies of social space and origin in, for example La place and Une femme. Alongside her early novels and her more
intimate journals, Ernaux sifts through the literary possibilities and challenges her texts to preserve her story, often rewriting the same scene in multiple works, encouraging forced remembrance through repetition. My focus in this thesis will be, among others, on the short autofiction, *Passion simple*, which encapsulates her attempts to still time and movement, and *L’usage de la photo*, which takes this freezing process into a different medium. I aim to discover whether Ernaux’s desire to capture, sequence and recreate time and space can tell us anything new about textual representation of lived experience or about the nature of narrative.

The repetition we observe in Ernaux leads us to a further discussion of simultaneity and recurrence. Although we continue to visualise duration through extension – and follow chronology, placing elements alongside one another – simultaneity, as we have seen, unifies time and space and allows us to perceive two or more events at once. Simultaneity relies on the fact that past moments endure in the present, but also that these pasts continue to move in a random but recurrent way. This idea of motion without linear direction evokes images of circularity and the spiralling effect we have now come to associate with Deleuzean ‘becoming’.

Patrick Modiano, a novelist whose obsession with history and memory and with the enduring presence of the past in physical space has been well documented, is the subject of Chapter Three. Modiano usually sets his novels in Paris and pursues stories and histories by following traces of the past embedded in the city streets. For Modiano, a return to place also means a return to the past, since all moments remain and endure in the present. Time is fluid and porous, and Modiano’s ability to slip between moments in the space of a sentence allows him to layer his novels with past experiences and multiple histories. His simultaneous perception of time means that he is witness to not only his own memories, but memories that are not even his, pasts which precede his birth and which endure in the fabric of the city. In
this chapter, therefore, we will study memory and simultaneity, moving from a writing of the present in Annie Ernaux to a fixation with the past.

Memory itself requires a simultaneous perspective of time, since we can perceive multiple moments at once, but memory also suggests distance and allows us to measure change and, therefore, difference. Change, we have seen, is a result of movement, and helps us gauge the fluid nature of time and space, so that, after the apparent stasis favoured by Annie Ernaux, we can chart the dynamics of time and space. It is again important to refer to Deleuze’s work on difference and repetition in our reading of Modiano, as well as remembering Bergson’s definition of simultaneity, and our exploration of the novels will require a further study of theories of memory. These novels are also very specifically ‘placed’ and pay careful attention to street names and urban redevelopment, evoking multiple durations in fixed and recognised places. Modiano’s characters follow Michel de Certeau’s creative meanderings, and raise questions about the power of place to lead us back in time. Most of Modiano’s novels repeat a single formula of the wanderings of a young man through the streets of Paris, ostensibly in the detective-like untangling of a mystery but usually in pursuit of his own identity and origin. For this reason, it is difficult to choose one novel above another for the purpose of this study and each would equally well provide examples. However, we will discuss this similarity further in Chapter Three and focus our close reading on two short texts: *Fleurs de ruine*, in which the narrator slips constantly between years and places, and *Dora Bruder*, which is a little different from the rest of the corpus in that it attempts to reconstruct the short life of a young Jewish girl deported from France during the Second World War. Through an examination of these texts, I will highlight the possibilities of memory as a manipulation of time and space and the role of the past in the construction of place.
Following directly from this discussion of place comes an examination of non-place and its possible function in fiction. Non-place, as we have seen, poses difficulties of definition, sometimes regarded either as a negative space or a mode of deterritorialisation and most often associated with movement and instability. Non_places proliferate in contemporary society and pose new challenges to writers. While places provide rich and sometimes significant backdrops to stories, non_places often appear as blanks in the text, rarely incorporated into the narrative. A reading of novels by Jean Echenoz raises questions about the necessity or desirability of defining non-place, and explores the narrative possibilities of non_places. Jean Echenoz’s novels weave stories out of the improbable, even the impossible. He constantly defamiliarises the everyday, giving voice to inanimate objects, introducing implausible plots and effacing the traditional barriers between the natural and the supernatural. His novels play with time and space in, at times, obvious ways, blasting characters into outer space and stranding them on exploding islands, but he also sets scenes in more familiar non_places, such as shopping centres and bus lanes. As we saw with Michel de Certeau, non-place is often dependent on ‘passing through’, and this is evident in Echenoz’s novels, which follow journeys or odysseys through real and imagined spaces. One of the author’s early successes was the novel Lac, which, as the title suggests, is a story of absence, of lack and of negatives. The title also, however, refers to a place and a setting for the denouement, and in Lac the action and inaction unfold in unusual but familiar spaces. Echenoz detaches his stories from the past and from contemporary Paris, which is where they originate, and places them in an altered, parallel universe which is at once recognisable and disconcerting. This detachment enables us to more clearly study the manipulations of time and space within the story and to study the fictional possibilities of non_places.

In the second novel studied, Au piano, Echenoz builds an imaginary cosmos based on the Christian division of purgatory, heaven and hell, superimposed on and around Paris. We
follow the protagonist’s adventures beyond death, and are therefore lifted out of traditional constraints of time and space. Purgatory must be the non-place par excellence, and the novel allows us to explore its boundaries and possibilities. We will discover whether non-places are static, sterile spaces or are part of an ever-changing landscape by looking at thresholds between places and non-places and the consequences of crossing these divisions. Since non-places defy definition, we will test whether their presence in fiction helps to define them and whether this definition in fact destroys them.

Chapter Five focuses on the works of Marie Darrieussecq, a young and prolific writer who seems to embrace the dynamism Ernaux fights against. Darrieussecq’s novels are experimental and daring, and challenge boundaries between life and death, reality and fantasy, and time and space. Her texts, therefore, are in constant motion, shifting and fluctuating between narrative voices and points of view, and allow for overlaps and mergers between spheres of being. Her debut novel, Truismes, was a story of metamorphosis, and the themes of transformation and fluidity remain in her subsequent works, which explore borders and bodies. In Darrieussecq we encounter difficulties of definition which, in turn, enable us to examine movement and interface. For Darrieussecq, both narrative and nature share a common fluidity which is often represented in her novels by the presence of the sea. The sea embodies the shifts and overlappings of boundaries and relationships, and is often symbolic of its homonym, la mère. The crossing of frontiers is equally evident in the ghosts and memories that haunt Darrieussecq’s fiction and in the slippery stream-of-consciousness narratives she employs, in which it is difficult to locate speakers and opinions. The author plays with genre and stretches language to imitate the inconstant reality of time and space.

The two texts on which I concentrate are at times troubling, but exemplify the author’s exploration of place and identity and her obsession with movement and flux. Bref séjour chez les vivants reassembles motifs from Darrieussecq’s earlier works, ghosts,
memory, sea, and mixes them into an internal, sometimes confusing, monologue composed of multiple voices. Spatially diverse, the text is unified into a single day lived at varying rhythms by the different characters. It is interesting to read the text as a deterritorialisation and to study this liberation, this *élan vital*, and its effect on the narrative. In tandem with this, I examine *Le Pays*, as a reterritorialisation, a search for origin and a creation of identity and place. The novel, set in the near future and in an imagined country, plays once more on ideas of absence and presence, occupation and belonging, emptiness and interiority. I look at place not as the stable and historic monument Modiano describes, but as a perpetual construction, a further thickening of time and space, and try to draw together the spatio-temporal manipulations studied in this thesis in relation to some of the more recent fiction published in France.

Therefore, in conclusion, we have identified a set of time-space manipulations taken from the works of Bergson, Deleuze, Certeau and Augé, which seem to be particularly pertinent to writers of contemporary French fiction and which raise questions about the nature and representation of time and space. We have seen that the two concepts cannot be understood in isolation, but must be treated as interdependent entities, and are not fixed and static, but in constant flux and motion. It would appear that our exploration and understanding of time and space is dependent on its representation and that, in turn, this depiction of time and space can lead us to a clearer understanding of our experience. Narrative literature is a highly appropriate and useful form of expression for this purpose, since spatio-temporal dynamics are inherent to its nature. Narrative literature carries within it properties of duration and extension, as well as the freedom to explore time-space models beyond our lived experience and to voice their internal fluctuations as well as their physical boundaries. Through close readings of texts by four authors, we explore these time-space models and discover how they operate within narrative and how the narrative can elucidate the time-space relationships.
Chapter 2  Duration and stasis in the works of Annie Ernaux¹

Annie Ernaux’s novels and autobiographical works, which span more than four decades, form a body of writing across which we can draw a steady trajectory from the early novels to the more documentary-style publications and trace the gradual striptease of her texts as she pulls away the clutter of fiction to reveal an ever more minimalist and frank prose. The patterns that have developed in her work have led to possible pairings or groupings of her texts according to subject and genre. Her first three novels, for example, stand a little apart from the rest of her corpus, which becomes increasingly autobiographical and can be categorised into diaries or ethnographic observations, accounts of her parents’ lives and relationship or her childhood, and her personal traumas.² However, we can also detect a more global rhythm which directs her work and which, beyond generic or thematic divisions, follows a conscious path through an exposition of the workings of fiction and literature, markedly in her published interviews and reflections such as L’écriture comme un couteau with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet (2003) and Le vrai lieu with Michelle Porte (2014), and more blatantly still in L’atelier noir (2011), her contemporaneous writing journals 1982-2007.³ This journey sees the author narrowing the gap between action and narration, striving towards a simultaneity of experience and representation, and trying to capture and freeze duration. We can identify not only a progression in Ernaux’s works from her early novels, through her ethnographic and autobiographical texts to her retrospective collection of personal, social and political memory in Les années (2008), but a

¹ Sections from the first half of this chapter have been published previously, Brenda Garvey, ‘Rhythms, Repetitions and Rewritings in Passion simple by Anne Ernaux’ in Rhythms: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture, ed.by Elizabeth Lindley and Laura McMahon (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), pp.75-85.
² For examples of possible pairings and groupings of Ernaux’s early works, see Siobhan McIlvanney, Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001).
circularity in her return to preoccupations with place of origin in *Retour à Yvetot* (2013), to her earliest sexual encounters in *Mémoire de fille* (2016) and to certain pre-histories, both her own in *L’autre fille* (2011) and that of her texts in *L’atelier noir* (2011). Her formal experimentation becomes more pronounced as the autobiographical voice grows stronger, emerging from the blurred beginnings in her early trilogy and gradually stripping itself of artifice until it speaks, allegedly unedited, in her journals. Ernaux exhausts episodes from her own history as she writes and rewrites recurrent scenes, and it is this repetitive nature which first alerts us to the experimental task and the specific aim of her oeuvre. In focusing her attentions and textual reflection on the act and purpose of her writing, she highlights the process of story-telling over the content of the story itself. In this way, Ernaux explores narrative and the distance between tale and telling which we will study in this chapter.

The Russian Formalists distinguished between *fabula* and *sjuzet*, referring to the elemental story and the finished narrative respectively, and French structuralists such as Gérard Genette in the mid-twentieth century continued to separate *histoire* and *discours* to differentiate between the tale and its telling. Most works of narratology explore the differences between these constructs but, if we are to accept the model of time and space as non-linear and indivisible, we see that the distinction no longer exists. The difference explored in narratology by Genette in particular hinges on the chronological order governing lived events and the ability of literature to rearrange this order. In this way a ‘story’ is a series of events that follow a linear path; it exists outside the text, is anterior to the writing of the text and is fixed and finite. The ‘narrative’, on the other hand, is composed of a series of scenes and is not limited to a linear chronology. Narrative can be fluid and multiple; a single story may be told many

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times in alternative ways with each new telling usually dependent on different manipulations of time-space relations.\textsuperscript{6} We have seen in Chapter One, however, that time cannot be sequenced and ordered, and instead endures in a constant movement of renaissance. Our ability to remember and recall events relies on simultaneity and a layering of experiences, and each telling of a tale changes both the story and each subsequent telling. The liberties of sequencing and ordering are not merely artistic but also reflect the nature and movement of time and space.

In narrative we can have progression without necessarily following chronology, but this progression is propelled by action and encoded in sequencing (which presupposes division), language or typography. Narrative must be dynamic and generally has direction, since we assume that, as the narrative proceeds, we will learn more about the story. In a narrative text, it is usually the revelation of the story that motivates the reader, and the reader’s pleasure is derived from the narrative tricks that delay or complicate this revelation. Creative sequencing is the most obvious way to build the suspense that we associate easily with detective or crime fiction but which is equally important in most fictional works where the revealing of the story, through the situation and linking of scenes, provides the impulse that carries the reader forward from the beginning of the text to the end. Therefore, narrative depends upon the artificial division of a story into scenes, and an examination of how time and space is manipulated in the narrative will show how movement is created in the text. Let us take as an example the opening line of one of Ernaux’s texts, \textit{Une femme} (1987):

Ma mère est morte le lundi 7 avril à la maison de retraite de l’hôpital de Pontoise, où je l’avais placée il y a deux ans.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{6} Gérard Genette, \textit{Figures III} (Paris: Seuil Poétique, 1972). Genette uses his reading of Proust to devise his theory on occurrence, sequence and frequency of events.

The statement uses conventional markers of date and place to situate and introduce the story, but the beginning of the sentence raises spatio-temporal questions. The use of the present tense in French to indicate a past event – the death of the mother – is already arguably problematic, although it underlines the finality of the declaration. The intertextual resonance of the phrase links it to another beginning, the start of Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger* (1942), thereby broadening or thickening the scope of the apparently simple statement. The second clause hints at the intrigue of the story through both the temporal marker, which gives us a possible framework for the narrative, and the personal pronoun and its action, which binds the mother-daughter relationship. We can see, however, that on a purely linguistic level, it is the prepositions that hold the sentence together, linking one word to the next, drawing the reader along the line, and that the comma operates as a hiatus, delaying the admission on which the story hinges. This is a simplistic explanation but demonstrates the inherent spatial and temporal nature of written narrative and, consequently, the difficulties the author faces in attempting to counter the forward movement of her texts.

In *Le vrai lieu*, the 2014 publication of Michelle Porte’s interviews with Annie Ernaux for the France 3 documentary *Les mots comme des pierres, Annie Ernaux écrivain*, Ernaux, echoing the end of *Les années*, repeatedly uses the word *sauver* in explaining her impulse to capture moments and scenes from the past and to rescue memories from the passage of time. She uses it in relation to her mother, ‘j’ai éprouvé le besoin presque fou d’écrire sur elle, d’écrire pour sauver quelque chose d’elle’ (pp.73-4) and in relation to her *journal extime*, ‘Sauver le présent dans *Journal du dehors*’ (p.74). This desire for salvation from the movement of time, for ‘*tous ce qui est permanence*’ underlines her corpus and motivates her need to revisit

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9 *Les années* ends with ‘Sauver quelque chose du temps où l’on ne sera plus jamais’ p. 254.
and rewrite episodes of her life. In order to examine more closely the tension inherent in this project, we will look at two short texts from the early nineties and consider their genesis and afterlife.

*Passion simple*

After her first three books, which are the most conventionally novelistic, Annie Ernaux’s works become more difficult to define in terms of genre, blending elements of fiction, ethnography, literary theory, biography and journalism. Her use of spacing, cataloguing, footnotes and authorial asides develops substantially as she moves out of fiction and into a more direct mode of expression. Her structural and stylistic choices are dictated by the material treated in her writing, and she regards the complexity of genre employed as reflective of the reality she is trying to represent. Her writing journals, published in *L’atelier noir* and covering a period of production from 1982 to 2007, bear witness to her constant struggle to find the exact manner in which to present her story, never shying away from the possibility that it has yet to be invented. In a humorous and prescient aside on 6 February 1995 she writes, ‘Ce qui sera bouffon, si on publie un jour ce journal d’écriture, en fait de recherche à 99%, c’est qu’on découvrira à quel point, finalement, la forme m’aura préoccupé’ (p.125). In her published interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, *L’écriture comme un couteau* (2003), the author refers to her ‘posture d’écriture’, established in *La place* (1981), as an ‘exploration de la réalité extérieure ou intérieure, de l’intime et du social dans le même mouvement, en dehors de la fiction’.

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and narrative to express the reality she experiences.

*Passion simple* marks a turning point in Annie Ernaux’s writing. It is the condensation and culmination of all that has been practised before, and the texts that follow it begin to grow again.¹³ Bare and raw, this is one of Ernaux’s most intimate pieces, and it incorporates extreme examples of her typographical and formal experiments. The *écriture plate* familiar since *La place* is at times reduced to barely punctuated lists, and the frequent references to popular music, magazines and television suggest a rejection of literature in favour of more mainstream media.¹⁴ In *Le vrai lieu*, Ernaux tells us that she perceives this *écriture plate* as factual, ‘une écriture de constat, soigneusement débarrassée de jugements de valeur, une écriture au plus près de la réalité, dépouillée d’affects’ (p.70).¹⁵ Extending the biographical mode of *La place* and *Une femme*, which take as subject the life of her father and mother respectively, the author focuses on herself as subject and writes about events in her recent adult past. It is an unusual book. The provocative title and the front cover of the Folio edition, with its seductive, red illustration of crumpled bed sheets, appear to promise drama and eroticism, but, turn to the back and a single sentence quotation sums up the narrative: ‘À partir du mois de septembre l’année dernière, je n’ai plus rien fait d’autre qu’attendre un homme: qu’il me téléphone et qu’il vienne chez moi.’ In *Passion simple* nothing much happens: a woman waits.

To summarise the story, the narrator, over a period of time, conducts an illicit affair with a married man who is visiting France and must eventually return to his own country. Here, we apparently have a simple structure with a beginning, a middle and an end. The opening and closing events, however, are not included in the text; we are never told how the couple met and we are given no farewell scene. Instead, both events remain outside the narrative, although

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¹⁵ In her writing journal for 5 July 1990, published in *L’atelier noir*, Ernaux reproaches herself for not yet having found the right tone, ‘L’écriture pas assez travaillée dans le sens sécheresse, objectivité’ (p.83).
references to them help shape the text. Since her earliest works, Ernaux has eschewed traditional chapter enumeration and played with spacing as a means of demarcating shifts in narrative and perspective. The text, however, is tightly structured and, for the purposes of this study, it is helpful to break it down. We can identify a Prologue and Epilogue; the aftermath of the affair, which starts ‘Il est parti de France et retourné dans son pays il y a six mois’ (p.52); and the story of the affair itself, which makes up the majority of the text and begins on page 13 with the sentence already quoted from the back cover. This simple, conventional statement, as well as summing up the totality of the novel, exposes the challenges facing the writer. It opens the story by directing the reader back to a recent past, locating a precise moment in time and suggesting duration; ‘À partir du mois de septembre l’année dernière...’ It also indicates that the novel is intrinsically about the passage of time and warns us that, at its centre, is a void; ‘je n’ai plus rien fait d’autre qu’attendre un homme’. Passion simple, then, is a story of absence, the absence of action surrounding the absence of the lover. It is not made up of a simple sequence of events, and instead Annie Ernaux composes a narrative from a story without action.

Since nothing much happens during the affair which is central to Passion simple and everything passes in a haze of impatience, the story’s chronology is of little importance. We are given only a vague sense of the passage of time through phrases such as ‘Au printemps’, ‘Tout ce temps’ and ‘Durant cette période’ but, without external markers with which to orientate ourselves, the temporal framework loses importance. Time is measured only in accordance with the lover’s telephone calls and visits, which mark phases in a cyclic pattern described early on (pp.16-22). The waiting is interrupted by a telephone call arranging a meeting, which sets in motion a series of habitual reactive emotions: anticipation of the visit, euphoria during the visit itself, exhaustion following the lover’s departure, a dreamlike state of reminiscence, and then the gathering of doubts and the recommencement of waiting for that
call. These events, as we were told in the opening sentence, are the only ones which bear any significance;

Je ne fais pas le récit d’une liaison, je ne raconte pas une histoire (qui m’échappe pour la moitié) avec une chronologie précise, « il vint le 11 novembre », ou approximative, « des semaines passèrent ». Il n’y en avait pas pour moi dans cette relation, je ne connaissais que la présence ou l’absence.16

For the reader, however, these passages which oscillate between presence and absence are reversed, so that the moments when the narrator is with her lover are invisible, while the text fills and is filled with the periods when he is gone. In order to express this sense of blurred chronology, Ernaux avoids using words like ‘puis’ or ‘cependant’ and robs the reader of a sense of consequence or simultaneity. We learn later that the affair spans a time of historic change and unrest, of riots in Algeria and the fall of the Berlin wall, and yet these events go unnoticed and unspoken, as if anything that does not pertain to the affair has ceased to exist. During her interviews with Michelle Porte recorded in Le vrai lieu more than twenty years later, Ernaux, reflecting on the affair, says, ‘Une passion a coupé plus d’une année de ma vie’ (p.83). The affair does not, therefore, fit her own chronological history, nor does it engage with historical event beyond its closed singularity. Without an alternative timeline against which to judge progress, the reader must accept the indefinable duration of the affair and concentrate instead on its internal mechanisms. If, by ‘narrative’, we expect some forward motion, perhaps Passion simple is not one; the narrator herself hints at this possibility. But, of course, something in the text does propel us forward, and does so without the aid of a sequential story.

Passion simple is made up of blocks of text which follow each other often apparently arbitrarily, separated by stretches of blank page. These blocks, though sometimes linked by a common theme, are often completely interchangeable and, at times, do not even begin with

16 Ernaux, Passion simple, p.31.
capital letters, so that they lose any distinction or authority. Frequently the text disintegrates further still and we are left with nothing more than a list.

Les contraintes que m’imposait sa situation d’homme marié – ne pas lui téléphoner – ne pas lui envoyer de lettres – ne pas lui faire des cadeaux qu’il justifierait difficilement – dépendre constamment de ses possibilités de se libérer – ne me révoltaient pas.

je lui remettais les lettres que je lui écrivais au moment où il partait de chez moi. Soupçonner, qu’une fois lues, il les jetait peut-être en petits morceaux sur l’autoroute ne m’empêchait pas de continuer de lui écrire.

je prenais garde à ne laisser aucun signe de moi sur ses vêtements et je ne lui faisais pas de marques sur la peau.17

In keeping with the theme of absence in the novel, the language here is stripped bare. We are given a parade of verbs which have been rendered powerless, all action having been prohibited. There is clarity and simple acceptance of the situation, no drama is betrayed, no emotion, merely a lack of disgust. The dashes horizontally connect what is essentially a list, and a rhythm is set up in the repeated negatives. The catalogue is continued in the next two paragraphs, which begin without capitalisation. Although lists are usually shorter and more concise than the paragraphs shown here, the line indentation, the lower case j and the repeated first person pronoun encourage the reader to move down the page. In fact, the shape of this extract on the page looks more like a poem than a piece of prose, but the language lacks any poetic ornamentation, striving instead to be as clear and ‘simple’ as possible. ‘C’est un descriptif pur qui s’est imposé, peut-être contre tout modèle’, Ernaux tells us in Le vrai lieu, ‘Ici, l’impression d’écriture comme un couteau convient tout à fait puisque je n’ai voulu décrire que les phénomènes d’une passion, les actes, les gestes, tout ce qui peut paraître dérisoire mais ne l’est pas au regard de ce que l’on éprouve’ (pp. 83-84).

This passage is typical of Passion simple and demonstrates how the first sense of shape or direction we get in the text is from typographical manipulations. In a story without sequential

17 Ernaux, Passion simple, p.37.
action, progress is enforced through the visual leaps from one block of text to the next, through the horizontal dashes and vertical lists and through the surprising use of footnotes. Unusual in a narrative discourse, these footnotes further fragment the text, causing the reader’s eye to jump from one space on the page to another and back again. Ernaux thereby disrupts the traditional novelistic flow and eschews the linear model we associate with fiction. The shape that is developing here so far is somewhat disjointed and does not appear to follow a coherent pattern. We have discovered a tension between the forward momentum necessary to drive the text and the rejection of chronology in order to express the impotence and impatience of the narrator. We have a time-space relationship at odds with itself, one that insists on spatial progression while trying to freeze time. There is a forced movement between the textual blocks, but the scenes described within them are often static.

In the tradition of Georges Perec, whom Ernaux cites as an influence, Ernaux builds scenes from the details and objects that litter them.18 ‘J’accumule seulement les signes d’une passion, oscillant sans cesse entre « toujours » et « un jour », comme si un inventaire allait me permettre d’atteindre la réalité de cette passion’ (p.31). She tries to model the physical space of the event by cataloguing the smallest details, the most insignificant objects, and relies on the simplicity of the words to build their own scene, refraining from linking or describing them.

Je contemplais les verres, les assiettes avec des restes, le cendrier plein, les vêtements, les pièces de lingerie, éparpillés dans le couloir, la chambre, les draps pendant sur la moquette.19

If, however, by doing this she hopes to freeze the scene and rob it of any movement, the listing of objects defies this desire since cataloguing has its own poetry and dynamic. She records habits and purchases and all the mundane business of everyday life as a testimony to a time that had no form. These objects or signs clutter the scene but assume no obvious shape; they

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18 See, for example, Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p.74, or *L’atelier noir*, p.33, p.55.
appear as a haphazard collection of remembered things piling into a void, building a picture that remains rigid and fixed. And so we have a model of time and space that appears to represent the complexities Henri Bergson identified: duration without chronology and extension without form.\(^{20}\)

Absence, as I have already noted, is a predominant feature of *Passion simple*. Not only does the narrative lack action, it is also strikingly empty of characters. Although there are fleeting references to the narrator’s sons, some friends and a few passing strangers, there are no proper names in the text. Even the lover is identified simply as A. and sketched only vaguely. Ernaux’s formal experimentation is reminiscent of the *nouveau romanciers* of the 1950s and, in *Passion simple*, with its extra-marital affair, its voids and vacancies, and indeed in the effacement of the lover in the identifier A., we find echoes of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s 1957 novel *La Jalousie*.\(^{21}\) In *Passion simple* it is important that the lover remain shadowy since it is his absence that engenders the text. Because of this empty, deserted landscape, the reader is all the more struck by the recurrence of the first person pronoun, drawing attention to the fact that *Passion simple* is centred firmly on or in the narrative ‘je’.

As the title suggests, *Passion simple* is the story of a love affair and little else. Consumed by her desire, the narrator blanks out everything that does not relate to her obsession. In so doing, she strips the text of external markers and complicates our search for a narrative time-space model. The narrator is almost paralysed by her anticipation of A.’s next visit, she limits her actions to the very minimum and tries to avoid leaving the house in case she misses his call. She stills herself to a state of bare existence in which she can experience as acutely as possible the sweet agony of waiting. All action, therefore, is framed and restricted and all time

\(^{20}\) In the second part of the novel Ernaux comments again on the static nature of the scenes she creates in a footnote where she writes, ‘je ne peux rendre compte de l’exacte transformation de ma passion pour A., jour après jour, seulement m’arrêter sur des images, isoler des signes d’une réalité dont la date d’apparition – comme en histoire générale – n’est pas définissable avec certitude’ (p.67).

is measured in relation to A. The narrative is embodied in the narrator and everything is translated through her perception. In *Passion simple* nothing much happens: a woman waits. In this waiting we begin to perceive certain rhythms; bodily rhythms of breathing and heartbeat, daily rhythms of mundane chores and habits, cyclical rhythms of arrivals and departures, and it is the stasis and absence of action in the text that allows a close study of these quieter movements and pulses of life. In minimising external factors and retreating into a reflective meditation, Ernaux focuses on the passage of time through the perpetually moving, growing, beating and ageing space of the body. While the body has physical boundaries, it is not detached or divorced from its surroundings and is never in a state of pure rest or isolation. The body becomes another model of time and space and an example of the interpermeation of movements through time and space. The narrator’s life is reduced to a routine of daily chores expressed in the text by the imperfect tense: ‘J’allais au supermarché, au cinéma, je portais des vêtements au pressing, je lisais, je corrigeais des copies, j’agissais exactement comme avant, mais sans une longue accoutumance de ces actes, cela m’aurait été impossible, sauf au prix d’un effort effrayant’ (p.13). The choice of tense reflects the sense of habitual action, the repeated verbs drum home the monotony, and the dragging vowel sound of the imperfect tense ‘ais’ reinforces the sense of duration without progress, a churning motion, heavy and slow like a tired heartbeat. The experience of time and space is personal, subjective and embodied.

So far we have two structuring devices which shape the text: the imposed blocks and jumps of the typography and the waiting *je* who strives to be as still as possible. As noted earlier, a first-person narrative imposes direction on a text and here, as well as expressing the claustrophobic, repetitive nature of the experience, it heightens the intensity and intimacy of the narrative. A careful reading of the main section of *Passion simple* reveals, however, that the narrative *je* is in fact double, and it is the second *je*, the authorial, commentating *je* that more directly orients and shapes the novel.
Rewriting

The bulk of the text which deals with the affair is written in the imperfect tense. However, within this section we frequently encounter the author analysing her behaviour, footnoting the text and speaking directly in the present tense about the process of writing. This can be seen in the section on pp.30-33. After a substantial physical pause on p.30 we shift from the period of the affair to the period of writing the book, ‘Tout ce temps, j’ai eu l’impression de vivre ma passion sur le mode romanesque, mais je ne sais pas, maintenant, sur quel mode je l’écris’. Within the sentence itself, the author moves from reflection on ‘ce temps’ to the present moment located as precisely as is possible in the writing of the verb ‘écrire’. After this commentary the narrative resumes but is footnoted on p.33 again in the present tense: ‘Cet homme continue de vivre quelque part dans le monde’. Most of the footnotes function as additional commentaries, and differ little from the authorial asides included in the text. In fact they sometimes comment on the latter as well, thereby suggesting a further degree of revision and edition.23 In L’écriture comme un couteau, Ernaux considers the different but related modes of experiencing an event, and particularly this love affair, and expressing it in writing by underlining the positive action of writing as compared to the passive existence she protected during her affair. Ernaux in love resists action, progress and the creative drive of spatio-temporal movement, preferring to retreat into her own internal world, but Ernaux the author directs her writing to recapture an already altered reality, ‘La passion, c’est un état de jouissance total de l’être et d’enfermement dans le present, une jouissance immediate, c’est

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22 Ernaux, *Passion simple*, p.30. Ernaux’s writing diaries from 1990 reveal repeated notes on the comparison of this love affair with the author’s passion for literature. On 5 February she considers ‘la beauté de cette passion, sans rapport à l’écriture’ (Le vrai lieu p.79) and later, on 9 April, the realisation that ‘Je ne peux faire qu’un récit racontant comment cette passion ressemblait à l’écriture d’un livre. Découverte que j’ai vécu cela comme on écrit un livre, avec le même désir de perfection’ (p.81). For a further discussion of this comparison, see Alain Schaffner, ‘Le temps et la passion dans *Passion simple et Se perdre*’ in *Annie Ernaux: Le temps et la mémoire*, ed. by Francine Best, Bruno Blanckeman and Francine Dugast-Portes (Paris: Stock, 2014), pp.265-79.

23 Footnotes also appear on pp.18, 26, 39, 50 and 66.
d’abord un état. L’écriture n’est pas un état, c’est une activité’.24 This means that in the text of *Passion simple*, we find both the past and present Ernaux, one active and the other passive.

The presence of this second *je*, the author as opposed to the mistress, imposes another layer on the text and forces a second, or repeated, reading. Clearly we have two important narratives in *Passion simple*, the story of the affair, which occupies the central section of the text and which, written in retrospect, allows for authorial intervention – this second voice which intrudes on the tale. Again we have a binary motion, a narrative that swings between a past and present first person. The authorial voice who speaks from her writing desk does so in the past historic and present tenses. Conscious of, but a little confused by these slippages, the author footnotes p.66 with the following observation, ‘je passe de l’imparfait, ce qui était – mais jusqu’à quand? – au présent – mais depuis quand? – faute d’une meilleure solution’. We get the impression then that language cannot sufficiently express the narrator’s experience, since she is bound by tenses that are insensitive to the gradual movements of time and too strictly demarcate between the past, present and future. This second voice, however, also produces a distance by objectifying the narrating ‘je’, separating the woman in the affair from the author writing, and this allows Ernaux to create a third-person character whom she observes but who is no longer herself, a ‘*je qui ne serait pas moi*’ (*L’atelier noir*, p.109). This opens her text on to the world and charges even a seemingly brief and intimate tale of love with a certain political force. By detaching herself from the narrating ‘je’ and foregrounding the minutiae of everyday life, Ernaux contests the labelling of her work as autofiction as restrictive and self-indulgent because ‘dans le terme même il y a quelque chose de replié sur soi, de fermé au monde’ (p.108).25 However, she recognises the potential of Doubrovsky’s definition of the concept and argues for the centrality of the *je transpersonnel*:

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24 Ernaux, *L’écriture comme un couteau*, p.120.
25 *L’atelier noir*, p.192, ‘Fausseté absolue de « l’autofiction » (en dehors de S. Doubrovsky)’.
Je n’ai jamais eu envie que le livre soit une chose personnelle. Ce n’est pas parce que les choses me sont arrivées à moi que je les écris, c’est parce qu’elles sont arrivées, qu’elles ne sont donc pas uniques. Dans La honte, La place, Passion simple, ce n’est pas la particularité d’une expérience que j’ai voulu saisir mais sa généralité indicible. Quand l’indicible devient écriture, c’est politique. 26

Ernaux is aware of the difficulties in achieving this in Passion simple and must experiment with other forms, such as journaux extimes and photo-documents before settling on a je/elle axis in Les années in order to fully realise her project. 27

The temporal distance between the time of the affair and that of the writing, concepts established in Jean Starobinski’s La Relation critique (1970), becomes clearer in the section begun on p.52 with the following: ‘Il est parti de France et retourné dans son pays il y a six mois. Je ne le reverrai sans doute jamais. Au début, quand je me réveillais à deux heures du matin, cela m’était égal de vivre ou de mourir’. 28 Here we are again given a temporal location relative to the affair but, interestingly, to the end of the affair which we expected, would be the end of the text. 29 After a brief projection into the future, we return to the familiar narrative and the story continues in the imperfect tense. However, just as the story ends, we find ourselves back at the beginning: ‘J’ai commencé de raconter «à partir du mois de septembre je n’ai plus rien fait qu’attendre un homme», etc., deux mois environ après le départ de A., je ne sais plus quel jour’ (p.60). The sentence demonstrates the oscillation between the two time periods if we


27 Ernaux writes on 9 April 1990 ‘Il y a un gros problème pour la ‘passion S.’: comment passer du particulier (amour-passion) au général – la génération. Où est le joint?’, L’atelier noir, p.81. In her writing diaries and in Se perdre (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) S. is used to identify her lover rather than A.


29 It would appear to have come as a surprise to the author too. In L’atelier noir, Ernaux tells us, ‘Retour de S., non prévu dans l’écriture. C’est comme s’il n’avait pas eu lieu, comme si l’écriture était plus forte maintenant que ma passion réelle. Ce retour tant attendu n’est nulle part dans le temps. Je devrais relire et travailler cela, ce texte [passion Sergueï]. Voir suite possible? Ou fermeture?’ (p.91). All emphasis in the original.
plot the movement between the repeated first-person pronoun. We have three beginnings here: ‘J’ai commencé’, which refers to a time still measured relative to A., with all the approximation and blurred memory we now associate with it, and, in ‘à partir du...’, we have a double backward motion towards the beginning of the affair and to the beginning of the text. The story is over and yet the narrative does not end. The author has become her own reader and brings us back to that one line which summarises the story, underlines the absence of action and represents, for the narrator, the perfect period of potential and anticipation. And so, like a mise en abîme, the text thickens and acquires another layer, another commentary and another copy.

In this way, the novel continues, repeatedly adding brief sections, each of which marks a possible conclusion and yet none of which succeeds in closing the text.\textsuperscript{30} The story renews itself time and again until the narrator admits:

\begin{quote}
Je n’arrive pas pourtant à le quitter, pas plus que je n’ai pu quitter A. l’année dernière, au printemps, quand mon attente et mon désir de lui étaient ininterrompus. Tout en sachant qu’à l’inverse de la vie je n’ai rien à espérer de l’écriture, où il ne survient que ce qu’on y met. Continuer, c’est aussi repousser l’angoisse de donner ceci à lire aux autres. Tant que j’étais dans la nécessité d’écrire, je ne me souciais pas de cette éventualité. Maintenant que je suis allée au bout de cette nécessité, je regarde les pages écrites avec étonnement et une sorte de honte, jamais ressentie – au contraire – en vivant ma passion, pas davantage en la relatant. Ce sont les jugements, les valeurs «normales» du monde qui se rapprochent avec la perspective d’une publication.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

The text will not let her go and A. remains her constant point of comparison and reference. Here, however, we are not just directed back to the affair but, clearly, to the text we have just read and, through the reference to moral values and fear of judgement, specifically to the

\textsuperscript{30} Ernaux, pp.64-66, the narrator revisits passage Cardinet, the scene of her abortion. This is one of the pivotal moments to which she returns in other works but also, here, reveals the ethnographic project she takes up in \textit{Journal de dehors} (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). She wonders, in parenthesis, if she writes ‘pour savoir si les autres n’ont pas fait ou ressenti des choses identiques, sinon, pour qu’ils trouvent normal de les ressentir’. \textit{Passion simple}, p.65.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.69.
Prologue. The narrator also becomes conscious of the future, when her private reminiscences will be made public, a future which, by the time we read the text, has obviously been realised. It is also clear that the reader has an important role to play in the continuation of the narrator’s story, since the existence and remembrance of the tale is only possible in its retellings and rereadings.

We become aware, when reading Passion simple, of the pile of copies and versions building up behind it as well as the repeated readings and revisions within it. There is the diary lying open on the desk, the loose leaves of barely legible hand-written drafts, typed sheets, the commented text, the expanding novel with subsequent sections being added on, this bound copy and thousands more like it. The text now exists, finite and complete, but the story continues to turn and be retold with each new reading. Ernaux suggests that a certain delay and distance are necessary in order to allow the private text to become public, and perhaps the proliferation of drafts acts as a buffer between the events and the author. She claims ‘je ne ressens naturellement aucune honte à noter ces choses, à cause du délai qui sépare le moment où elles s’écrivent, où je suis seule à les voir, de celui où elles seront lues par les gens et qui, j’ai l’impression, n’arrivera jamais’ (p.42). This necessary distance, which she elsewhere equates with Pierre Bourdieu’s *distance objectivante*, is the same impulse that led her to write fiction rather than autobiography in her early career and to develop the style of *écriture plate* or *écriture de la distance*, which was, she believes, ‘la seule position narrative tenable’, and which allows her now to intrude on her text with a second narrative voice. However, in that chasm between writing and rewriting, something may equally be lost, and a contraction of that distance could have been more desirable.

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32 This short introduction, written in the present tense, recounts the narrator’s experience of watching a blurry porn movie on Canal+. She is astounded and fascinated and sees in it another possibility for literature: ‘Il m’a semblé que l’écriture devrait tendre à cela, cette impression que provoque la scène de l’acte sexuel, cette angoisse et cette stupeur, une suspension du jugement moral’ (p.12).

reveal a rawness in the story as well as a demonstration of the unavoidable fictionalisation that takes place in writing. *Passion simple* closes with an epilogue, dated February ’91, which balances the novel’s opening, narrates A.’s fleeting return to France, and offers another possible conclusion as the narrator sighs, ‘je n’attends plus rien’ (p.74). However, having explored the author’s compulsive return to the tale and to the text, it is hardly surprising that another version exists. Published in 2001, *Se perdre* is one of the largest of Ernaux’s works, running to almost 300 pages. It is the diary of her affair with a married Russian man and is, she tells us, unedited. This is the author at her most autobiographical and most vulnerable, as she exposes her innermost thoughts, her insecurities and surprising dependencies, her dreams and her interpretations. The text is frequently repetitive, often monotonous and the seasoned Ernaux reader is even robbed of the voyeuristic intrigue one might enjoy when reading someone else’s diary, because the story of *Se perdre* has already been told. For Ernaux, this is a rejection of the *distance objectivante* in an attempt to get closer to the reality of the event, to approach the truth she is constantly pursuing. Ernaux, herself, is conscious of this repetition, and her books can be grouped according to pivotal events in her own history to which she returns: the trauma of an illegal abortion; the complexities of her affair with a married man; a parent’s death; and the shock of her father’s violence towards her mother one June Sunday in 1952. While the need to record these events may be explained as potentially cathartic, the desire to rewrite is different, as it suggests that the importance is in the telling and not in the tale.

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34 Ernaux believes a certain truth to be attainable through literature alone. At the beginning of *Une femme* she says: ‘Mon projet est de nature littéraire, puisqu’il s’agit de chercher une vérité sur ma mère qui ne peut être atteinte que par des mots. (C’est-à-dire que ni les photos, ni mes souvenirs, ni les témoignages de ma famille ne peuvent me donner cette vérité)’ (p.23).

In Ernaux’s best known and most widely acclaimed work, *La place*, the narrator, explicitly identified as the author for the first time, describes her father and her relationship with him. In so doing she recounts her own childhood and adolescence, her experience of growing up in a *café-épicerie* in the Normandy town of Yvetot (referred to in the text only as Y...), and her education, which distances her from her father and her roots. The text is inventive, employing a flat, neutral language, free of the *argot* and the claustrophobia of her earlier works, and playing with the auto/biographical genre, introducing social observations and metacommentary. The story itself, however, is not new to readers of Ernaux. In her debut novel, *Les armoires vides* (1974), the narrator, a university student called Denise, recalls her experience of growing up in a *café-épicerie* in a Normandy town and how her education has separated her from this past. Denise, alone and afraid in a university bedroom after seeking an illegal abortion, is also an early twin of the author-narrator of *L’événement* (2000), Ernaux’s account of her own abortion. And so the pattern continues, each text duplicating another with situations and stories reappearing and overlapping. Usually the subsequent tellings of an initial tale strip it of its fiction, drawing it closer to autobiography, but in the case of *Se perdre* this is taken to an extreme. It appears that each book fulfils a specific function in Ernaux’s discovery of herself as writer, that a familiar framework allows for freer literary experimentation and that she will repeat the same story until she finds the form and voice that suit it best.

*Se perdre* is a fuller version of *Passion simple*. Free of metacommentary, apart from the introduction, the author removes herself as editor and critic and allows her journal entries to tell the story. Perhaps this is a sign of increased confidence, any fear of judgement diluted

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37 Even the pattern of publishing the novel followed by the diary is repeated. *Une femme*, published in 1987, is a biographical novel about Ernaux’s mother, opening with the statement ‘Ma mère est morte le lundi 7 avril...’. Ten years later, Ernaux published «Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit» (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), the journal of her mother’s illness leading up to her death. For other pairings and duplications, see Alison S. Fell, ‘Recycling the past: Annie Ernaux’s evolving *écriture de soi*, *Nottingham French Studies* 41 (2002), 60-69.
by her literary success. She is ready now to expose herself by publishing the private diaries she kept during her relationship with A. and up until she began writing *Passion simple*.\(^\text{38}\) She is trying to shorten the gap between the public and private texts, and hopes that her journal entries, written close to the events and occupying a different literary space, will reveal another version of the tale. The temporal distances here work in opposite directions, the proximity between the events and their recording supposedly preserving veracity but written in ‘l’opacité du présent’, and the ten-year gap between writing and publication allowing for a more discerning gaze through the text to the story behind it. Explaining the subsequent appearance of the diaries « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » and *Se perdre* after *Une femme* and *Passion simple*, Ernaux writes:

> Sans doute le délai est important: c’est lui qui me permet de jeter sur le journal un regard objectif, froid, de considérer le «je» comme un autre, une autre et, surtout, de voir, sentir devrais-je dire, l’écriture, la vérité produite par l’écriture....de lui donner un autre éclairage.\(^\text{39}\)

*Se perdre*, then, does not replace *Passion simple*, but it adds another telling. Again the double ‘je’ is in evidence and, while the diary, written in the immediacy of the affair, gives us the active subject of the author writing, time has distanced Ernaux sufficiently from the text so that she may now regard this other ‘je’ with an objectivity that destroys the autobiographical and approaches the ‘elle’ that she will employ later in *Les années*. The publication of the diary is, therefore, part of her experiment with the transformative power of literature, and the two texts are meant to be read together so as to show the mundane reality of the affair as well as the mythologised narrative. Referring us to her earlier work in the introduction to *Se perdre*, Ernaux says:

\(^{38}\) In *Se perdre* A., still mostly absent, becomes S.  
En janvier ou février 2000, j’ai commencé de relire les cahiers de mon journal correspondant à l’année de ma passion pour S., que je n’avais pas ouverts depuis cinq ans. (Pour des motifs qu’il n’est pas nécessaire d’évoquer ici, ils avaient été resserrés dans un endroit qui me les rendait indisponibles.) Je me suis aperçue qu’il y avait dans ces pages une « vérité » autre que celle contenue dans *Passion simple*. Quelque chose de cru et de noir, sans salut, quelque chose de l’*oblation*. J’ai pensé que cela aussi devait être porté au jour.\(^{40}\)

Ernaux is building a belief system through her writing, a way of explaining the world and of understanding herself. She is not suggesting that *Passion simple* is not true but that it is a version of the truth, perhaps less honest than the one the diary reveals.\(^{41}\) Offering up her diary is a rite, an act of sacrifice, through which she will get closer to her goal. A diarist from the age of sixteen, obsessed with the dating and recording of events, Ernaux has experimented with the diary form in texts such as *Journal du dehors*, a *journal extime* with an overt ethnographical mission, planned for publication, and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » a more traditional, personal log.\(^{42}\) *Se perdre*, like the latter, was not intended for publication and does not add any information to the story told in *Passion Simple*, so it serves a different purpose in highlighting the gap between the tale and its telling. In her interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Ernaux admits, ‘Une des raisons qui m’a fait publier *Se perdre*, c’est de montrer le «jeu» – au sens d’espace qui sépare – entre le journal intime et le texte de *Passion Simple*’.\(^{43}\) The game that is played out in this temporal space must surely be one of fictionalisation, which, despite all attempts at the autobiographical and the almost archaeological social excavations Ernaux undertakes in works such as *La place*, creeps into the breach between the action or tale and its telling. This is a frustration to


\(^{42}\) ‘Le besoin de dater est plus ancien que celui d’écrire, dans mon souvenir…Besoin compulsif de marquer le temps qui fuit, le fixer, me faire histoire dans tous les sens du terme.’ Ernaux, *L’écriture comme un couteau*, pp. 126-27.

Ernaux, who is desperate to freeze and contain the action itself and, therefore, believes that a narrowing of this gap may bring her closer to the present moment of the event.

*Passion Simple, L’occupation*, mais aussi *Une femme* ont été des textes où l’écart de temps entre la vie et l’écriture a été très étroit, mais il existe cependant, de quelques semaines à quelque mois. Ces trois textes sont « doublés » par un journal intime qui, lui, est la saisie du vécu dans l’instant, quelque chose comme l’effort pour «se souvenir du présent», selon le voeu de Jules Renard, qui écrit dans son journal, «le vrai bonheur serait de se souvenir du présent».44

In light of this admission, the works of Annie Ernaux, which appear at first to display a constant backward motion, retracing the past and describing scenes again and again, must be read instead as an example of Deleuze’s ‘difference and repetition’ and of the perpetually moving and renovating present identified in Chapter One. We said that time could not be divided into past and present but that, instead, each moment contained and renewed all of the past. Ernaux appears to be attempting to carry, repeat and retell her stories into new, familiar but always altered texts. To *Passion simple* and *Se perdre* we must add further versions, the writing journals published in *L’atelier noir*, which trace the evolution and repetition of the author’s process in constructing works from *La place* to *Les années*, their palimpsestic qualities underlined by the fact that they are scribbled on the back of recycled loose pages, letters and bills.45 We find on these dated pages not only the author’s fixation with form, but her constant rereading of her own diaries and plans. Teasingly, beside these entries, lie other drafts and versions of the printed works. Here we have ‘rien de ce qui constitue les matériaux du livre en cours. Tout cela est encore ailleurs, dans d’autres dossiers. C’est un journal d’avant-écriture’ (p.9). And so we catch a glimpse of the research and writing, but not the real struggle which, Ernaux tells us, lies elsewhere and which she is unwilling to expose as being too intimate, even

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44 Ernaux, *L’écriture comme un couteau*, p.58.
On the other side of the spectrum, we have the collection *Écrire la vie* (2011), in which both these texts reappear along with most of Ernaux’s corpus and some additional articles and reflections. This could be read as a chronological construction of the author’s life, an attempt to foreground progress and development, and yet it can be argued that, instead, it reinforces the circularity of Ernaux’s work and her compulsion to repeat and review. The layering of drafts and published texts reflects the spiralling effect of Bergson’s thickening time, and it is the desire to extend or sustain the present that drives Ernaux to recapture and retell specific events. However, her writing seems to freeze and restrict these scenes, as if she is trying to arrest the movement of time and, instead, paint a detailed but static picture of the present. This may be because she associates the movement of time with mortality.

The measurement of time in works by Annie Ernaux can be equated with loss: loss of the mother, loss of the unborn child or loss of her identity with her social background. Progression of time in Ernaux seems to require sacrifice. Her texts often emerge from a time of mourning, with the writing process fulfilling a therapeutic role, admittedly designed as a means of regaining happier times. She tells us explicitly towards the end of *Passion simple* that ‘quand je me suis mise à écrire, c’était pour rester dans ce temps-là’ (p. 61). We can be in little doubt, then, that the initial incentive for writing was the personal pleasure of recalling the events, the excuse to indulge in remembering the past. However, Ernaux’s statement suggests that the desire was not simply to remember the past but to somehow relive it. The past, therefore, exists for Ernaux as a physically attainable space, extant concurrently alongside the present and

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46 Annie Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p.95 : ‘Et je me dis toujours que ce n’est pas spécialement intéressant pour un lecteur de connaître ce que l’écriture représente de contraintes dans la vie quotidienne, ni tous les questionnements qu’elle suscite. C’est très intime, écrire…. Je détruisais les traces du travail, de la peine. Je les garde maintenant mais je n’aime toujours pas exposer les souffrances de l’écriture, peut-être, parce qu’il y a quelque chose d’indécent là-dedans’.

accessible if only she had the necessary tools. Time follows a cyclical pattern, promising the possibility of rebirth and renewal, and the recurrence of temporal phases can be marked or even invited through rituals. In *Passion simple* we see the narrator practising her own rituals in the hope that she will experience, not a renewed time but ‘un temps réversible’ (p.59). Ernaux explores the possibility of regaining times past first through sheer force of will:

> Je revoyais des moments de cette époque, qui n’avaient rien de particulier – je suis dans la salle des fichiers de la Sorbonne, je marche boulevard Voltaire, j’essaie une jupe dans un magasin Benetton – avec une telle sensation d’y être encore que je me demandais pourquoi il était impossible de passer dans ce jour-là, ce moment-là de la même façon qu’on passe d’une chambre à une autre.

However, this effort of imagination is not enough and, as anniversaries approach, she dresses in the same clothes as before and retraces her steps, visiting the monuments she has created to her past, hoping that this faithful pilgrimage will allow her to relive that same happy day. ‘Durant cette période, toutes mes pensées, tous mes actes étaient de la répétition d’avant. Je voulais forcer le présent à redevenir du passé ouvert sur le bonheur’ (p.58). When this too fails, Ernaux turns to writing, where she tries to elicit the resurgence of emotion through the concentrated reconstruction of events. ‘L’imparfait que j’ai employé spontanément dès les premières lignes est celui d’une durée que je ne voulais pas finie, celui de « en ce temps-là la vie était plus belle », d’une répétition éternelle’ (p.61). However, it is not only the imperfect tense that communicates duration for Ernaux but also the perfect tense, and its use, along with the employment of simple, direct language, is a defining feature of Ernaux’s writing and a further method of narrowing the gap between experience and expression. The immediacy of Ernaux’s prose is a deliberate attempt to capture the present.

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Non, j’emploie le passé composé par impossibilité absolue de rendre compte des choses au passé simple. Je le sens comme une mise à distance – le comble de la distance étant tout de même pour moi l’imparfait du subjonctif…. Et il y a ceci pour le passé composé: il fait sentir que les choses ne sont pas terminés, qu’elles durent encore dans le présent. C’est le temps de la proximité des choses, dans le temps et l’espace. Le temps du lien entre l’écriture et la vie.  

Despite criticism, Ernaux defends her choice of tense and highlights the duration inherent in the passé compose. She is eager to maintain an emotional link to the affair she describes in Passion simple, and endeavours to keep the experience alive through the act of writing, and, in the temporal manipulation of the narrative itself, both the narrator and the narrative try to freeze themselves in the time of the story and escape the inevitable progress of time.

To reiterate, Annie Ernaux’s prose attempts to shorten the distance between past and present moments in the hope of preserving the present. We have, however, unearthed several tensions in her work, particularly in the opposing forces of stasis and repetition. We have seen that the proliferation of versions of a story at once distances us from the event by planting copies and layers between the reader and the event, and multiplies the scene by providing different viewpoints. Repetition takes on a ritualistic feel, a mantra recalling a past event, willing it back into existence. Equally, there is a tug between movement and stasis that we have identified in the rigidity of the scenes and the dynamic textual layout, as well as in the almost paralysed je of the affair and the energetic authorial voice. There is also the clash of linear and circular forms produced by the internal turnings of the text and the enforced linearity of reading, and again in the accumulation of Ernaux texts but the constant return to familiar tales. These key concerns of stasis, movement and repetition are again evident in the text which was published immediately after Passion simple but composed in tandem with the novel, Journal du dehors (1993).

49 Ernaux, L’écriture comme un couteau, pp.129-30.
In *Journal du dehors* the novelist writes of her difficulty in truly grasping and understanding the *ville nouvelle* in which she lives. It is, she says, ‘un lieu à une seule dimension’ (p.47). In the Avant-propos she explains:

Depuis vingt ans, j’habite dans une ville nouvelle, à quarante kilomètres de Paris, Cergy-Pontoise. Auparavant, j’avais toujours vécu en province, dans des villes où étaient inscrites les marques du passé et de l’histoire. Arriver dans un lieu sorti du néant en quelques années, privé de toute mémoire, aux constructions éparpillées sur une territoire immense, aux limites incertaines, a constitué une expérience bouleversante. J’étais submergée par une sentiment d’étrangeté, incapable de voir autre chose que les esplanades ventées, les façades de béton rose ou bleu, le désert des rues pavillonnaire. L’impression continuelle de flotter entre le ciel et terre, dans un *no man’s land*.50

We have here a spatial and temporal opposition between town and country, the countryside being associated with the past and a rootedness which cannot be traced in the synthetic suburbs of Paris. Ernaux is again careful to specify duration and location, and reminds us of her personal history and origins. This movement from village to city and from a fixed identity to a disconcerting liberty is one that has troubled Ernaux throughout her writings, with the dichotomy already established in *La place*, where she struggles with her geographical and social displacement. Local, collective history is highlighted as a basis for a sense of belonging and stability that the *villes nouvelles*, in their very newness and enormity, cannot hope to provide. There is a collision between the subject (‘arriver’) and her surroundings (‘sorti’), as they arrive from different spaces – she from ‘province’ and the town from ‘le néant’. The suddenness of the new town’s construction contributes to its strangeness, since it has not had time to grow organically and collect memories across a thickening time, but has been imposed as an in-between place, unidentified, unwritten and foreign, a no man’s land. Confirming a feeling of isolation rather than communion, Ernaux gives a vivid first-hand example of the alienation Marc Augé describes in *Non-lieux* and, in order to make some connection with her

environment, the author gives herself a literary project and compiles a text of observations, snatched conversations and pen-portraits.

For the first time, Ernaux abandons the narrative text which has been fragmenting since her early novels and presents disparate ‘journal’ entries, assembled year by year from 1985 to 1992. An entry from 1987 reads:

Un caddie renversé dans l’herbe, très loin du centre commercial, comme un jouet oublié.

En plein mois d’août, une petite vieille rose et fraîche, en socquettes blanches, avec un chapeau de paille, est invisible, peut-être égarée, au milieu des Trois-Fontaines. Autour d’elle, la boutique de sport, le bijouterie «La Baguerie», les vins Nicolas.

Dans le R.E.R., un type saoul, derrière, au fond, répète haut: «Je n’ai pas peur moi. Quand on a la conscience tranquille on n’a pas peur.»

These paragraphs appear as snapshots, brief glimpses of solitary objects and people, which Ernaux admits is ‘une sorte d’écriture photographique du réel’ (p.7). Concentrating on visual and spatial terms, as in this extract, Ernaux tries to describe what she sees in the hope that the scenes will become not only memories but stories to serve as literary landmarks in this bleak disorientating cityscape. Almost in response to Augé’s *Introduction a une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, which appeared at just the same time, Ernaux is attempting a contemporary ethnographic study of ‘man in solitude’ while concurrently uncovering the beauty of the place in her ‘chant de la ville’. While she finds the *ville nouvelle* difficult to read, she finds it equally difficult to write, and discovers that it imposes a new and fragmented style. Commenting on the text in *L’écriture comme un couteau*, she explains, ‘Je ne pourrais pas dire vraiment que je

52 This phrase is repeated throughout her writing journals (*L’atelier noir*, pp.28, 31) in relation to her *ville nouvelle* project. It is a song that can only be written ‘en voix anonyme et fragments’, p.31. Gone is the intimacy of *Passion simple*; here bodies keep their distance and try not to meet: ‘Dans les rues couvertes du centre commercial, les gens s’écoulent avec difficulté. On réussit à éviter, sans les regarder, tous ces corps voisins de quelques centimètres’. *Journal du dehors*, p.14.
cherche à rénover la forme du récit, je cherche plutôt à trouver la forme qui convient à ce que je vois devant moi comme une nébuleuse – la chose à écrire – et cette forme n’est jamais donnée par avance’.\(^{53}\)

The interaction between self and environment, then, is two-way, with Ernaux trying to write the alien world of the *ville nouvelle* into existence, and the non-place transforming the way she writes. *Journal du dehors*, like the non-place it describes, is built of negatives and lacks narrative, conclusion, and change. It can be opened at any page and read in any order, since there is no chronological meaning. The *ville nouvelle* is neither poetic nor historic and calls for a new type of representation in which images of negation seem unavoidable and connections are difficult to make, so that the snapshots remain just that – unconnected and stagnant, like a montage of city life:

Je vis dans la Ville Nouvelle depuis douze ans et je ne sais pas à quoi elle ressemble. Je ne peux non plus le décrire, ne sachant pas où elle commence, finit, la parcourant toujours en voiture…. Aucune description, aucun récit non plus. Juste des instants, des rencontres. De l’ethnotexte.\(^{54}\)

With characteristic tenacity, Ernaux pursues her study and, seven years later, publishes a follow-up volume entitled *La vie extérieure*, in which she presents her observations for the years 1993-1999. We can note the similarity of the titles, the idea of the quotidian and that of the outsider. Written with a more detailed chronology, Ernaux shifts her concentration from space to time and describes the entries ‘comme des traces de temps et d’histoire, des fragments


\(^{54}\) Ernaux, *Journal du dehors*, p.61.
du texte que nous écrivons tous rien qu’en vivant’, suggesting, perhaps, like Michel de Certeau, that our movements through space create stories which, if multiplied and geographically concentrated, can transform a space into a place. The interconnectedness that she outlines between the body and its surroundings reminds us, too, of Edward Casey’s argument for the production of place and, if she does not quite recognise experiences of implacement, she is aware of flashes of reterritorialised belonging, since she sees reflections of herself in the people she passes by and reincorporates the external experience in order to affirm her own identity. Ernaux professes to be writing an ethnographic text, but the autobiographical pull is too strong and the objective study turns quickly into a strange subjective collage. She manages to interpret the anonymity of the ville nouvelle by translating the nameless faces into possible versions of herself, and concludes the book with this confession:

C’est donc au-dehors, dans les passagers du métro ou de R.E.R., les gens qui empruntent l’escalator des Galeries Lafayette et d’Auchan, qu’est déposée mon existence passée. Dans des individus anonymes qui ne soupçonnent pas qu’ils détiennent une part de mon histoire, dans des visages, des corps, que je ne revois jamais. Sans doute suis-je moi-même, dans la foule des rues et des magasins, porteuse de la vie des autres.

Ernaux ends with another dialectic action, believing that the solution to the difficulty of readability and writability in non-places lies in the movement of people along individual itineraries and the reflections of the self they represent. She is constantly looking for reflections of herself – in the crowd, in strangers and in externalised images – and this merging of the self


56 ‘Pourtant, je sais aussi que dans les notations de cette vie extérieure, plus que dans un journal intime, se dessinent ma propre histoire et les figures de ma ressemblance.’ Annie Ernaux, book cover, La vie extérieure. Interestingly, in this short text that Ernaux has added, she is once more writing after having re-read the journal, and no longer recognises herself as having written it, again doubting her presence, adding comment and pointing towards the ever-increasing distance between the event and her memory of it.

57 Ernaux, La vie extérieure, pp. 106-7.
with the other explains the *je transpersonnel* she employs to make her own story common or collective. Despite this eternal search for a definition of herself, she realises the fluidity and multiplicity of this being, so that the only real touchstone she has is her physical presence, which, likewise, is neither static nor unchanging.

In 2014, *Regarde les lumières mon amour* would return to this territory in familiar and yet altered ways. Ernaux once again becomes the social observer in the supermodern space but limits her boundaries to the Auchan supermarket in Trois-Fontaines and to a single year, November 2012 to October 2013. Immediately, the focus shifts from fragmented, anonymous observations to longer, more sustained reflections in which these spaces ‘suscitent des pensées, fixent en souvenirs des sensations et des émotions’ (p.11). Even the title suggests the romance of a starlit night rather than the fluorescent tubes of the supermarket ceiling. Ernaux’s project remains the same, ‘tenter de saisir quelque chose de la vie’ (p.16), and, she tells us towards the end, even to preserve it for future generations for whom hypermarkets may be a nostalgic memory. While accepting the labyrinthine quality of the supermarket and its disorientating and alienating geography, Ernaux continues to insist that it is not a non-place, but a world teeming with humanity and stories. She compares it to a magical ‘cathédrale flamboyante’ (p.29), a ballet (p.60), a ‘spectacle de la fête’ (p.53), and her text is full of metaphor and reminiscence:

Sortant d’Auchan, un très vieil homme plié en deux, flottant dans un imperméable, avance tout doucement avec une canne en traînant des chaussures avachies. Sa tête tombe sur la poitrine, je ne vois que son cou. De la main libre, il tient un cabas hors d’âge. Il m’émeut comme un scarabée admirable venu braver les dangers d’un territoire étranger pour rapporter sa nourriture.

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59 Ernaux opens the book with a rejection of non-lieux, claiming the hypermarkets to be ‘loin des discours convenus et souvent teintés d’aversion que ces prétendus non-lieux suscitent et qui ne correspondent en rien à l’expérience que j’en ai’ (pp.12-13), a belief she also defends in *Le vrai lieu* in reference to Cergy – ‘J’entends dire aussi que c’est un non-lieu, pas du tout, c’est un lieu qui a déjà une histoire, qui s’accroît des histoires des gens’ (p.18) – and yet she often contradicts this in her writing, where she is sensitive to the anonymising experience of the supermarket, as in *Regarde les lumières mon amour* – ‘On peut, dans cet endroit, se sentir désorienté, mal à l’aise’ (p.53) – or ‘Dans les allées de l’hyper, les gens étaient des présences qu’on croise et voit vaguement. C’est seulement aux caisses qu’ils s’individualisent’ (p. 47) – and in her own quest to write herself and these places into existence.
60 Ernaux, *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, p.41.
The rhythm, internal rhymes, assonances and imagery in this paragraph attest to both the photographic quality of Ernaux’s observations and the desire to communicate the stories behind them. *Regarde les lumières mon amour* takes on a softness sometimes hidden by the objectivity of her earlier *journaux extimes* and allows the personal and public to fuse in a fluid, organic way.\(^{61}\) However, while the supermarket may be a society in microcosm, it is also still a refuge and a place apart, governed by implicit and explicit rules, following its own calendar of seasons and sales and protecting its clients from the world beyond. Ernaux tells us of the ‘Curieuse impression que le temps ici ne s’écoule pas, qu’il est un présent répété maintes et maintes fois. Qu’il n’y a pas d’Histoire’ (p.42).\(^{62}\) As her interviews, diaries and published works make clear, a means of representing the relationship between history and personal memory remains a frustration and a force in her writing. It demands an artistic engagement with the concept and depiction of time and its passing, and an exercise in object-subjectivity that Ernaux experiments with across different genres and text types and which has led her, naturally, to consider and incorporate photography in a variety of ways.

Many of Ernaux’s texts, including *La place* and *Une femme*, begin with or incorporate the contemplation of absent photos. The first, however, to publish copies of the images considered is *L’Usage de la photo* which also introduces multiple voices to record the story.\(^{63}\) It is, once again, an attempt by the writer to document her existence and, particularly, both her relationship with a new partner, Marc Marie, who co-authors the book, and a reflection on her

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battle with breast cancer. The work is made up of fourteen photographs (reproduced in black and white to confirm their documentary status), depicting scattered clothes in different rooms – clothes thrown off in the passionate moments before love-making – and independent ‘compositions’ by Ernaux and Marie related to these photographs. Ernaux explains the project in the introduction, where she lays down the rules of the game and highlights the surprising beauty of the photographs and the memories they evoke.

It is clear from the outset that the photographs in *L’Usage de la photo* are meant to be documentary, and that the author hopes to achieve an unbiased record of her reality with an honesty beyond language. She states in the introduction that by tidying away the clothes in the morning she had ‘l’impression de supprimer la seule trace objective de notre joissance’ (p.9). We see once more this obsessive desire to record in which the description of the event becomes more important that its experience, ‘Tacitement ensuite, comme si faire l’amour ne suffisait pas, qu’il faille en conserver une représentation matérielle, nous avons continué de prendre des photos’ (p.9). Again, however, we encounter problems of delay and distance. The photographs are taken after the love-making, in the cold light of day when the event has already passed into memory. They are already laments, and fail to excite any feelings of anticipation or eroticism, but, for the author, ‘Les retrouver à la lumière du jour, c’était ressentir le temps’ (p.10). The photographs, then, are intended to recapture the past in an objective and slightly distanced way, and it is in the image rather than the word that Ernaux perceives *l’image-temps*, the perfect embodiment of time, ‘Les photos, elles, me fascinent, elles sont tellement le temps à l’état pur’.

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In order to preserve the value of the evidence, we are told that neither writer touched the arrangement of clothes but left everything exactly as they found it. However, there is a degree of editing in the process, since often several shots would be taken of each scene and the image angled and framed and, therefore, in some way composed, with the more experienced photographer, Marc Marie, usually taking the pictures. Add to this the delay between the taking of the photograph and the writing which accompanied each, and we begin to see that this book is more a testament to the past than an extension of the present, and more properly described as such.

Ce n’était plus la scène que nous avions vu, que nous avions voulu sauver, bientôt perdue, mais un tableau étrange, aux couleurs souvent somptueuses, avec des formes énigmatiques. L’impression que l’acte amoureux de la nuit ou du matin – dont on avait du mal, déjà, à se rappeler la date – était à la fois matérialisé et transfiguré, qu’il existait maintenant ailleurs, dans un espace mystérieux.66

Ironically, it is this difference Ernaux perceives that supports her claim that photographs embody time in its pure state. In the double delay between the act, the photograph and the viewing of the photograph, we again encounter an example of Deleuzean repetition and difference, evidence of the movement, displacement and recurrence of time, in which past experiences remain but are altered, and thereby serve as markers of duration which help us to understand the nature of time. Perhaps this new perspective on the passing of time is a result of Ernaux’s battle with cancer and her renewed examination of her own mortality. In the photographs collected here it is not the temporal Ernaux hopes to preserve, but the physical or corporeal as well. The clothes lie haphazardly, metonyms for bodies and limbs, jeans collapse in on themselves, still holding the form of the man who has stepped out of them, and the disarray at times takes on a sinister mood, one of violence and death, of amputation and loss, the single overturned shoe a familiar image from news footage of crime scenes or natural

66 Ernaux, L’Usage de la photo, p.11, emphasis as in original.
disasters. We see a series of opposites at play in the photographs, of light and shade, male and female, presence and absence and of love and death.

Interestingly, the first photograph in the collection is missing. It is a blank page, followed by a description of the absent photo, a nude shot of Marc Marie from the waist down. Once more the body is missing, recalled only in the text and even then incompletely, in amputation. The author herself points out that the wig she wore during this period, having lost her hair as a result of chemotherapy, does not appear in any of the images and that, even naked before her lover, she would not remove this ‘sign’ of her cancer. So even among the discarded clothes and accessories, pieces are missing or hidden and the image never fully revealed. Therefore, L’Usage de la photo, like the rest of Ernaux’s work, focuses on loss and absence; it is the story of the disintegration and disappearance of the body and arguably reveals the role of photographs in the slicing up of time and space.

L’Usage de la photo is not a diary but, as ever, the author’s diaries inform the text and each of the pictures is dated. However, because of the delay between identifying the photograph and describing it, these dates lose their significance and, instead of recalling specific events, open the way towards related stories and reflections. The importance of each entry in the series is instead indicated by the titles given to the texts and images, which, certainly in the case of Ernaux, relay a sense of duration, of the corporeal and of historical connections: à cette période de ma vie; ressembler aux femmes tondues; ce n’est pas mon corps. The images alone are repetitive and do not betray any sense of chronology; it is only in the attendant texts that we

67 ‘A la différence des autres pièces d’habillement devenues formes abstraites, les chaussures sont le seul élément de la photo qui conserve la forme d’une partie du corps. Qui réalise le plus la présence à ce moment-là. C’est l’accessoire le plus humain’, L’Usage de la photo, p.46.
69 Ernaux, L’usage de la photo, pp.23, 35, 137.
gain any narrative movement, and this too proves to be repetitive and fragmentary. Each photograph is described in turn by each writer, usually in great detail and with frequently surprising similarities. This forces the reader to study each picture and refer back and forth between the image and the text, producing yet another layering effect in the reading, writing and recurrence of the image:

J’essaie de décrire la photo avec un double regard, l’un passé, l’autre actuel. Ce que je vois maintenant n’est pas ce que je voyais ce matin-là, quand j’ai descendu l’escalier avant le petit déjeuner, que j’étais dans le couloir d’entrée avec mon souvenir moite de la nuit.70

Another double ‘je’ is at play, a distinction between the then and now and a recognition of the distance between the two. The photograph has become something other than an encapsulation of a moment in time; it has become a signpost to the past event but also a new and not wholly familiar picture which requires another reading and demands to be commented on and explained. It also proves to be only a poor visual reminder of the past; silent and light, lacking the important memories of taste, smell, sound and touch, and failing to reveal clues that in any way enrich or complement the author’s recall. In fact, not only does the photograph highlight the difference between the physical record of the scene and the memory of the scene, but it actually obstructs the memory:

C’est mon imaginaire qui déchiffre la photo, non ma mémoire. J’ai absolument besoin de l’écarter, de ne plus l’avoir dans mon champ visuel, pour qu’au bout d’un moment m’arrivent des images du printemps 2003, dans une sorte de remémoration différée. Pour que la pensée même se mette en mouvement.71

We begin to see the limitations of photography in recording reality. For one, it is purely the representation of the surface and cannot express the whole space taken up by the body or what is under the skin, but on the other hand, by recalling the past, we realise the shifting,

70 Ernaux, L’Usage de la photo, p.24.
71 Ibid., pp.24-25. Marc Marie also finds that the photographs do not necessarily help to differentiate between specific nights and a collection of memories that begin to merge into one another, p.30.
anti-linear nature of time.\footnote{Ernaux provides an acute reminder towards the end of the book that this it is not always the case that only the external body is pictured. While she and Marie have been photographing their external reality, doctors have been x-rayling and investigating Ernaux internally, therefore, hidden from the reader/spectator there exists a parallel series of medical photographs charting this period in Ernaux’s life.} What we see and what we do not see, what is present and what is absent once more become significant dichotomies.

The photographs are meant to expose the intimate, to, in a sense, document foreplay and suggest the future act. Instead, however, the photographs in themselves are not provocative; they are unusual in that the subject matter is uncommon, but without the accompanying text they are static and objective. While the undressing was undoubtedly spontaneous, the photographs, like the clothes, are empty and inanimate, even cold. We have already said that they resemble forensic evidence, but they also have a shrine-like quality, the habit of photographing the sacred scene becoming a further ritual in the couple’s relationship. The intimacy comes in the written texts, in which the sharing of innermost thoughts becomes a more extreme disrobing: ‘Il me semble que nous ne pouvons rien faire de mieux ensemble que cela, un acte, à la fois uni et disjoint, d’écriture. Quelquefois, cela m’effraie aussi. Ouvrir son espace d’écriture est plus violent que d’ouvrir son sexe’ (p.47). However, even in these descriptions the act is absent, since it is of the least importance. Instead what is revealed are the thoughts and memories surrounding the scene, related anecdotes triggered by the place, and reflections that cannot be represented visually or statically. If we take a closer look at a single passage from the text we will see the deep and anti-linear movement of both the memory and the narrative:

La photo a été prise le lundi matin, peu de temps avant de quitter la chambre. Ce n’est pas un paysage d’après l’amour, juste l’image d’une chambre où l’on a vécu trois jours et que l’on ne reverra sans doute jamais, dont on oubliera la plupart des détails. Comme j’ai presque tout oublié – sauf la disposition du lit par rapport à la fenêtre et à la télévision – de celle où j’étais dans ce même hôtel Amigo, en février 1986, avec Z., et ma mère devait mourir subitement deux mois après. Qu’elle ait été encore vivante lorsque je suis venue pour la première fois dans cet hôtel me paraît invraisemblable.\footnote{Ernaux, L’Usage de la photo, p.35.}
The tenses and reflections evident in this extract display the dynamic and wide-ranging nature of memory, creating links based on time and space to draw in a whole network of stories. A specific point in time, a Monday morning, swells into the past (to the three days spent at the hotel), and into the future in which it will all have been forgotten. The moment also recalls its double, the same hotel room at another time, a repetition and a change, since the author was there with another man and recognises that she is no longer the person she was then. That previous scene too foreshadows a change, as Ernaux remembers that her mother had then still been alive, so that in just two short sentences we have moved from the lover’s bed to a mother’s death with a layering of memories triggered by a single photograph. This echoes Bergson’s musical metaphor of interdependent elements, in which each element, or note in his case, carries the whole of the melody. Here, each scene contains the whole of Ernaux’s life story, which is, in turn, made up of each of these scenes. The author is conscious, too, of the possibility of forgetting. She understands its erosive and destructive power and realises it is already present as a threat. Photography helps to combat this threat since the images exist as proof and turn us into witnesses rather than readers. In *L’Usage de la photo* this desire to challenge forgetting or disappearance is tied up with a personal struggle with mortality.

The photographs and commentary in *L’Usage de la photo* cover not only the duration of Ernaux’s affair with Marie but, more importantly, the period of her battle with cancer; she meets Marie just a week before her first operation and the text ends with her remission. Clearly the illness forces her to consider her mortality and to question her relationship with time and with her body. As we have said, bodies are absent from the photographs – only their imprints remain – and perhaps this is an indication of the textual traces Ernaux will leave beyond her own physical existence. This phototextual project is another of the author’s attempts to find the appropriate voice for her story: ‘J’ai cherché une forme littéraire qui
contiendrait toute ma vie. Elle n’existant pas encore’ (p.27). L’Usage de la photo does not necessarily mark a shift in Ernaux’s work away from prose and towards the photographic, but instead helps to represent this period in her life. As the experience of illness comes to an end and her hair starts to regrow and her body to strengthen, there is no longer the desire or need to obsessively photograph her existence. It is as if, free of the threat of annihilation, the photographs have lost their potency. However, in retrospect, the images do not record Ernaux’s life but foretell her death.74 Death may be a recurring theme in Ernaux’s works, but more blatant still is her preoccupation with sex and the body. L’Usage de la photo begins with an epigraph taken from Georges Bataille, ‘L’érotisme est l’appropriation de la vie jusque dans la mort’, and the constant juxtaposition of sex and cancer in the text illustrates two conflicting impulses of the body. Ernaux is constantly aware of her body and the space it occupies, horrified and fascinated by the extensions and amputations her body undergoes in the process of her illness, an illness that she views as being particularly feminine so that she is not surprised to have breast cancer but sees is almost as a rite of passage much like maternity or even her earlier abortion, and, for similar reasons, tries to create a literature for what is often untold. As she charts her changing relationship with her body, she comments too on how she is perceived by others, highlighting the possibilities for misinterpretation and raising questions about notions of beauty and the grotesque when Marie erroneously identifies Ernaux’s left breast as the one which is cancerous, since the other, swollen by the tumour, looks more beautiful. The body is not stable but is constantly changing, and the effects of Ernaux’s illness and treatment magnify these changes in extreme and troubling ways. Against the momentum towards death, chemotherapy ostensibly reverses the aging process as Ernaux sheds her hair and is left ‘lisse’ and ‘mermaid-like’ with the naked pubis of

74 ‘Mais il me semble que nous ne regardons plus de la même façon le spectacle que nous découvrons, qu’il n’y a plus cette douleur qui nous poussait à fixer la scène. Photographier n’est plus le dernier geste. Il appartient à notre entreprise d’écriture. Une forme d’innocence est perdue’. L’Usage de la photo, pp.131-32.
a little girl. Her womanhood is being doubly challenged in the removal of the breast and the loss of body hair, and her body becomes increasingly alien to her as tubes and dyes invade and it is carved up and dismembered.

Par la suite il m’avouera qu’il avait été surpris devant mon sexe nu de petite fille. Il n’avait jamais entendu parler de cette conséquence de la chimio – mais qui en parle – moi aussi j’avais ignorée jusqu’à ce que cela m’arrive. Il ne s’est pas aperçu ce soir-là que je n’avais pas non plus de cils ni de sourcils, absence qui me donnait pourtant un regard étrange, de poupée en cire.75

Quand je suis nue, avec ma ceinture de cuir, ma fiole toxique, mes marquages de toutes les couleurs et le fil courant sur mon torse, je ressemble à une créature extraterrestre.76

Her illness gives her an other-worldliness and distances her from people who see her as changed and newly defined by the cancer, but it also relates her to a certain community, or rather sorority, through which, at the Marie Curie centre, she finds ‘une sorte de lieu idéal’, a paradisiacal space and antithesis to the non-place of Journal du dehors because it is a place for meeting and socialising in a way she believes absent in contemporary urban life.77 But she also sees it as a bridge across historical time and cultural space and compares her bald head to images of the shaven women at the end of the Second World War, and her wig to the Islamic veil. Her body becomes the stage for a series of violent operations and is physically disturbed internally in ways we can see mirrored in the black and white pictures. The photographs of discarded clothes reveal not only the bodies that wore them but the action of those bodies in throwing them off and the new landscapes and portraits created in this act.

Ces choses dont nos corps s’étaient débarrassés avaient passé toute la nuit à l’endroit même où elles étaient tombées, dans la posture de leur chute. Elles étaient les dépouilles d’une fête déjà lointaine. Les retrouver à la lumière du jour, c’était ressentir le temps.78

75 Ernaux, L’Usage de la photo, p.18.
76 Ibid., p.83.
77 Ibid., p.27.
78 Ibid., p.10.
The pictures remind the author not only of the time, but of the body as well. However, the absence of the body may also be a refusal of the objectification of the female body and an attempt to portray the erotic without showing it. Pierre Bourdieu, in *La domination masculine*, suggests that the space of the female body is measured in negative units diminishing towards the internal and the invisible, but here Ernaux leaves the destructive traces of the displacement of bodies, male and female, and chooses not only the traditional location of the bedroom but the kitchen and office too. The scattered clothes cover an area larger than the confined space of the body, so that images of the (absent) body dominate the fixed spaces. These spaces are rewritten in terms of the bodies that have passed through them, markers of the passage of time and signposts towards disappearance. Marc Marie asks, when contemplating the pictures, ‘Peut-on être nostalgique d’un moment tout entier conditionné par l’éventualité de la mort?’ (p. 115). The certainty of death heightens the experience of living, and Ernaux, studying her photographs, gains an understanding of non-existence, of the ‘néant’, an understanding which she believes justifies all philosophical, scientific and artistic research.

Rien de nos corps sur les photos. Rien de l’amour que nous avons fait. La scène invisible. La douleur de la scène invisible. La douleur de la photo. Elle vient de vouloir autre chose que ce qui est là. Signification éperdue de la photo. Un trou par lequel on aperçoit la lumière fixe du temps, du néant. Toute photo est métaphysique.

So the use of photography is a paradox, one which Ernaux herself identifies. Although it may be intended to record and preserve the present or the past, it, in fact, forces us to confront our inevitable future. The static image makes us confront the movement of time. It is at once a physical and tangible document of an event and a reminder of the unattainable. In *L’Usage de

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Ernaux’s understanding of time has moved from the instantaneous to one of duration.

Ernaux’s desire to record grows from a need for proof that an event has taken place and from greater trust in the written word than in memory. Her route into memory comes via the physical. She collects the details and the things that have made up her past, finding comfort in this concrete evidence. Her social and personal histories begin as archaeological digs in which she documents external components in order to find a way into her emotional past. In *La place* she names the books she read and the songs she heard on the radio as a way of building the architecture of her youth, and in *L’Usage de la photo* she offers another interpretation of her prose style by claiming: ‘Je ne connais que la langue des choses, des traces matérielles, visibles. (Bien que je n’aie de cesse de transmuer celles-ci en mots, en abstraction.)’ (p. 121). Photographs are an important part of the physical universe Ernaux tries to represent in her writing. They are, she says, ‘Les taches les plus matérielles, organiques. Je me rends compte que j’attends la même chose de l’écriture. Je voudrais que les mots soient comme des taches auxquelles on ne parvient pas à s’arracher’ (p.132). Therefore, Ernaux hopes that photographs, like words, will endure but she is already aware that the words will, in fact, outlast the images. She also recognises that photographs cannot communicate duration; they are instantaneous and capture a moment, freezing time in a way that does not reflect lived experience. While photographs remain a significant aide-mémoire for Ernaux, they become nothing more potent than the other physical objects that help guide her to a remembrance of her past. In fact, Ernaux uses photographs as historical documents in which she finds evidence of the fashion of the period, social conduct or the material well-being of the subjects. The photographs themselves do not make the past any more substantial. *Les années* opens with the acknowledgement that ‘toutes les images disparaîtront’ (p.11), and
in this book, in which Ernaux once again confronts her mortality by recording her life, she structures the text around photographs that are once more physically absent. Instead, she meticulously describes them, allowing the words to paint a more durable picture. Here photographs are used to mark the chronological measurement of time, showing the author grow and age. The static nature of earlier texts is replaced here, even in the title, with a move towards duration and the depiction of the flowing continuity of time rather than the snapshot focus on specific events. Ernaux makes reference to her method of reconstructing the past, emphasising her dependence on physical markers:

Parmi les questions:

Quand vous aviez notre âge, comment imaginiez-vous votre vie? Qu’est-ce que vous espériez?

La réponse (lentement): Il faudrait réfléchir…pour revenir à seize ans, être sûre… il faudrait au moins une heure.(…) (Il faudrait replonger, stagner longtemps dans ces images d’elle en classe de seconde, retrouver des chansons et des cahiers, relire le journal intime.)

It is worth noting the importance of music here. Song titles are a frequent reference in Ernaux’s works and a significant element in the popular cultural framework in which she places her ethnographic mission. Reminiscent of Bergson’s musical metaphor for simultaneity, Ernaux highlights the ability of music to extend beyond the instantaneous and to communicate duration in a way that photography cannot. This difference between image and song is one she first defines in L’Usage de la photo, when she understands the limitation of photographs before turning her back on this experiment with photography in order to concentrate more fully on prose:

82 Ernaux, Les années, p.156.
Aucune photo ne rend la durée. Elle enferme dans l’instant. La chanson est expansion dans le passé, la photo finitude. La chanson est le sentiment heureux du temps, la photo son tragique. J’ai souvent pensé qu’on pourrait raconter toute sa vie avec seulement des chansons et des photos.83

In *L’Usage de la photo*, Ernaux has discovered what is tragic about the photograph: the fact that it represents a lost and unattainable moment, that it is finite and empty and brings her nothing of the past. It is only a signpost, and one that signals her inevitable future more forcefully than her past. Commenting on *Les années* in *Le vrai lieu*, Ernaux explains that, ‘La photo n’est rien d’autre que le temps arrêté. Mais la photo ne sauve pas. Parce qu’elle est muette. Je crois qu’au contraire elle creuse la douleur du temps qui passe. L’écriture sauve,’ (p.73). This, then, is how she employs photographs in her later work, as a marker or measure in the span of time. Like Zeno’s paradox, Ernaux appears to ask if duration is not most easily represented as a series of moments at rest.

In her use of physical props Ernaux is concerned with the validity of her recall. She wants to ensure authenticity and reconstruct her past self as faithfully as possible. She also, in incorporating songs, cultural references and material objects, wants to paint a shared history alongside the personal. *Les années* is the culmination of perhaps thirty years of reflection and planning. It is the *roman total*, as Ernaux calls it in her writing diaries, that she has been preparing since the publication of *La place*. Here, she tells us, she finally achieves the *je transpersonnel* she has been experimenting with since her very first manuscript, and marries personal and shared histories in a way that has eluded her previously.84 ‘Dans *Les années*’, she writes, ‘il y a une espèce de transsubstantiation continuelle entre les individus – “elle”, “nous” – et la société’.85 Differentiating between herself as subject and as authorial voice by removing the *je* from the text and referring to herself as *elle*, Ernaux distances herself from

84 Ernaux, *Le vrai lieu*, p.60.
the action so that she can join the crowd and her social commentary on the end of the twentieth century moves still further from the autobiographical, journalistic mode she adopted in her ethnographic texts, such as *Journal du dehors*, without returning to fiction. *Les années* is the history of a woman and the history of a period viewed by a particular woman. Ernaux is, at once, the individual and the conduit. It is an ambitious construction of personal and collective identity and centres on the individual’s position in time and on an understanding of the constant evolution of time. Ernaux wants to ‘Décrire le passage de l’Histoire en nous. Qui ne s’arrête jamais’. 86 This history is manifest in events and in the material. Ernaux describes the detailed surveys she conducts of past bedrooms, in which, in a Proustian turn, each object remembered is associated with an action or gesture and, not quite sure what she expects to find in these inventories, she suggests that, ‘peut-être, à force d’accumulation de souvenirs d’objets, redevenir celle qu’elle était à tel ou tel moment’. 87

Ernaux’s obsession with the past and with its recording provides us with a useful study of the complexity of the movement of time in space, the relationship between the instantaneous and the eternal, and the tension between the very natural desire to capture time and the intuitive and physical experience of its passing. We are brought back to our opening questions on stasis and duration.

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Stasis

Let us consider the desire towards stasis and stability that we have identified in the works of Annie Ernaux, beginning at a typographical and grammatical level. The fragmented nature of Ernaux’s texts attempts to detach scenes from the general narrative flow and frame them as isolated tableaux. Paragraphs separated by expanses of white page help to build an incomplete story of the past in which the silences or blanks often carry the intrigue of action. It is the action that is usually missing from the text, action that goes unrepresented and, therefore, retains its mystery and dynamism. These empty stretches between bits of text do, however, forge links between the paragraphs, jumps and delays and even moments of suspense which drive the narrative forward and which are, therefore, essential to the tale. Even, or especially, lacunas within the text contribute to the narrative, introducing spatial and temporal distances between scenes and events. In *Passion simple*, a story of absence and waiting, the blanks can also portray the suspension of action but not the arrest of time. On page 66, after another meditation on her experience of abortion, half a page is crossed before the author’s voice returns. The extent of the blank suggests a respectful silence after the traumatic reflection but, when it is interrupted with the words, ‘Maintenant c’est avril’ it grows retrospectively and symbolises both an extended period of time and an astonishing lack of action. The size of the blanks in the text is significant, spatially representing time and altering the rhythm of the narrative, with shorter breaks encouraging jumps and changes of direction and longer ones delaying progression and suspending action. In either case, they are never empty.

In creating the scenes between these spaces Ernaux hopes that a careful description of physical detail and the employment of an unemotive *écriture plate* will help to build an objective image which preserves a space and freezes the instant. The objects, the ‘signs’ of her relationships and love-making in *Passion simple* and *L’Usage de la photo*, are more
durable and more easily considered than the emotions she finds so difficult to describe; they are proof of a reality that has now disappeared.

Je me demande si contempler et décrire nos photos n’est pas pour moi une façon de me prouver l’existence de son amour, et devant l’évidence, devant la preuve matérielle qu’elles constituent, d’esquiver la question, à laquelle je ne vois aucune réponse, «est-ce qu’il m’aime?».

The author claims not to understand ‘la langue du sentiment’ and prefers a detached, documentary style of expression. She experiments with the simple past tense in her search for l’image-temps, a model of time in its pure state, divorced from its fluid context. It is a model she likens to the photograph and one in which she recognises a transformative power. By distilling language to a functional and unadorned form, stripped of conventional punctuation, prepositions and conjunctions, Ernaux attempts to focus attention on the static object but, as we have seen, her catalogues and lists take on a poetic motion of their own. Taking this desire to its obvious conclusion, we find ourselves in front of metaphorical and actual photographs, but these snapshots prove problematic since, instead of filling in gaps of memory, they reveal both the passage of time and the promise of mortality.

We saw in Chapter One that artificial markers that attempt to locate and fix points in time and space are often necessary in order to perceive the movement of time. Ernaux follows conventions of dating and situating scenes and events in order to construct a personal history against which she can chart change. It is a change she resists, and she tells us repeatedly that her obsession with recording her life is born of the will to preserve the present, but she finds that, even with this careful recording, time, viewed in retrospect, loses its chronology and distinction. It is this aim which encourages her to rewrite and reread her accounts and the use of footnotes, editing and authorial reflection define this project. Her comments on her writing process introduce another level of action and a cyclical, backward motion in which she

88 Ernaux, L’Usage de la photo, pp.121-22.
revisits and revises both the event and its description. Paradoxically, it is through this
dynamic process that Ernaux appears to seek stasis. She insists that a single true experience
exists, and that this experience can be attained and preserved through repetition and through
the narrowing of the distance between the event and its representation. In this way her journal
entries and the photographs of her pre-coital clothes piles attempt to stabilise scenes to which
the writer can return. In her frustrated exercises of resurrection, Ernaux is in fact reflecting
the very nature of time. Struggling with tenses that prove too rigid and finding ghosts of
herself already imprinted on each rewriting, the author is bound to fail in her search for fixed
and stable memories. Eventually Ernaux admits that she cannot extract herself from the story,
and that she is bound up in the text, a further example of the inter-permeations of time, space
and narrative. The clinical eye Ernaux turns on her photographs and on her texts, the gradual
stripping of fiction from her anecdotes and of ornamentation from her language, are all
measures she takes in order to portray a pure, clean and true image of the past. The task,
however, is impossible, not only because the author cannot be removed from the text but
because no pure, clean or true past exists. Time, we are reminded, is neither static nor
divisible. It undergoes constant flux and change, and narrative representation of time is, by its
very nature, a faithful expression of this movement.

We said at the beginning of this chapter that narrative is distinguished from story, in
that it need not follow chronological sequence. In fact, it is the concept of the story and not
that of narrative that artificially represents the experience of time, since chronology depends
on a fixed perspective and a linear model of time. Deleuze and Bergson tell us that time is a
process of constant rebirth, and a cyclical or spiralling thickening in which past moments are
carried along and reformed with each new moment. In this way, Ernaux’s repeated tellings of
the same tale parallel this movement, recreating new pasts as they move along, altering all
previous tellings and carrying them forward into a new incarnation. For example, Se perdre
does not close the gap between the love affair and its recording; the journal entries are no longer the same as they were when first written now that they have been reproduced and can no longer be disassociated from *Passion simple*. There can be no return to a perfect past, and the publication of the diary is instead a rebirth, and one which retrospectively alters the original; a similar game is at play in the commented photographs of *L’Usage de la photo*. Ernaux’s desire to keep memories alive in an eternal present is, in fact, very close to the Deleuzean idea of repetition. Here we have an attempt to understand time as a single, all-encompassing force. In *Passion simple* the aim is to preserve a happy experience; in *L’Usage de la photo* it is a struggle to survive. We have shown that the use of photography, despite first impressions, is not to plug gaps in memory or merely to aid recall and trigger sensations, but is, in fact, a reminder of our own mortality, of the inevitable passing of time, of the inability to arrest or preserve specific moments and of the dynamic nature of duration. Instead of being captured instants full of meaning and detail, the photographs are empty and portentous, warning of change and, ultimately, of loss. They highlight the artificiality of stasis and force us to contemplate duration.

**Duration**

Duration, we have said, can be perceived through change, and in *L’Usage de la photo* Annie Ernaux is more acutely attentive to change than in her earlier texts. Doubtless this is related to the ravages of cancer she can see in her body, a body at once familiar and strange, terrifying and fascinating. She charts these changes implicitly in the photographs and more openly in her writing, in which she offers stark quasi-forensic explanations of medical procedures and physical transformations. She admits reluctantly that things are no longer exactly how she remembers them, and the photographs, rather than reigniting the passion of

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their composition, confront her with the complexities of memory and force her to resort to imaginative reconstruction. Ultimately, the photographs fail to capture the past and do not, in the end, reveal anything supplementary to or even approaching the depth of her literary descriptions. Eventually she accepts that photographs lack duration and that it is duration that reflects reality. In *Les années* she reverts to these prose pictures and descriptions of photographs and uses them as simple reference points which help to chart the progress of time which she is now ready to confront. Having extracted herself from the narrative and replaced ‘je’ with ‘elle’ in a move that reflects her embracing of the commonality of her lived experience, her move beyond the present moment into the larger span of time and her effacing of the difference between the action and the agent, Ernaux confirms her changing relationship with time, ‘Ce qui a le plus changé en elle, c’est sa perception du temps, de sa situation à elle dans le temps’ (p.236). Instead of translating time through herself and through her body, trying to find the fixed point from which to resist the movement of time, she situates herself within its flux in the way that Bergson suggests, and thereby more completely understands its nature. She is able to view herself and her life more objectively, almost cinematically, so that she portrays an *image-mouvement*. This change appears to have been brought about by the seriousness of her illness.

Faced with the certainty of death, Ernaux becomes obsessed with images of stasis. As she recovers strength and hope, her thoughts turn to continuity since, as Bergson says, ‘l’être vivant dure essentiellement’. In her impatience to meet her lover in *Passion simple*, duration is a torture. In light of her illness, however, the time becomes precious. Duration is, therefore, subjective. We can see here that spatial components influence our relationship with time, since internal and external changes, and corporal and physical markers, alter our perception, experience and interaction with time and space. We must be careful, however, not

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to impose a direction on this duration, especially since we have identified its end or opposite, and here again, Ernaux’s use of repetition serves as a useful example of non-linear duration. Henri Bergson bemoaned the impossibility of representing the human experience of duration, but I would argue that Ernaux, in the tension produced between stasis and repetition in her work, has done just that. We do not have to directly verbalise the passing of time, narrative provides the perfect vehicle for this expression since it incorporates the essential dynamic relationship of time and space. Bergsonian duration is a ‘création perpétuelle de possibilités et de réalités’,\(^91\) a constant rebirth which replaces the linear model with the idea of an eternal but ever-changing present. The ‘souvenir du présent’ that Ernaux hopes to achieve in her literature is, in fact, a truer reflection of this process, and each repetition of Ernaux’s texts is a model of time thickening spatially with a creative but directionless force. In this way, Ernaux answers Bergson’s call to restore ‘au changement sa fluidité, au temps sa durée’.\(^92\) Narrative, like duration, is a continual evolution.

Ernaux recognises this layering of time in *Les années* and gives us an indication of the relationship between time and memory by providing us with a version of the simultaneity Bergson described. She refers to her intuitive understanding of time as ‘la sensation palimpseste’ and suggests that this is a common and general experience:

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\text{Elle se ressent dans plusieurs moments de sa vie, flottant les uns par-dessus les autres. C’est un temps d’une nature inconnue qui s‘empare de sa conscience et aussi de son corps, un temps dans lequel le présent et le passé se superposent sans se confondre, où il lui semble réintégrer fugitivement toutes les formes de l’être qu’elle a été. C’est une sensation déjà éprouvée, épisodique…(…) qu’elle saisit maintenant dans une sorte d’agrandissement et de ralentissement. Elle lui a donné un nom, la sensation palimpseste, bien que, (…) ce mot ne convienne pas tout à fait. Elle y voit un instrument possible de connaissance, non pas seulement pour moi-même, mais de façon générale, presque scientifique – de quoi elle ne sait pas. […] elle voudrait, sans doute influencée par Proust, que cette sensation en constitue l’ouverture, par besoin de fonder sur une expérience réelle son entreprise.}\(^93\)
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\(^91\) Bergson, *Essais sur des données immédiates de la conscience*, p.74. 
\(^92\) Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant*, p.8. 
\(^93\) Ernaux, *Les années*, p.204.
This relationship to time is relatively new in Ernaux’s work and is therefore not representative. Instead, her negotiations of time are best exemplified in her desire for stasis. Her impulse to freeze-frame and describe detail is related to her stated mission to authentically reconstruct reality and leads her logically to a study of photographs, but she finds that these images are empty and closed and that words are, in fact, a more useful tool for portraying the past. In an interview with Gallimard to promote the publication of *L’Usage de la photo*, Ernaux admits that, while the photographs initially provided proof of her love affair, ‘ensuite, cette preuve m’est apparue insuffisante, c’est l’écriture seule qui donnerait un supplement de réalité’.

The frozen image points towards the end of existence, but the narrative itself provides a model for duration.

Language is never fixed or static and by its very nature incorporates spatial signifiers and temporal markers of repetition and change. Narrative texts, divorced from chronological or linear constraints, move inevitably and can eschew direction. Ernaux’s texts prove the inability of language to be arrested, of action to be suppressed and of time to be fixed. Her failed attempt to capture moments of the past as isolated, static tableaux through her writing led her to experiment with photography as an obvious medium, but this too proves unsatisfactory. Her realisation of the limitations of photography directs her back towards her literary project and renews her faith in prose. In fact, Ernaux’s meditation on the difficulties of writing the past or preserving the instant are in themselves examples of the *élan vital* Bergson associates with duration, and her texts, including *Passion simple* and *L’Usage de la photo*, are results of its creative force. According to Bergson, the stability Ernaux desires is to be found in movement rather than stasis – ‘rien que la mobilité dont est faite la stabilité de la vie’ – and movement can only be measured through change. In *Les années*, Ernaux uses the

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94 We are reminded here of Ernaux’s affirmation at the beginning of *Une femme* that literature can attain a truth beyond photographs and memories.
95 Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, p.141.
description of photographs to chart this change, the progress of time and the inevitable
desire for the inevitable
towards death, but her earlier works fight against this flow and obsessively try to plot
and freeze moments in the hope of preserving them. The ability to recall and revisit past
moments or memories relies on a simultaneous perception of the extension of time, which
Ernaux begins to voice in *Les années*. However, another writer, Patrick Modiano, explores
the ideas of simultaneous existence, duration and the accessing of memory in ways that
reinforce the connections between time and place. His ideas are consequently discussed in the
next chapter.
Chapter 3  Memory and simultaneity in Patrick Modiano

Simultaneity, according to Henri Bergson, unifies time and space and allows us to perceive two or more events at once. It relies upon the supposition that past events are extant and accessible in the present but also that they continue to move, to recur and to change with each reincarnation. For Patrick Modiano, a novelist obsessed with personal and collective history, past events have no fixed location in time but remain in specific physical spaces, so that a return to place is a return to the past. Modiano’s stories slip between decades as fluidly as they follow his detailed itineraries through Paris, and the fusion and overlapping of time and space structure and colour his novels. Where dates and diaries helped Annie Ernaux fix her present and document her existence, for Modiano addresses, telephone numbers and notebooks are the points de repères for his wandering narrators and even these lose their serviceability when streets change, buildings are demolished, the telephone rings out, the line is cut and the scribbled notes no longer make sense and raise more questions than they resolve. Modiano’s Paris, the central character rather than the backdrop of his novels, is a place both of familiarity and disconcerting mystery, an arena of possibility and secrets in which people can disappear and reappear. The city affords anonymity but, more importantly, allows for encounters, sometimes fleeting, sometimes meaningful, often both, and this synergy is what generates Modiano’s novels; these chance meetings, or the memory of them, propel the story and the narrator through the streets and into the past in search of meaning and confirmation of their occurrence. In this quest, addresses and phone numbers become forensic evidence, the only tangible trace of what happened. In his speech to the Swedish academy on the acceptance of his Nobel Prize for Literature in 2014 the author explained his long-held obsession with telephone directories:
C’est ainsi que, depuis ma jeunesse, pour m’aider à écrire, j’essayais de retrouver de vieux annuaires de Paris, surtout ceux où les noms sont répertoriés par rue avec les numéros des immeubles. J’avais l’impression, page après page, d’avoir, sous les yeux une radiographie de la ville, mais une ville engloutie, comme l’Atlantide, et de respirer l’odeur du temps. À cause des années qui s’étaient écoulées, les seules traces qu’avaient laissées ces milliers et milliers d’inconnus, c’étaient leurs noms, leurs adresses et leurs numéros de téléphone.¹

By his own admission, this dependence on telephone books and postal addresses means that he may be part of a génération intermédiaire of writers between the great novelists of the 19th century, for whom time and the city moved more slowly, and 21st century writers, for whom connections are less easily lost, where disappearance is complicated by a parallel virtual existence, removed from place and where secrets are less easily kept.² In this way, Modiano distances himself from perceptions of the city as a supermodern space devoid of meaningful interactions and immerses himself in the moving mass, a flâneur in the style of Charles Baudelaire or of Edgar Allan Poe’s tracker in ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840), both of whom he cites as forefathers.³ While the flâneur is associated with place and with cities such as Paris, London or Berlin, Bruno Chaouat, in his article on ‘Modiano à l’ère du numérique’ points out that for Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire’s poetry ‘attesterait une rupture dans l’expérience du temps’ and subsequently memory, due to industrial and commercial change in the mid-19th century.¹

² See Modiano, Discours à l’Académie suédoise, p.18.
century, so that the flâneur’s function is not only to map the city and stories of the people he observes, but to act as a conduit between past and present.\textsuperscript{4} This is the possibility opened up by Modiano’s anti-heroes. Having wandered the streets and explored different neighbourhoods since his youth, Modiano has an understanding of the fabric and topography of the city that he then bestows on his successive narrators, often reflections of, or indeed ghosts of himself. Walking through Paris, Modiano’s narrators rediscover memories and emotions of the past, but these are not exclusively their own: ‘aussi la vie des autres, de ces milliers et milliers d’inconnus, croisés dans les rues ou dans les couloirs du métro aux heures de pointe’.\textsuperscript{5} This connection with the people he passes means that Modiano’s work is very definitely of this chronological moment. It explores a contemporary or very recently disappeared Paris, and geographically reconstructs layers of time and sets out stories on a frequently changing three-dimensional schema. In his novels, physical space has a memory, and place is the key to the past. His characters can slip between timescapes and exist in different spheres synchronously. Therefore, this chapter studies the relationship between memory, place and simultaneity through a close reading of two novels – Modiano’s best known work, \textit{Dora Bruder} (1997) and the more obscure but particularly pertinent \textit{Fleurs de ruine} (1991) – that begin with a similar premise: \textit{a fait divers} from an old newspaper cutting.\textsuperscript{6}

It is an unsettling experience to find oneself at the beginning of a familiar story when opening a novel for the first time. Pricked by a sense of \textit{déjà vu}, you struggle to place the scene, to rerun the situation, and to wonder why you are back there again. You begin to look for markers with which to orientate yourself in this rediscovered landscape, and for promises or

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Discours à l’Académie suédoise}, p.26.
puzzles that might encourage you to read on towards a conclusion you already know.\textsuperscript{7} Readers of Patrick Modiano are frequently thrown into this state of confusion and often have difficulty distinguishing between texts they have read. The novels, in which recycled themes and plots unfold around recurrent characters, merge in the memory and into each other. Without explosive endings or dramatic climaxes, their stories often peter out unfinished, ready to be retold.

Apparently, this is true for the author as well as his reader. In interviews Modiano repeatedly pleads amnesia and confesses to losing sight of characters, plots and prose, so that he only later recognises their recurrence:

\begin{quote}
chaque nouveau livre, au moment de l’écrire, efface le précédent au point que j’ai l’impression de l’avoir oublié. Je croyais les avoir écrits les uns après les autres de manière discontinue, à coups d’oubli successifs, mais souvent les mêmes visages, les mêmes noms, les mêmes lieux, les mêmes phrases reviennent de l’un à l’autre, comme les motifs d’une tapisserie que l’on aurait tissée dans un demi-sommeil.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

In contrast to Ernaux, who consciously rewrote, re-edited and reissued versions of the same story, Modiano suggests that this impulse is involuntary, the stories retelling themselves in various guises, each leading onwards in a never completed quest, propelled by their own internal force.\textsuperscript{9} Perhaps it is the blurred boundary between author and narrator, remembered fact and imagined fiction, that provokes this return to particular events, people and places, since

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[7] In ‘Fade-Out: Patterns of Inconclusion in Modiano’s Novels’ in Patrick Modiano ed. by John E. Flower, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp.223-38, Simon Kemp studies the narrative structure of Modiano’s texts and explores their tendency to ‘conclude without being conclusive’ (p.223).
\item[8] Modiano, Discours à l’Académie suédoise, pp.12-13. For a further example of Modiano’s amnesia, see Marie Desplechin’s interview for Le Monde, 4 March 2010, on the publication of Horizon (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), entitled ‘Patrick Modiano: “J’oublie ce que j’ai écrit. C’est comme une amnésie”’ in which the author laments, ‘Oui c’est toujours le même livre…. Ça ne peut pas être autrement…C’est difficile à expliquer…. L’impression qu’on ne peut pas faire autre chose’. In her article ‘Avis de recherche: Patrick Modiano’ in Europe, no. 1038 (2015), « Patrick Modiano » pp.41-52, Régine Robin discusses the relationship between memory and forgetting through a comparison of three recurrent characters and shows how this ‘éternel retour va bien au-delà d’un simple déjà-vu’ (p.51).
\item[9] It is worth noting an exception here. In 1995 La place de l’étoile (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) was published in a new edition with corrections. For a study of these, see Stéphanie Chaudier, “‘J’étais un vrai jeune homme” L’édition revue et corrigée de La Place de l’étoile’, Europe, no. 1038 (2015), « Patrick Modiano », pp.28-40.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the stories lie deep within Modiano’s own memory and resurface repeatedly to be re-examined. As with Ernaux, autobiographical elements underscore much of Modiano’s writing. At times the connection is overtly indicated, as in *récits* such as *Livret de famille* (1977), *Remise de peine* (1988) and *Fleurs de ruine* (1991), but it is just as surely present in the fictional young man roaming Paris in search of lost love, stable identity or an absent parent, central to so many of his novels.\(^{10}\) Until more recently, the author had always been reluctant to discuss his private life in interviews, and readers were left to decipher the outline of Modiano’s past from his fiction by paying attention to the recurrent themes, scenes and anxieties. In 2005, however, he published *Un Pedigree*, his ‘constat’ or ‘curriculum vitae’, charting his life up until he became a novelist, thereby confirming the biography his readers had already guessed.\(^{11}\) Ending the text at the beginning of his publishing career would suggest that he is licensing a reading of his subsequent works as semi-autobiographical or, at least, as possible realities. In his Nobel speech, Modiano attested to the fragmented and lonely childhood he experienced, entrusted to a series of quasi-strangers in constantly changing locations that he has not since been able to identify. His desire to write comes, he says, from a sense that ‘l’écriture et l’imaginaire pouvaient m’aider à résoudre enfin ces énigmes et ces mystères’.\(^{12}\) His motivation, then, is an origin quest but one in which the origin may never be knowable. In his work *Écritures du non-lieu, Topographies d’une impossible quête identitaire: Roman Gary, Patrick Modiano et Georges Perec*, Timo Obergöker examines the relationship between literature and l’oubli and, with reference to Serge Doubrovsky’s definition of autofiction in *Fils* (1977), suggests a possible genre of ‘roman des non-origines’.\(^{13}\) For Modiano, his novels became a way of writing

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himself into existence, a tangible record of his becoming, and so his regular readers recognise traces of the author each time a text opens on a man alone in a Parisian street, searching for his father, a friend or a former self. The young man, we have come to expect, will follow clues, make unusual acquaintances, and uncover further mysteries, but ultimately fail to find what he is looking for. Unlike Proust, for whom sensory experience awoke the past, Modiano’s quest unravels multiple layers of past without ever reaching a stable and recognisable point. This foreknowledge seems to matter little to Modiano fans, who greedily welcome his regular offerings, which implicitly suggests that they read for something other than plot. As with the works of Annie Ernaux, it is apparent that familiarity and repetition may bring something to the reader as well as to the writer and that, fundamentally, Modiano’s corpus of texts, in which each is only slightly different to the last, is an example of the Deleuzean recurrence and difference explored in this thesis.

In fact, Gilles Deleuze’s work, *L’image-temps*, contains a similar occurrence of Modianesque spatial location and temporal movement; it is what the philosopher terms, ‘l’image-movement’:

L’image-mouvement a deux faces, l’une par rapport à des objets dont elle fait varier la position relative, l’autre par rapport à un tout dont elle exprime un changement absolu. Les positions sont dans l’espace, mais le tout qui change est dans le temps.

Deleuze explains this idea further in relation to the medium of cinema by using the examples of framing and montage to demonstrate the two sides of the movement-image; the cinematographic frame (image) is turned towards the object and the montage (movement)

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14 ‘Il me semble, malheureusement, que la recherche du temps perdu ne peut plus se faire avec la force et la franchise de Marcel Proust. La société qu’il décrivait était encore stable, une société du XIXe siècle. La mémoire de Proust fait ressurgir le passé dans ses moindres détails, comme un tableau vivant. J’ai l’impression qu’aujourd’hui la mémoire est beaucoup moins sure d’elle-même et qu’elle doit lutter sans cesse contre l’amnésie et contre l’oubli. À cause de cette couche, de cette masse d’oubli qui recouvre tout, on ne parvient à capter que des fragments du passé, des traces interrompues, des destinées humaines fuyantes et presque insaisissables’. Modiano, *Discours à l’Académie suédoise*, p.30.

15 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps*, p.50.
expresses the ever-changing whole. It is from this that Deleuze derives his thesis that montage shows the ‘image du temps’ which is, nevertheless, an indirect representation of time, since it comes from the linking of one movement-image to another.

C’est pourquoi la liaison ne peut pas être une simple juxtaposition: le tout n’est pas plus une addition que le temps une succession de présents. Comme Eisenstein\(^\text{16}\) le répétait sans cesse, il faut que le montage procède par alternances, conflits, résolutions, résonances, bref toute une activité de sélection et de coordination, pour donner au temps sa véritable dimension, comme au tout sa consistance. Cette position de principe implique que l’image-mouvement soit elle-même au présent, et rien d’autre.\(^\text{17}\)

This is a reminder of the non-linear progression of time and its transformative power, as Deleuze points out that the frame-montage relationship, or literally the image-movement pairing, is interdependent, with each frame or montage having a reciprocal and retrospective influence on the next. ‘De ce point de vue, le temps dépend du mouvement lui-même et lui appartient’.\(^\text{18}\) But it is also worth noting Deleuze’s emphasis on the present as the backdrop for this time-space relationship.

I would argue that Patrick Modiano’s novels reflect just this type of montage, with his narratives blending frames and scenes with even greater fluidity than the halting sequencing of film.\(^\text{19}\) As Eisenstein suggests, Modiano’s texts develop through the use of resonance and resolution ‘pour donner au temps sa véritable dimension’ and show time as a creative force in which the past, encapsulated but unrestricted in the present, is being constantly rewritten.

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\(^\text{16}\) The Russian director Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) is credited with introducing and developing the concept of ‘montage’, the juxtaposing of two images to produce a new idea.

\(^\text{17}\) Deleuze, L’image-temps, p.51.

\(^\text{18}\) Deleuze, L’image-temps, p.51.

\(^\text{19}\) Even in Deleuze’s extensive work on cinema it is difficult to reconcile the fundamentally static nature of the art with the dynamics of time. Film ultimately divides time and motion into single shots which pass through the projector at a rate of 25 frames a second, thereby giving the illusion of movement. In his article ‘La place de l’écran: Cinéma et intériorité dans la pratique narrative de Modiano’, French Cultural Studies, 24 (4) (2012), 309-318, p.309, Colin Nettlebeck suggests that, ‘Familier du cinéma et de ses techniques, Modiano, tout le long de son œuvre, les intègre dans sa pratique d’écrivain, tant sur le plan thématique que sur le plan stylistique’. This reflects Modiano’s collaborations with Louis Malle on the screenplay of the 1974 film Lacombe Lucien, with Pascal Aubier on Le fils de Gascogne in 1995 and with Jean-Paul Rappeneau on Bon Voyage in 2003 and several of his novels have been adapted for screen, including Une jeunesse, directed by Moshé Mizrahi in 1983 and Des gens qui passent, directed by Alain Nahum in 2009.
Again, literature and language mirror this dynamic, creative process, and I will continue to discuss narrative models of time and space in this chapter. Since the passage of time is a process of change, it is important to be aware that these texts deal with becoming and difference rather than being and identity, a fact that is complicated by the author’s search for his origin.

Modiano’s freedom of movement through time allows him to fictionalise biographies, to add to lives already lived and to change the past as he writes. This liberty presupposes not only the cyclical or spiralling pattern of time already identified, but ‘la possibilité pour deux ou plusieurs événements d’entrer dans une perception unique et instantanée’.20 Chapter One intimated that it is this simultaneity that makes memory possible, but, in fact, a closer study of simultaneity raises new questions about memory. Memory suggests temporal distance, while simultaneity indicates coexistence: if the past is always present, is memory, in fact, the ‘souvenir du présent’?

**Fleurs de ruine**

As with Annie Ernaux, links can be drawn between different Modiano texts because of the playful cross-referencing and intertextuality which encourage us to read each individual work as part of a larger unified whole. Within the corpus, smaller groups can be identified; the author’s first three works, for example, focus explicitly on the historical past, specifically the Occupation. Other groups are collected around characters such as Pacheco or Jaqueline, who crop up in more than one text as shown later.21 So already we have multiple examples of repetition as well as the impression of an oeuvre united through echoes and refrains. *Fleurs de ruine* resounds with familiar motifs and stories and examines the relationship between time and space by knitting fragmented stories into a single coherent text which leaves the reader with a

sense of fusion and recurrence. The Modiano reader is used to looking for connections between scenes and characters, since most of the author’s works in some way pervert the form of the detective novel. The detective fiction genre itself depends on time-space relations and often follows a circular pattern, shifting backwards and forwards in time, telling a story in retrospect and playing a game of hide and seek in the spatial setting for which the city, with its possibility of anonymity, is perfect.22

Ostensibly, the récit of Fleurs de ruine springs from a Romeo and Juliet style tragedy, ‘24 avril 1933. Deux jeunes époux se suicident pour des raisons mystérieuses’ (p.13). The narrator, writing in the 1990s and remembering his time in Paris in the 1960s, sets about unravelling the mystery. In true Modianesque fashion, the mystery is never solved, indeed no mystery ever really exists since the deaths were undoubtedly self-inflicted, and all interest in the doomed couple dissipates well before the end of the book. The narrator, however, focuses his energies on locating a red elevator mentioned by the dying Mme T., and this search becomes the starting point for diverse and divergent stories in which the three eras merge. Fleurs de ruine blends the different decades so competently that the fiction appears to completely destroy the gaps between the years, leaving a gently poetic text in which the past is ever present. As Akane Kawakami writes in A Self-Conscious Art: Patrick Modiano’s Postmodern Fictions, Modiano’s novels are full of dates. The narrators seem to take much pleasure in specifying precisely when certain events took place, whether in their own lives or in someone else’s. Chapters and paragraphs frequently start with a date reference […] Yet a reading of a Modiano novel leaves the reader with the overall impression that chronology, although definitely there, is curiously redundant. […] It is as if the different

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chronological levels are situated on a single plane, on which they enjoy an unhierarchical and interdependent existence.23

Like Passion simple, Fleurs de ruine is broken down, not into numbered chapters, but into blocks of prose separated by spaces on the page. The blocks of text are longer than those in Passion simple and their succession is apparently less arbitrary, with one leading into the next, increasing the number of storylines, characters or clues to provide a sense of progression, although also of divergence and incompletion. As the thread of the original story disappears, new, more complex tales develop and carry the reader forward. Mysteries, slight or profound, fascinate Modiano and his narrators. An overheard conversation, a newspaper cutting, or simply an unusual name is enough to trigger an investigation and lead both narrator and reader off in unexpected directions. The narrative of Fleurs de ruine is composed of at least six different stories, each mirroring the original premise by doubling couples or raising new questions of identity. The most complete and coherent of these tales is the story of Philippe de Pacheco. Pacheco is a recurrent character in Modiano’s novels, having previously appeared in Dimanches d’août, Une jeunesse and Voyage de noces, but his true identity is uncertain.24 The narrator’s search for the real Pacheco makes up the central chunk of Fleurs de ruine and creates a mise en abyme, a tale within the tale which has all the hallmarks of a Modiano novel, with the young detective unearthing letters and documents, diligently following leads and creating colourful hypotheses from flimsy clues. It is crammed with the paraphernalia of a crime story; there is an abandoned suitcase, a stolen alias, exotic locations and even some late-night suspect-

24 Patrick Modiano, Dimanches d’août (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), Une jeunesse (Paris: Gallimard, 1981). As will be seen, Modiano has a Balzacian habit of using the same characters in different texts, reinforcing the links between these texts and the overall effect of a united oeuvre. Jacqueline is an important and sometimes elusive companion who appears repeatedly in various guises, and Pagnon, who is mentioned briefly here, turns up in at least five other novels. Of course, the most consistently recurrent character is the narrator himself, who is clearly a shadow of the author. For a more detailed study, see Raymond Bach’s essay ‘Recurring Characters in Modiano’s Oeuvre’ in Paradigms of Memory; The Occupation and Other His/stories in the Novels of Patrick Modiano, ed. by Martine Guyot-Bender and William Vanderwolk (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), pp.165-180.
tailing. It also recalls the themes of identity and of the Occupation, which bring in another familiar though shadowy story, that of Modiano’s father, so that two quests dovetail – that of the narrator and the compelling search of the author himself.

Among the other tales being told is the story of the narrator’s relationship with Jacqueline. As previously stated, Jacqueline is a familiar character in these novels and here it is possible to piece together her relationship with the narrator, which, a year later, crops up again, fictionalised in *Un Cirque passe*. Jacqueline’s story is told in reverse. She slips into the *récit* at the very beginning, suitably enigmatic and memorable – ‘J’aurais pu marcher jusqu’au Val-de-Grâce, dans cette zone paisible où nous nous étions cachés, Jacqueline et moi, pour que le marquis n’ait plus aucune chance de la rencontrer’ (p.12) – but the reason why the pair are running from the marquis is not revealed until the closing section of the text on page 127. These stories occupy different eras, and are united in the narrator’s reminiscences as he wanders around Paris in the winter of 1989-90. The stories criss-cross in and out of one another so that the narrator’s acquaintance with Pacheco in the 1960s links him tenuously to the 1933 tragedy. The first-person narrator directs the reader in ways discussed in Chapter Two but, instead of framing and limiting the time and space of the novel like the narrative *je* of *Passion simple*, the Modianesque narrator is a disembodied shifting voice. The *je* who speaks could one moment be that of a teenaged boy, and the next, the established author with children of his own. This meandering opens up the text to wide temporal and spatial parameters.

Where, with Ernaux, there was a weight of claustrophobia and stasis, with Modiano a sense of possibility and movement emerges.


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Saint-Jacques où j’allais après avoir assisté à une séance de cinéma, au Studio des Ursulines.26

The reader enters the text at a present moment, but one that vibrates with repetition, since Sunday is a recurrent motif in Modiano’s fictions and represents an indefinite point of closure and of new beginnings, an idea which is paralleled in the broader temporal indicator, November – a dark, dead time. The winter also anticipates the coming of spring and the possibility of rebirth.27 The imperfect tense of the second half of the first sentence forces us to correct the assumption of the first and we are thrown back to a particular day in the past. The space of the long wall is taken up in the lazy vowels of ‘longeais’ and in its suggested extension. Then, after a brief shift to the present tense, we are directed even further back in time and guided into the realm of memory. Modiano has carefully chosen the geography of his opening paragraph, enjoying the exotically long place-names, luxuriating in the images they conjure up and playing with the vertical and horizontal lines they draw through the hyphenation, the pointing sword, the steeple and the raised steps. The opening scene is one of spatial and temporal movement but a pattern is not immediately apparent, so we need to look more closely at how one scene leads into the next. With Passion simple this was a relatively easy task since scenes appeared as single, fixed units. In the case of Fleurs de ruine, however, the constant motion and slippages between stories and their temporal settings complicates the exercise. Let us take an example:

26 Modiano, Fleurs de ruine, p.11.
27 The récit opens on a Sunday and returns frequently to it as a stabilising marker. The critic Paul Gellings has calculated that the narrative ends on a Monday, thereby reinforcing the idea of new beginnings, and looks at patterns of recurrence in his work Poésie et mythe dans l’oeuvre de Patrick Modiano; le fardeau du nomade (Paris: Lettre modernes; Minard, 2000). The narrator of Fleurs de ruine first sees Jacqueline on a Sunday and returns to a particular place every Sunday thereafter, hoping to see her again. Even Pacheco turns up mostly on Sundays, ‘Un dimanche soir, il était seul à la cafétéria et ils nous avait invités, Jacqueline et moi, à déguster un pan-bagnat et une tarte aux pommes’(p.59) and, ‘Il réapparut, un dimanche soir, à la cafétéria de la Cité’ (p.68). The dominance of the day is made all the more obvious by the omission of any other weekday in the text. In L’Herbe des nuits, Modiano’s narrator tells us, ‘les dimanches, surtout en fin d’après-midi, et si vous êtes seul, ouvrent une brèche dans le temps’ (p.14).
Gisèle T., avant de succomber à ses blessures, avait pu parler, mais ses souvenirs étaient vagues. Oui, ils avaient rencontré, à Montparnasse, deux femmes, deux inconnues dont elle ne savait rien... Et celles-ci les avaient entraînés au Perreux, dans un dancing où deux hommes s’étaient joints à eux. Puis ils étaient allés dans une maison où il y avait un ascenseur rouge.

Ce soir, je marche sur leurs pas dans un quartier maussade que la tour Montparnasse voile de deuil. Pendant la journée, elle cache le soleil et projette son ombre sur le boulevard Edgar-Quinet et les rues avoisinantes. Je laisse derrière moi la Coupole que l’on est en train d’écraser sous une façade de béton. J’ai peine à croire que Montparnasse connut jadis une vie nocturne...


La chambre voisine de la mienne était occupée par un homme d’environ trente-cinq ans, un blond que je croisais dans le couloir et avec lequel j’avais fini par lier connaissance. Son nom? Quelque chose comme Devez ou Duvelz.28

Everything here is in flux, nothing is stable, everything is dull, gloomy and precarious, the only strong flash of colour being the red elevator. Mme T.’s memory of the fateful night is vague, and the narrator’s own reveries, introduced by suspension points, are a series of questions answered with estimated dates and approximate names, the use of the conditional tense further emphasising the uncertainty. We pass from 1933 to 1965 by way of 1990 and from the story of the double suicide to an anecdote involving Jacqueline and Duvelz – or Devez – which leads us eventually to an apartment in 19 du boulevard Raspail from which the narrator and his girlfriend later escape, ‘nous avons descendu l’escalier. Tout à l’heure, nous avions pris l’ascenseur, mais il n’était pas rouge, comme celui dont avait parlé Gisèle T.’(p.24), which brings us back to where we began.29

The second paragraph vacillates between day and night, although the distinction is blurred with the quartier immersed in an eternal dusk. The scene has elevation and extension. A progressive path is traced beyond the arch of the Coupole, with the diagonal lines of the

28 Modiano, Fleurs de ruine, p.18.
29 Here is another example of rhyme and repetition within the text, as this phrase is taken up again at the end of the section on page 27. ‘Mais où pouvait bien être – se demandait-on dans l’article – la maison à l’ascenseur rouge dont avait parlé Gisèle T.?’
shadow projecting from the tower and the levelling of the verb ‘écraser’. There is also the layering of time in the footsteps the narrator is following. The area of Montparnasse is detached and defined as a unit by its juxtaposition with the Duvelz-Devez story which occupies a time anterior to ‘mon départ pour Vienne’. Even in the brief sentence introducing the stranger there are at least three spatio-temporal markers – ‘chambre voisine’, ‘je croisais dans le couloir’ and ‘j’ai fini par’ – indicating an implied extension of time. The movement between these scenes is directed by the proximity of their spatial location, which unites the disparate time frames. Almost sixty years pass between the first two paragraphs, and the transition is abruptly stated in ‘Ce soir’, but the two scenes are related by the physical path walked by both Gisèle T. and the narrator. What follows is a memory, eased into through the suspension points and becoming gradually more specific as the narrator focuses his description from ‘quartier’ to street to room. And so the pattern continues, with temporal leaps confined within spatial boundaries. Within this coherent narrative, however, individual stories are told in different ways; the tragedy of M et Mme T. is told in cyclic snatches full of repeated facts and phrases that, in the end, reveal nothing new, Jacqueline’s story is recounted in reverse, and only the Pacheco mystery is told in an (interrupted) linear form. It becomes apparent that, if we are looking for fixed points with which to orientate ourselves in the text, we must look to the space of the city on to which the story is mapped.

Paris is rich in associations for Modiano. The Left Bank, for example, evokes memories of his childhood (p.38), while just across the river, via le pont des Arts, he feels the relief and freedom of his twenties (p.88). In many of his works, particularly his early novels, place-names are carefully used to raise ghosts of the Occupation, and the mythic echoes of monuments such
as Montparnasse are evoked.\textsuperscript{30} Aware of the importance the author attaches to place, we could follow the text and trace his path but it soon becomes apparent that, in \textit{Fleurs de ruine}, place is important less as a geographical location than as a temporal one. Each café or street corner recalls a person or event which leads the narrator deeper into Paris and further into the past. Characters are frequently introduced alongside their associated locations, ‘J’ai connu Pacheco à la Cité universitaire’ (p.56) or ‘J’avais connu Jacqueline un dimanche soir, à Paris, dans le XVIe’ (p.127). The narrator’s past is mapped out on the city and, by returning to a specific place, memories come spontaneously flooding back as if all past actions remain locked at a physically located point. The search for the red elevator may be the initial motivation in the text, but it is in wandering through the city streets that the most exciting and intricate windings of past and present take place and drive the text. Aimless roaming of Parisian districts is typical of Modiano’s narrators. Jobless and often friendless, the protagonist usually whiles away the evening hours by tracing a haphazard path through the capital. It is a habit the narrator of \textit{Fleurs de ruine} has displayed since adolescence, and so we find the familiar formula several times; here at the age of fourteen having just run away from school, ‘Je ne suis pas allé au cinéma, ce soir-là. Je me suis promené dans le quartier’ (p.97), and some years later: ‘Après avoir quitté l’appartement de Simone Cordier, je n’ai pas toute de suite pris le métro à la station Boissière. Il faisait nuit et je me suis promené au hasard dans le quartier’ (p.107).

\textit{L’Herbe de nuit} (2012) revisits themes and places from this earlier work. Montparnasse is the backdrop and this time Aghamouri is the shadowy outsider, a Moroccan living at the Cité universitaire without ever being a student, the flash of red is the old Lancia driven by Paul Chastagnier, and Dannie is the girl the narrator meets and follows on ramblings through the

\textsuperscript{30} ‘These names have multiple functions as signposts for the detective to follow, as indicators of extra-textual historical events and as symbols of a universe at once personal and mythic, real and romanesque’. William VanderWolk, \textit{Rewriting the Past: Memory, History and Narrative in the Novels of Patrick Modiano} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p.68. For an examination of the importance of Parisian districts in Modiano’s work, see too Manet van Montfrans, ‘Dante chez Modiano: une divine comédie à Paris’, \textit{RELIEF} 2 (1) (2008), 1-21.
The narrator, Jean, is never sure of her true identity. Is she Mireille Sampierry, is she using false documents, is she passing herself off as Aghamouri’s wife? Times, addresses, places reappear: ‘Un dimanche après-midi, j’étais seul avec Dannie, au bas de la rue d’Odessa. La pluie commençait à tomber et nous nous étions réfugiés dans le hall du cinéma Montparnasse’ (p.24). And one day she disappears and he can no longer locate some of the places they visited. Many years later, retracing his steps, he believes that his physical movement will lead to a temporal transformation: ‘Ce soir, je me dis que je vais prendre le métro jusqu’à Jussieu. À mesure que les stations défileront, je remonterai le cours du temps. Je retrouverai Aghamouri assis à la même table près du zinc’ (p.99). The city is recognisably Paris, and it is the narrator’s movement across the city that allows him to access memories and former times.

The wandering protagonist is reminiscent of Rousseau and, more directly, Baudelaire. The title of the Fleurs de ruine contains an homage to the poet, and there is a flâneur, walking dark, shadowy streets which evoke Baudelaire’s Tableaux Parisiens. The connection adds a further layer of the past to the narrative and strengthens the feeling of continuity and repetition. It is another transposition, of one poet on to another, a build-up of footsteps and texts with the quiet lines of ‘Le Cygne’ beneath Modiano’s prose.31 And so Paris seems to unite all past events within its boundaries; the city is spatially limited but temporally extensive.

Within this eternal Paris, the impression of constancy is offset by a sense of progression derived from the narrator’s constant motion. These meanderings do not lead to a fixed destination, but melt into new stories which curl and twist across time and unfold in fragmented

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stages. The directions given are not meant to guide the reader through a mental map; the
detective game here is not to unscramble the maze, but to follow the path through the narrator’s
history. It is a personal topography that directs the text. However, paradoxically, the detailed
directions also serve the function of exoticising the city and disorientating the reader. The
excessive sketching of itineraries through Paris, instead of carrying the reader along, creates a
dislocating haze of place-names. The directions are so detailed that they lose their significance
and their relationship to actual locations, and develop a sense of movement without direction.

Après Charléty, la Cité universitaire, et à droite le parc Montsouris. Au début de la rue
qui longeait le parc, dans un immeuble aux grandes baies vitrées, avait habité l’aviateur
Jean Mermoz. L’ombre de Mermoz et la SNECMA – une usine de moteurs d’avion – ont
lié dans mon esprit le quartier à l’aéroport d’aéroport d’Orly, tout proche, et aux pistes
d’atterrissage de Villacoublay, de Buc et Toussus-le-Noble.

Des restaurants presque campagnards. En face de l’immeuble où revenait Mermoz
entre deux vols de l’Aéropostale, le Chalet du Lac. La terrasse s’ouvrait sur le parc
Montsouris. Et, plus bas, au coin de l’avenue Reille, une petite maison au jardin
semé de graviers. L’été, l’on y disposait des tables et l’on dinait sous une
tonnelle.\footnote{Modiano, \textit{Fleurs de ruine}, pp.52-3.}

It is the images that are thrown up that become important, not the plotting of buildings along a
street. At times, as with \textit{Passion simple}, these passages break down further and we get a list
which, on the page, has the formal style of a poem.

Voilà ce qu’on découvrait sous ses arches, à l’ombre des plantes de l’avenue:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Laboratoire de l’Armanite
  \item Le Garage des Voûtes
  \item Peyremorte
  \item Corrado Casadei
  \item Le Dispersaire Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes
  \item Dell’ Aversano
  \item La Régence, fabrique de meubles
  \item Les Marbes français
  \item Le Café Bosc
  \item Alligator, Ghesquière et Cie
  \item Sava-Autos
  \item Tréfilerie Daumesnil
  \item Le Café Labatie
\end{itemize}
Here we enjoy the sonority and rhythm of the names. The melody of Laboratoire de l’Armanite or Corrado Casadei and the litany of shop, cafes and streets builds up a song of the city. We get a graphic representation of the serpentine quality of the text and a reminder of Modiano’s emphasis on the visual.\textsuperscript{34} There is also here a hint at the exoticism of Paris which directs the reader beyond the boundaries of the capital.

In ways reminiscent of \textit{La Ronde de nuit} and \textit{La place de l’étoile}, Modiano transforms Paris from a familiar city into one of adventure.\textsuperscript{35} In order to do so, he first bathes the city in shadow from which strangers can appear, and then highlights the exotic and the curious. A deserted \textit{boulevard Jourdan} points east, gifts arrive from Morocco, suburbs take on a Roman atmosphere, and whole \textit{quartiers} detach themselves from the city to exist in virtual isolation.

The city is crowded with people of unknown origins and shifting identities, possible criminals and wealthy playboys.

Il y régnait un silence et une demi-pénombre de grotte marine, les après-midi de juillet où la canicule vidait les rues de la butte Montmartre. Les fenêtres aux vitraux multicolores réfractaient les rayons de soleil sur les murs blancs et les boiseries sombres. San Cristobel... Le nom d’une île de la mer des Caraïbes, du côté de la Barbade et de la Jamaïque ? Montmartre aussi est une île que je n’ai pas revue depuis une quinzaine d’années. Je l’ai laissée loin derrière moi, intacte, dans l’azur de temps...

Rien n’a changé : l’odeur de peinture fraîche de la maison, et la rue de l’Orient qui m’évoquera toujours les rues en pente de Sidi-Bou-Saïd.

C’est avec la Danoise, le soir de ma fugue du collège, que je suis allé pour la première fois au San Cristobel. Nous étions assis à une table du fond, près des vitraux.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Modiano, \textit{Fleurs de ruine}, p.29.
\textsuperscript{34} As well as frequent references to photography and film in Modiano’s novels, the author has, at times, brought the visual directly into his texts with graphic works such as \textit{Memory Lane}, (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) illustrated by Pierre Le-Tan and his books for children, including \textit{Catherine Certitude} (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), illustrated by Sempé. For a study of memory, image and illustration, see Christian Donadille, ‘Entre chien et loup: Incertitude de l’apparence et écriture du silence dans les œuvres illustrées et les images textuelles de Patrick Modiano’, \textit{French Cultural Studies} 23 (4) (2012), 329-340.
\textsuperscript{35} Patrick Modiano, \textit{La Ronde de nuit} (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).
\textsuperscript{36} Modiano, \textit{Fleurs de ruine}, pp.93-94.
Paris is both unique and multiple, familiar and exotic, fixed and dislocated. It hides secrets and opens up to the foreign; it manages to contain the narrative and allow for all its adventure. The city provides a relatively stable network and the geographic constancy allows the narrator to breach the boundaries of time. In *L’Herbe des nuits*, the narrator, Jean, describes it as instantaneous:

À l’instant où je passais devant le grand immeuble blanc et beige sale du 11, rue d’Odessa – je marchais sur le trottoir d’en face, celui de droite – j’ai senti une sorte de déclic, ce léger vertige qui vous prend chaque fois justement qu’une brèche s’ouvre dans le temps. Je restais immobile à fixer les façades de l’immeuble qui entouraient la petite cour.37

Even when *quartiers* evolve and buildings are demolished, the narrator can conjure up who and what once inhabited the site, past events remain intact and accessible.

**Place**

In *Getting back into Place* Edward Casey tells us that place is a space that has gained history. Place requires duration, tradition and memory, and must be habitable, all of which suggests a certain stability. We will return later to the idea of ‘passing through’ and ‘implacement’ but will first look at the collective places in Modiano’s work. While *Fleurs de ruine* is a text teeming with dates and place-names, strangely, this gives the overall impression of a single time and space, an eternal Paris, an image that evokes stability rather than change. For Modiano, fixed geographical spaces are the guardians of the past, and changes in the landscape can trouble memory. By retracing paths through the city, Modiano believes he can resurrect the dead and access his pre-history, ‘On se dit qu’au moins les lieux gardent une légère empreinte des personnes qui les ont habités’.38

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38 Modiano, *Dora Bruder*, p.28.
The above quotation comes from the beginning of *Dora Bruder*, a text that reconstructs the life of a young Jewish runaway in Occupied France. In this fictionalised biography, the author relies on geographical points to recreate the girl’s history. Modiano adopts her story after reading her description in an old edition of *Paris-Soir*, under the appropriate rubric ‘D’hui à aujourd’hui’. With his usual blend of documentary detective work and sympathetic imagination, he spends years on the trail of the lost child: tracking the immigration of her parents to Paris, her birth and schooling, her truancy and escape and eventually her capture, deportation and death. His simultaneous perception of time means that he is witness to not only his own memories, but the memories of others, memories that precede his birth and that endure in the fabric of the city. Johnnie Gratton, building on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory as ‘the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth’ and on Rancière’s *anachronie*, explored further in Régine Robin’s *La Mémoire saturée* (2003), suggests that Modiano’s, or at least his narrators’, ability to slip into pasts that predate his own existence is perhaps a form of paramemory, beyond explanation or proof. In this way his novel reconstructs not only Dora’s identity but also a specific period in French history.\(^39\) Much has already been written on Modiano’s depiction of the Occupation and of his search through his father’s past so I will not elaborate on his historiography but will instead look at the relationships between memory, place and simultaneity.\(^40\) We have so far identified some difficulties here and must address the following questions: is place fixed and stable, do memories reside in places, are memory and simultaneity one and the same thing?


It would appear at first that, for Modiano, place is indeed stable and, quite literally, concrete. History is engraved on to buildings and streets and locked into the stone so that the city becomes a monument, visual and tangible evidence of its past. The author meticulously notes urban and architectural changes over the half century since the war but, interestingly, these changes do not in any way harm or alter the memory. Physical places may allow access to memory, but memory cannot reside only in these spaces since, even in their absence, the memory remains. Place may be a threshold between moments in time, but it does not contain or restrict the movement of memory. This can be explored further through a close reading of *Dora Bruder*.

In the text Modiano builds his connection with Dora Bruder geographically, since the trigger for his obsession with the girl is the address printed with her description, ‘« Adresser toutes indications à M. et Madame Bruder, 41 boulevard Ornano, Paris. » Ce quartier du boulevard Ornano, je le connais depuis longtemps’, he begins and, writing in the 1990s, he remembers his childhood visits to the markets with his mother and, later, as a youth, his own merging with that landscape, ‘Janvier 1965. La nuit tombait vers six heures sur le carrefour du boulevard Ornano et de la rue Championnet. Je n’étais rien, je me confondais avec ce crépuscule, ces rues’. He thinks that the parallels between his and Dora’s geography are not coincidental and that he was following her path long before he knew her name. Walking the streets of Paris Modiano rediscovers Dora, sometimes following her ghost, sometimes morphing into her; the narrator retraces her journey to school but it is Dora who emerges from the metro station:

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41 ‘La rue Bachelet où habitaient Cécile et Ernest Bruder au moment de leur mariage est une toute petite rue sur la pente sud de Montmartre. Le 17 était un hôtel où Ernest Bruder se réfugia sans doute à son retour de la Légion. Je suppose que c’est là qu’il a connu Cécile. Il y avait encore à cette adresse un «café-hôtel» en 1964. Depuis, un immeuble a été construit à l’emplacement du 17 et du 15. Il porte seulement le numéro 15. On a jugé plus simple de ne garder qu’un seul numéro’. *Dora Bruder* p.27. See also pages 11, 19.
42 Ibid., pp.7-8. The narrator here disintegrates and merges with the place and the moment in ways which will be explored further in Chapter 5.
Je regarde le plan du métro et j’essaye d’imaginer le trajet qu’elle suivait. Pour éviter de trop nombreux changements de lignes, le plus simple était de prendre le métro à Nation, qui était assez proche du pensionnat. Direction Pont de Sèvres. Changement à Strasbourg-Saint-Denis. Direction Porte de Clignancourt. Elle descendait à Simplon, juste en face du cinéma et de l’hôtel.43

As we pass from the first to third person pronoun we also move from 1996 to 1940, and the certainty of the imperfect verb in the last line jolts the narrative from speculation to fact. However, the narrator’s younger self also haunts these subways:

Vingt ans plus tard, je prenais souvent le métro à Simplon. C’était toujours vers dix heures du soir. La station était déserte à cette heure-là et les rames ne venaient qu’à de longs intervalles.
Elle aussi devait suivre le même chemin de retour, le dimanche, en fin d’après-midi.44

so that, simultaneously, we perceive three overlapping moments. Modiano is aware not only of the traces left by others, but of the traces he continues to leave as he doubles back on himself over time. With detective-like precision, the narrator endeavours to rebuild Dora’s environment but his quest is complicated by the fact that people like Dora, Jews in Occupied France, disappeared, leaving no trace at all. This, in turn, presents Modiano with a duty of memory.45

Ce sont des personnes qui laissent peu de traces derrière elles. Presque des anonymes. Elles ne se détachent pas de certaines rues de Paris, de certains paysages de banlieue, où j’ai découvert, par hasard, qu’elles avaient habité. Ce que l’on sait d’elles se résume souvent à une simple adresse. Et cette précision topographique contraste avec ce que l’on ignorera pour toujours de leur vie – ce blanc, ce bloc d’inconnu et de silence. […]

On se dit qu’au moins les lieux gardent une légère empreinte des personnes qui les ont habités. Empreinte : marque en creux ou en relief. Pour Ernest et Cécile Bruder, pour Dora, je dirai : en creux. J’ai ressenti une impression d’absence et de vide, chaque fois que je me suis trouvé dans un endroit où ils avaient vécu.46

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43 Modiano, *Dora Bruder*, p.45.
44 Ibid., p.45.
45 For a study of Modiano’s identity search with emphasis on his Jewish heritage, see Timo Obergöker, *Écritures de non-lieu: Topographies d’une impossible quête identitaire: Romain Gary, Patrick Modiano and Georges Perec*.
46 Modiano, *Dora Bruder*, pp.28-29.
It is because of this very void that Modiano sets about reintroducing Dora into the places she visited, rubbing her story into the streets of Paris and uncovering an imprint of her life. Since Dora herself, erased from history, cannot be sensed in the fabric of the city, Modiano proposes that this very absence tells a story and makes itself felt. He suggests that, even before he was aware of Dora’s existence, he felt shivers as he passed through certain places as if he had entered, ‘la zone la plus obscure de Paris’ (p.29). Once again we are faced with the complication of what is there and what is not there, where streets have been altered and premises reassigned. Modiano’s knowledge of what once occupied a site is enough to reconnect the past to the present; the author’s urban memory fills the gaps in certain streets. Where buildings have been razed, for example, the destruction hides not the past, but the shame of it, not only of World War II but also of the events in Algeria.47

The perceived necessity to destroy places in order to erase memories is testament to the belief that place and memory go hand-in-hand. Debates over the preservation or renovation of sites of human tragedy or atrocity hinge on this belief, but neither visual monuments nor physical

47 For the contemporaries Ernaux and Modiano, the shadow of the Algerian war is present in numerous works, at times discreetly alluded to and, at others, more explicitly referenced or indeed, as in the case of Passion simple, conspicuous by its absence.
48 Modiano, Dora Bruder, pp.130-31.
gaps truly alter the memory. Modiano shows that, while places may be an aid in reconstructing memory, memory exists despite and beyond place. This therefore reaffirms the contradiction of Casey’s predominance of place over time and space first posited in Chapter One. Place depends on a relationship between time and space and not vice versa. Here, however, are two opposites: the place and the void, and memory and forgetting.

Modiano’s text, indeed all his texts, are full of typographical and narrative blanks. Like Ernaux, the fragmentary nature of his novels reflects a rejection of linear narrative, and the meandering stories he tells parallel the confusing human experience of time. In *Dora Bruder* the voids are often inescapable, and the absences speak for themselves. As already seen in Ernaux’s work, absence and presence can often be reversed and here, in *Dora Bruder*, the eponymous heroine fills a gap in Modiano’s own story. The author’s obsessive pursuit of Dora stems not only from coincidences of geography but from a desire to know his father who, himself a Jew, spent the war years in Paris. Distanced from his father since adolescence, Modiano now feels the need to construct his father’s past in order to build his own identity and, through repetition of an anecdote of his father’s arrest and escape in February 1941, Modiano tries to retrieve memories that are not even his. This snapshot of his father’s life sparked Modiano’s earliest novels and is one that is repeated here when a young girl, carted off by police at the same time as the author’s father, takes on the face of Dora Bruder. Dora’s instability as a character allows her to become a link between father and son and a building block in the reconstruction of Modiano’s identity, here, potentially, as her brother, *Bruder*. Once again, spatial blanks do not hinder memory, neither in the existence or destruction of buildings nor in the presence or absence of a person. Dora’s presence is symbolic on another level as well: she becomes an Everywoman, a representation of many lost pasts, and Modiano
embraces a duty of memory. The author tells us that, without his testimony, no trace would remain of Dora or the other forgotten Jews deported from France, so he writes her into existence, creating her memory. This is a theme the author takes up again in the preface to Hélène Berr, Journal (2008), where he attempts to accompany the ghost of the eponymous young woman through the streets of Paris. Grateful for the testimony of her intimate diary, he wonders if she had had a presentiment of what might come to pass: ‘Ou craignait-elle que sa voix soit étouffée comme celles de millions de personnes massacrées sans laisser des traces? Au seuil de ce livre, il faut se taire maintenant, écouter la voix d’Hélène et marcher à ses côtés’.50

The importance of the written word is twofold. Modiano reconstructs Dora’s past from a paper-trail unearthed over years of investigation. Documents and scraps of official evidence exist which provide the author with the basis of his story. His initial discovery of Dora Bruder came from a newspaper cutting which, in itself, exemplifies the transformative power of recurrence. Language, like time, is a process of différenciation, with each change altering all that has gone before. A word repeated in a new context will change the meaning of that word but also influence other instances in which that word appeared. Our understanding of a word is made up of all the contexts in which we encountered that word, and this understanding colours our perception of that word in the future. A very basic example of this repetition and retrospective change occurs in the use of the phrase ‘D’hier à aujourd’hui’. It appears in the opening sentence as the rubric under which Dora’s description is printed in the newspaper and seems nothing more than a title, a constant, insignificant in its familiarity. When the phrase occurs again, further into the novel, without its distinguishing quotation marks, it has taken on a different meaning. Now aware of the superimpositions of time in the text, and of Modiano’s

blending of past and present, ‘d’hier à aujourd’hui’ has broadened and no longer refers to faits divers but has swollen to include decades. It also, however, triggers a memory and deflects the reader back towards its earlier occurrence which, in turn, assumes a prophetic quality.

Modiano’s investigation progresses as he uncovers identity cards and police records, birth certificates and deportation lists proving that Dora’s existence has been logged bureaucratically. The author picks up clues in diverse archives and unearths traces of Dora in dry documents. Buried among so many names, these signs of life are bereft of story; it is only in the juxtaposition of these words that a narrative unfurls. Of course, Modiano’s book adds to the paper pile and brings another version to the layers of stories tramping over familiar territory but each slightly altering the literary landscape. Each repetition is a rewriting of the past, and the limits of the truth no longer matter since any telling adds to the history and a story becomes the story, constantly renewed and open to the future. Movement is required to breathe life into Dora’s story, through the investigation, the physical retracing of her steps, the act of writing and the flow of the narrative. If for Ernaux duration is associated with loss, perhaps for Modiano stasis is related to death.

The narrative of Fleurs de ruine attests to a belief in the interconnectedness of all things. It plays on the strange coincidences that bring people together as seen in the criss-crossings that link the narrator in 1990, through his chance encounter with Pacheco in the sixties, to Urbain T. in 1933, a character whose name not only reflects the metropolitan theme of the text but sketches a picture of the person in a Dickensian mode. The past appears to be constantly present, so close beneath the surface of every moment that it is easily recalled and made to flow simultaneously with the present, ensuring that the solitary stroller is never actually alone but quietly accompanied by figures from his past. Time, for Modiano, is open, fluid and transparent,

but it also appears to incorporate both recurrence and progression.\textsuperscript{52} Progressive time is associated with change, and although Modiano understands that time only takes on meaning when we measure it, he, like Ernaux, displays a desire to arrest time. For Modiano, paradise is a timeless place:

La zone la plus mystérieuse s’étendait à gauche des jardins du Carrousel le long de l’aile sud qui se termine par le pavillon de Flore. [...] Là-haut, dans le renforcement que faisait l’aile du palais, une horloge. Et derrière l’horloge, la cellule du prisonnier de Zenda. Aucun des promeneurs des jardins du Carrousel ne s’aventurait dans cette allée. Nous jouions des après-midi entiers parmi les vasques et les statues brisées, les pierres et les feuilles mortes. Les aiguilles de l’horloge ne bougeaient pas. Elles indiquaient pour toujours cinq heures et demie. Ces aiguilles immobiles nous enveloppent d’un silence profond et apaisant. Il suffit de rester dans l’allée et plus rien de changera jamais.\textsuperscript{53}

This image becomes a motif which is repeated whenever the narrator wants to evoke a magical time, ‘Et je pense à Rome où le temps s’est arrêté comme l’horloge des jardins du Carrousel de mon enfance’. (p.123) It also, however, reinforces the idea of progression since, through contrast with fixed place and frozen time, it associates time and movement.

\textbf{Memory}

In the flux of time and space, stories can be lost or forgotten, so Modiano sets himself the task of recovering Dora’s past, which helps reconstruct a personal and collective memory. In \textit{The Making of Memory} Steven Rose explains that, ‘individual our memories may be, but they are structured, their very brain mechanisms affected, by the collective, social nature of the way we live as humans’.\textsuperscript{54} Collective memories help form our identity, they become part of us and, therefore, part of our individual memory. Rose admits that the act of writing can transform the way we conceive of memory and I would argue that narrative, once more, provides an excellent

\textsuperscript{52} ‘J’ai traversé les jardins. Était-ce la rencontre de ce fantôme? Les allées du Luxembourg où je n’avais pas marché depuis une éternité? Dans la lumière de fin d’après-midi, il m’a semblé que les années se confondaient et que le temps devenait transparent’, \textit{Fleurs de ruine}, p.43.

\textsuperscript{53} Modiano, \textit{Fleurs de ruine}, pp.90-91.

form for the expression of the dynamics of memory. ‘To understand memory’, Rose says, ‘We need also to understand the nature and dynamics of this process of transformation’.  

A video or audiotape, a written record, do more than just reinforce memory; they freeze it, and in imposing a fixed, linear sequence upon it, they simultaneously preserve it and prevent it from evolving and transforming itself with time.

So again we come back to the pivotal points of movement and change: memory is not static or fixed; it does not reside in spatial locations, but moves according to the same non-linear patterns as time. Attempts to freeze memory destroy its very nature, and I would suggest a comparison between the written documents Modiano unearths in his search for Dora Bruder and the non-linear, dynamic nature of the narrative which tells her story. Furthermore, Rose posits that memory possesses a transformative power. Surely this is none other than Bergson’s *élan vital* and the constant rebirth already discussed. Memory, therefore, appears to display many of the characteristics of duration. It is a spatio-temporal relationship in constant movement – so is memory separate from duration or simply another name for it?

Before answering this question, we should remember that Modiano links memory to place, to fixed spatial points, but these places are, in fact, *aides mémoires* rather than part of memory itself. The association of place and memory is a classical one: it is part of the art of remembering, a mnemonic device. According to Rose, the rules of memory are attributed to the poet Simonides of Ceos (c.556-468 BC), who proposed that the key to a good memory was (artificial) spatial order, for example, memorising the places in which people sat at a meal as a way of remembering the individuals themselves. It was a matter of ‘placing’ things, of fixing facts or ideas to concrete spatial markers. However, while a fixed order may be imposed, the

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55 Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory*, p.60.
56 Ibid., p.61.
act of recall requires movement – a mental journey across the environment you have mapped.

It is an act of re-assembling, re-membering, as Toni Morrison suggests. 57

Of course, another reinforcement of memory is repetition. We have seen that Annie Ernaux continually retells the stories of her past in an effort to remember them and not let their immediacy fade. In the same way, Patrick Modiano rewrites the story of his father’s arrest in many of his novels in the hope that he will be able to recall the memory and finally understand the truth of what happened. The repetition of these stories means that the readers, too, can predict the tales and either seek comfort in their familiarity or enjoy the variations in the theme.

In Dora Bruder Modiano refers to his own previous works for the first time, citing his debut Occupation novel, La place de l’étoile, and the text Voyage de noces, which, he tells us, was based on the story of Dora Bruder, an early draft. However, while narratives usually clarify the past, Modiano’s retellings never draw closer to a single truth, but instead add versions and rewrite the stories in a reflection of the transformative movement of time. 58 While it is his search for identity that drives his texts forward, this search can never be wholly fulfilled since his identity is always under construction.

Because individual memories are dependent on collective memory, Modiano, desperate to discover his father’s past, looks for it in the history of the Occupation, since a remembrance of this past will fill gaps in his own identity. In his essay on Modiano, Ontologie fantôme, Daniel Parrochia shares this view:

pour exister, fût-ce comme des fantômes, il faut nécessairement se souvenir des autres, de tous ces échos qui nous traversent et qui sont nous. Voilà donc où le besoin rejoint la morale: se souvenir des autres, c’est aussi se souvenir de soi. 59

58 ‘It is the power of the first-person narrative to clarify the past that is challenged and denied by the kind of narrative practised by Modiano.’ Akane Kawakami, A Self-Conscious Art: Patrick Modiano’s Postmodern Fictions, p.24.
In anthropological terms, place describes a shared social space, and a shared space must mean a shared time and shared memory. The overlaps between Dora’s past and that of the author become more significant. Not only do they share a geography, but a history too. As Ricoeur points out, ‘la frontière n’est pas en effet aussi nette à tracer qu’il semble d’abord, entre la mémoire individuelle et ce passé d’avant la mémoire qu’est le passé historique’. However, Parrochia goes on to strengthen the link between past and place and to show that neither share platonic unity but are in flux, ‘La vie des êtres comme celle des lieux suppose la discontinuité, l’éclatement, le vide et l’oubli’ (p.45). This throws up an interesting opposition between memory and forgetting. Several contemporary studies look at the importance of forgetting and argue for its necessity if progress (or movement) is to be made. Marc Augé’s short text, Les Formes de l’oubli, discusses the influence of forgetting on memory, suggesting that it is forgetting, by way of erosion, that forms our memory. For Augé, memory is a product rather than a vital force, and forgetting is the agent – once again a change associated with the passage of time. The sociologist identifies three forms of forgetting, the first being ‘retour dont l’ambition première est de retrouver un passé perdu en oubliant le présent’, the second, suspense which sees the present dominate over past and future, and the third ‘est celle du commencement’. In Les Abus de la mémoire Tzvetan Todorov warns not to place too much importance on the past but to concentrate on the present. He says that Europeans are obsessed with a cult of memory and that ‘l’oubli’ is necessary in order to move on. He sees the influence of globalisation as provoking this quest of identity in the past and says that ‘La réunion de ces deux conditions – le besoin d’identité collective, la destruction des identités traditionnelles –

60 Paul Ricoeur, Temps et récit vol.3 Le temps raconté, p.207.
61 Augé specifies that what we remember is not the event but a souvenir, in other words an impression. This type of sensory evocation is associated with Proust and explored by Julia Kristeva in her study, Le temps sensible. Proust et l’expérience littéraire (Paris: Gallimard,1994). For a reading of Modiano through Proust, see Claude Burgelin, ‘Proust Lecteur de Modiano’ Europe, no. 1038 (2015), 11-13.
Modiano’s repetition of Occupation period narratives seems to tug in both directions, on the one hand building monuments to Dora and others, and on the other trying to extract himself from this past and discover his own identity. He appears to be constantly recalled to the past and needs to write and narrate the past in order to forget it or liberate himself from it. Repetition can be a means of both remembering and forgetting.

Modiano has accessed possible pasts that are not his own, so memory cannot be limited to place or to the body. Memory is neither spatially nor temporarily distant, since it exists contemporaneously with the present. If all moments exist in the present, memory is simply another name for duration – a word which introduces an illusion of distance and stability. Bergson himself made the connection, as Deleuze points out in Le Bergsonisme: ‘Or cette identité de la mémoire avec la durée même, Bergson la présente toujours de deux façons: « conservation et accumulation du passé dans le présent »(p.45). In other words, the relationship is founded on the dual action of endurance and growth.

Since all pasts co-exist with the present, we are not limited by our own history, and memory is simply another layer of the present.

The mistake, yet again, lies in separating past and present, in ignoring the continuum of time and space and endeavouring to divide and sequence both. Modiano’s novels, however, aim to preserve the interrelationship of time and space and reflect its transformative power. This interplay could be called either duration or memory.

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64 Todorov, Les Abus de la mémoire, p.53.
In a collection of Bergson’s texts chosen by Deleuze and published as *Mémoire et vie* we find confirmation of the identity of duration and memory. In a chapter entitled ‘La mémoire ou les degrés coexistants de la durée’, Deleuze includes an extract from *Evolution créatrice* subtitled ‘En quel sens la durée est mémoire’, in which Bergson writes:

La durée est le progrès continu du passé qui ronge l’avenir et qui gonfle en avançant. Du moment que le passé s’accroît sans cesse, indéfiniment aussi il se conserve. La mémoire … n’est pas une faculté de classer des souvenirs dans un tiroir ou de les inscrire sur un registre. Il n’y a pas de registre, pas de tiroir, il n’y a même pas ici, à proprement parler, une faculté, car une faculté s’exerce par intermittences….tandis que l’amoncellement du passé sur le passé se poursuit sans trêve.66

According to this, it is not possible to record memory; we can only aim to represent the passage of time, as Modiano tries to do, and, in so doing, reflect the idea of memory. Memory, however, is only another name for the constant presence of the past and the thickening or swelling of time. It attempts to distinguish between past and present through spatial means, through an idea of retrospective distance and tries to order events and create a chronology that does not, in fact, exist. Just as there are no boundaries between past and present, there are, apparently, no frontiers between individual and collective memory and, in another essay from this collection, this time taken from *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson asks, ‘Que sommes-nous, en effet, qu’est-ce que notre caractère, sinon la condensation de l’histoire que nous avons vécue depuis notre naissance, avant notre naissance même, puisque nous apportons avec nous des dispositions prénatales?’67

So we are products of the past, and not only of our own past but of all pasts. For a further study of this topic, William VanderWolk’s *Rewriting the Past. Memory, History and Narrative in the Novels of Patrick Modiano*, is a useful source. In his introduction VanderWolk draws parallels between the art of memory and the art of fiction. He claims that the author must

67 Ibid., p.40.
shed the past in order to write, but that there is paradoxically no escape from the past. For VanderWolk, writing is a necessary action of both forgetting and remembering. In the study of fiction, however, it is vital to distinguish between imagination and memory. Modiano mixes memory and fiction in order to fill in the gaps and create whole and coherent stories, but his fictions, in turn, become part of the past, so that *Voyage de noces* is added to *Dora Bruder* as a retelling of a single tale. Individual memory, once written, forms part of the collective.

VanderWolk talks of the city as repository for memory, but this notion denies the dynamic nature of memory that we are proposing and is perhaps born of a confusion of memory and history. In *Le syndrome de Vichy* Henri Rousso makes the following distinction: ‘La mémoire est un vécu, en perpétuelle évolution tandis que l’histoire – celle des historiens – est une reconstruction savante et abstraite’. Modiano himself privileges memory over history, but it should be remembered that memory is being treated as a process and not a fixed past, as becoming rather than being.

Place, although not a repository for memory, does act as a signpost to the past. Street names and metro stations, monuments and landmarks all carry cultural and historical significance and remain as physical markers of the past. Modiano’s place-names function as poetic spaces. Lyrical rather than descriptive, they are narrative possibilities. Memory may reside neither in place nor in the body, but instead in the interaction between the two. For Michel de Certeau,

> *Les lieux sont des histoires fragmentaires et repliées, des passés volés à la lisibilité par autrui, des temps emplis qui peuvent se déplier mais qui sont là plutôt comme des récits en attente et restent à l’état de rébus, enfin des symbolisations enkystées dans la douleur ou le plaisir du corps.*

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Modiano would have us believe that the space of the city bears an imprint of past events, but his reading of the city is not static – it is dynamic and based on the narrator’s movements within the city, in the crossing of streets and the tracing of itineraries. Once more the reader is confronted with the interdependence of time and space and the importance of our dynamic interaction with both. Memory is a component of the merging of time and space and its eternal and recurrent nature: ‘La mémoire n’est pas en nous, c’est nous qui nous mouvons dans une mémoire-Être, dans une mémoire-monde’. Our movement through time is creative, so that the motion of walking is a spatial creation and creates the city which, in turn, is a means of visualising time. Parallels can easily be drawn between the act of walking and the act of writing as a way of making time and space readable. However, to remain with the concept of place, it is necessary to dig a little further, since Certeau and Casey both recognise the creative force of movement but suggest that it creates non-place and place respectively.

Modiano’s narrators, in their obsessive listing of street names and directions, appear to constantly locate themselves in a specific time and place but, on closer inspection, it can be seen that all, even the city, is in flux.


Place is not anchored by the past but continues to move. It is infused with force, motion and direction in the above quotation, and the narrator interacts with it – in fact he dissolves into it, so that the naming of Rue de Bretagne and Rue des Filles-de-Calvaire conveys both the location and the movement of the narrator through it. The date, too, is named but not necessarily fixed; it is a moment in time, now blended into the landscape and renewed by this very recall – could the reference to ‘ce dimanche’ be indicative of plural Sundays 28th April?

72 Modiano, *Dora Bruder* p.130.
This act of movement and creation propels the reader back to the previously identified ideas of birth and rebirth. Place, as a space of movement, is a process. Edward Casey uses the term ‘implacement’ to define the movement of a person through space. He sees place as the result of the interaction between body and landscape: where the body is becomes a place. This is reminiscent of Heidegger’s fusion of being and situation, but implacement, being dynamic, is instead an act of ‘coming into being’.

Body and landscape present themselves as coeval epicenters around which particular places pivot and radiate. They are, at the very least, the bounds of places. In the embodied being I am just at a place as its inner boundary; a surrounding landscape, on the other hand, is just beyond that place as its outer boundary. Between the two boundaries – and very much as a function of their differential interplay – implacement occurs. Place is what takes place between body and landscape.73

For Michel de Certeau, on the other hand, the passage of a person through space creates the opposite: a non-place. Place, for Certeau, carries connotations of origin and, therefore, of fixity, while non-place is produced by movement, by ‘passing-through’. While the act of walking in Modiano’s novels multiplies and repeats the city, Certeau claims that ‘Marcher c’est manquer de lieu. C’est le procès indéfini d’être absent et en quête d’un propre’, which would suggest that stasis produces place.74 However, Certeau recognises walking as the creation of the urban fabric, but declares that the city is a place only in name, ‘La Ville’. Movement within the city is not a practice of place but, more importantly, an act of space, and one which Certeau links closely to narrative: ‘Tout récit est un récit de voyage – une pratique de l’espace’.75

In contradiction to Bergson’s ideas of simultaneity, Certeau believes place to be dependent on order and stasis, while space incorporates movement and direction.

73 Edward Casey, Getting Back into Place, p.29.
74 Michel de Certeau, L’invention du quotidien, p.155.
75 Ibid., p.171.
Un lieu est donc une configuration instantanée de positions. Il implique une indication de stabilité… Il y a *espace* dès qu’on prend en considération des vecteurs de direction des quantités de vitesse et la variable de temps. L’espace est un croisement de mobiles. Il est en quelque sorte animé par l’ensemble de mouvements qui s’y déploient… En somme, *l’espace est un lieu pratiqué*. Ainsi la rue géométriquement définie par un urbanisme est transformée en espace par des marcheurs. De même, la lecture est l’espace produit par la pratique du lieu que constitue un système de signes – un écrit.76

However, while place may be fixed, it is not merely three-dimensional, but haunted by history:

‘Les lieux sont des histoires fragmentaires et repliées, des passés volés à la lisibilité par autrui, des temps empilés…’.77 Place is layered, stratified, a palimpsest.78 Certeau links the idea of a static space imbued with the past with the image of the museum. It is something dead and detached, gathering dust, memory. On the other hand, like the non-lieu he describes, it is also vibrant and dynamic and is understood in the classical sense as a plurality of times unrestricted to the past: ‘En fait, la mémorable, c’est l’anti-musée: elle n’est pas localisable’.79

Memory and place, therefore, are part of the creative movement of the body through time and space; they are derivatives of time and space, and are dependent upon the interrelationship of the two. The importance of movement through space ultimately recalls the writings of Gilles Deleuze and his notion of deterritorialisation. Both Certeau’s assertion that walking produces an absence of place and Casey’s theory of implacement can be united and explored in Deleuze’s binary motion of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Deterritorialisation combines Certeau’s distinction of place and non-place, in that it evokes both a sense of origin and displacement. Our experience of the passage of time is merged with the spatial component of movement in Deleuze’s term and hints at the

76 Ibid., p.173.
77 Ibid., p.163.
78 Modiano echoes this in his *Discours à l’Académie suédoise*, p.26: ‘Et souvent la même rue est liée pour vous à des souvenirs successifs, si bien que grâce à la topographie de la ville, c’est toute votre vie qui vous revient à la mémoire par couches successives, comme si vous pouviez déchiffrer les écritures superposées d’un palimpseste’. See, too, Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn, 2013).
disconcerting and destabilising flux which our authors endeavour to represent. The rebirth Deleuze wrote about, Bergson’s *élan vital*, is possible only after an instantaneous purging of the past. As seen in the novels of Patrick Modiano, characters constantly enter and exit new territories, never to return to a specific experience but always able to access its perpetually altered memory. In each moment identity is destroyed in order to be rebuilt, and this process of ‘coming into being’ is a liberty that allows for much of Modiano’s storytelling. The repeated rebirth necessitates not just a change in time, but a movement in space, so we are being constantly deterritorialised, uprooted and moved along. If deterritorialisation can be compared to a perpetual erosion of identity and our being requires us to situate ourselves in space or find a new place in which to be, there must also be an attendant process of reterritorialisation. However, deterritorialisation is absolute. There is no original or reclaimed territory to which we can return, so reterritorialisation is a constant creation of place; it must lead us to something new. This movement takes into account the creative power of place as a fusion of time and space and is another act of repetition and change, a process that alters what has gone before and what is to come so that each displacement through time is an act of ‘difference’. In fact, deterritorialisation-reterritorialisation is a simultaneous experience, and the terms spatialise our notion of the passage of time in a useful way. The differentiation these terms define is reflective of the image-mouvement we discussed earlier in this chapter and helps underline the coherence between duration, memory and movement. In summary, place and memory are both the result of the movement of the body through time and space and are dependent upon the inter-relationship of the two. In the context of literature, there are parallels in the act of writing and the nature of narrative, particularly in the cyclical patterns explored in this chapter.

Earlier this chapter showed how *Fleurs de ruine* plays on weekly and seasonal cycles, exemplified by the predominance of Sunday as a named and significant point of reference. Another recurrent motif is fallen leaves, reminiscent of the *fleurs de ruine* of the title, blooming
and disintegrating in a single phrase. These two motifs merge on page 122 when readers catch a glimpse of the possible repercussions of effacing the boundaries between times and spaces. In the confusion and lack of stability, the narrator is in danger of losing his identity.

Par bonheur, la présence de mes filles me rattachait au présent. Sinon tous les anciens dimanches soir, avec leur rentrée au pensionnat, la traversée du Bois de Boulogne, les manèges disparus de Neuilly, les veilleuses du dortoir, ces dimanches-là m’auraient submergé de leur odeur de feuilles mortes.

The dead leaves also, however, help to trace a linear progression in the récit. The narrative begins in the dead of winter and ends in early spring, so that we follow a path from the past towards the future while still being reminded of the annual cycle of death and rebirth. *Fleurs de ruine* thus reveals a fluid narrative that works on a dual pattern of linearity and circularity.

The leitmotiv of the circle or *ronde* is familiar to readers of Patrick Modiano, and can be seen clearly from the titles of works like; *La Ronde de nuit, Les Boulevards de ceinture*. They are linked, of course, closely to the city in which he sets his novels, a city that is encircled and enclosed in its own space. However, texts such as *Memory Lane* and *Rue des Boutiques obscures*, also provide a sense of linearity. In fact, the two, circularity and linearity, reside comfortably in the city, as Modiano tells us in the closing lines of *Fleurs de ruine*:

Je me suis assis avec lui à une terrasse de café. C’était en juin. On n’avait pas encore creusé la tranchée du périphérique qui vous donne une sensation d’encerlement. Les portes de Paris, en ce temps-là, étaient toutes en lignes de fuite, la ville peu à peu desserrait son étreinte pour se perdre dans les terrains vagues. Et l’on pouvait croire encore que l’aventure était au coin de la rue.

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81 Modiano, *Fleurs de ruine*, p.142.
The labyrinthine city allows stories to surface and disappear without closure. Despite the enforced linearity of the reading experience, the internal turnings mean the narrative always folds back in on itself, bringing readers back, in this case, to the wandering narrator of 1990.82

As with Passion simple, the end of the text of Fleurs de ruine is not the end of the story, not only in the sense that no autobiography can ever truly be finished, but also because the stories have not been definitively concluded and the shadows of uncertainty which surround them permit them to be resurrected in future works.

**Poetry of Repetition**

It would appear from this study of Annie Ernaux and Patrick Modiano that, with every retelling, the original story, instead of becoming more important, becomes less so. When rereading a text or rereading the same story in another text, matters of plot and conclusion lose significance, and the narrative itself takes precedence over the story it relates. Modiano and Ernaux, in retelling a familiar tale, are thus exploring the possibilities and intricacies of narration.

Just as Vladimir Propp was able to compile a morphology of the folktale because of the structural similarities between individual stories, the mechanisms at play in these narratives can more easily be seen because of the familiarity of their tales. Of course, fairy tales and other narratives born of the oral tradition use repeated tellings and recurrent phrases, characters or incidents to make the stories more memorable, but, equally, once the story is familiar, the language of the text is thrown into relief and, in this way, the narrative approaches the poetic.

Most of our early literary memories are of formulaic nursery rhymes and retold tales. Repeated stories bear a comforting sense of continuity and eternity. Music and song work on

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82 ‘In Modiano, the linear narrative of autobiography meets the circular structure of the detective novel, taking the readers beyond Les Gommes into a world in which they are left with the impression that the author’s life has become one long detective story which has repeated itself time and again’. Martine Guyot-Bender and William VanderWolk in Paradigms of Memory; The Occupation and Other His/stories in the Novels of Patrick Modiano, p.9.
systems of refrain and recurrence created from repeated sounds and returning images and rhythms. Along with an established form comes the freedom to experiment. Annie Ernaux and Patrick Modiano appear to be using their narratives in this way, repeatedly employing the outline of a single story in order to play with spatio-temporal constructs and story-telling techniques. There is a poetic effect that extends across each author’s oeuvre in the echoes and recurrences between individual texts building towards a united whole, and these repeated cyclical structures are associated with mythology.

Le retour d’une même image donne naissance au mythe. Comme Modiano emploie bien fréquemment ce procédé, il installe un autre récit dans la fiction initiale. Et alors on voit un assemblage de motifs réitérés – comme « la fleur » et « le dimanche soir » dans Fleurs de ruine – se transformer en une histoire intemporelle et immuable: une sorte de poème qui transparaît dans le roman. Autrement dit, le mythe est là.

Myths encapsulate a return to primordial instinct, and, according to Jean-Yves Tadié, the privileging of the instant and the season over a succession of events. This is certainly true of Modiano, for whom the present moment is eternal, and it is also apparent in Ernaux’s wish for ‘une répétition éternelle’ which she hopes to achieve through her writing.

Patrick Modiano has created dynamic texts which coil or spiral onwards, carrying each passing moment forward. They recognise the two-fold nature in the time-space model, that of repetition and irreversible change. Repetition, as well as being a way in which to carry the past forward to the present, is a way of compensating for the relentless flow of time, a way of managing and understanding time and space by bringing the familiar into the unknown. There is also something in the act of rewriting which differs from normal expectations of literature but which brings us closer to an expression of our daily experience of time and space. The narrative of Fleurs de ruine mirrors the flux and fluidity of reality. Modiano’s narrator

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83 French poetry, in particular, contains structurally repetitive poetic forms, such as the rondeau and rondel.
84 Paul Gellings, Poésie et mythe dans l’œuvre de Patrick Modiano; le fardeau du nomade, p.76.
85 Ernaux, Passion simple, p.61.
86 Reality is naturally incoherent, according to Michel Butor, Répertoire II (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1964).
wonders: ‘Voulait-il me donner une leçon en me montrant que la réalité était plus fuyante que je ne le pensais?’ (p.83).

Part of the difficulty in modelling time and space, as Bergson pointed out, is due to its constant movement. We are aware that time and space are connected and that they are dynamic but we still feel the need for some fixed, stable point from which to view and understand their relationship. Within a text too we need a point of reference and orientation. In *Fleurs de ruine* and *Dora Bruder* we have constant, aimless movement and a proliferation of times and places that fuse into a coherent whole governed, again, by forward-moving repetition. The act of reading may be inescapably linear, but the reader’s initial sense of progression is thwarted by these texts which retell familiar tales. Repetition, then, can be a form of fixing, since the repeated story becomes a stabilising framework around which the narrative can twist and play. Modiano’s narratives reflect the human experience of repetition within irreversible change.

The beginning of this chapter recalled how Annie Ernaux attempts to attain immediacy in her writing to capture the ‘souvenir du présent’, prompting a closer look at memory, its nature and location. Henri Bergson’s definition of simultaneity dispels the perceived distance between past and present and allows for the presence of multiple events at once. In fact, it leads back to the original study of duration and the movement of time and space which showed that all of time is constantly present, moving and changing in a process of *différenciation* so that all pasts are extant and accessible. If this is so, then memory is simply a label for our access to events. It is not a backward motion or distanced from the present moment; memory is a derivative of duration and is part of the experience of time rather than a conscious act of recall. Memory, like duration, extends beyond both an individual’s birth and the physical confines of the body, and its association with place is again a labelling of the movement of time and space, since time and space endure memories and places are constantly being created, destroyed and reborn. I have identified this destruction and rebirth as Deleuze’s *image-mouvement* or, more
specifically *deterritorialisation-reterritorialisation*. Modiano’s texts reflect the montage effect of the movement-image and show the creative power of memory (or duration) and the identity crisis provoked by *deterritorialisation*.
Chapter 4  Negation and Non-place in Jean Echenoz

While Annie Ernaux stills the action of her texts to a barely audible beat and Patrick Modiano layers memories across Paris, Jean Echenoz builds fictions that further challenge the notions of time and space we have so far established. In direct opposition to Modiano, he moves his stories into the types of non-places interrogated in Marc Augé’s work, into the ill-defined history-less spaces of the contemporary city, and, therefore, what he finds is not identity but change, a troubling lack of action and determination, and an exploration of the boundaries of time and space. Echenoz chooses to set his fiction not only within the dark heart of the urban landscape, in its subways, shopping complexes and clogged arteries of circulation, but also in imagined realms beyond the limits of our lived experience which, ultimately, exaggerate and expose the crises of contemporary society. The prose style he has developed blends and subverts genres so that we get parodies of detective fiction and spy novels in Les Grandes blondes or Envoyée spéciale, for example, and short fictional biographies of Emil Zátopek and Nikola Tesla in Courir and Des éclairs.¹ Oana Panaïté writes of the ‘anti-voix’ in Echenoz’s prose, or rather in his ‘envers de la prose’, and outlines how he plays with the formal composition of literature, drawing parallels with the ideas of the OuLiPo in the 1960s.² His novels abound with self-referential eye-winks as characters and situations recur and with a superabundance of the sort of cultural references associated with the postmodern or supermodern period, including cinematic and televisual allusions, the appearance of actors or singers, and even fellow authors such as Pierre Michon turning up in an interview on TV5

Monde on the screen of a hotel bedroom. Peopled with unreliable narrators and suddenly disappearing or reappearing characters who move from spaces that may be recognisable and familiar to ones more indistinct, imaged or exotic, Echenoz’s fiction evokes a sense of uncertainty and instability. His playful prose can leave us wrong-footed, questioning our expectations of genre, plot and narrative voice as he assails conventional boundaries and locates adventure in atypical territories. In this way, Echenoz’s novels encapsulate the concerns we have raised about representation of spaces and places at the turn of the century, about shifting frontiers and movements across them.

Critical works on Jean Echenoz reveal a focus on spatio-temporal axes, with particular reference to contemporaneity, flux, absence, emptiness and non-place. Many labels have been attributed to Echenoz’s work, often recognising the ludic quality of his fiction and grouping him alongside fellow authors with Les Éditions de Minuit and a minimalist style or écriture impassible. For Bruno Blanckeman this is an écriture reversible or indécidable. For Dominique Viart it is l’écriture de l’instabilité. Colin Nettlebeck uses Echenoz to define the post-literary novel and his work is increasingly cited as exemplifying the extrême contemporain.

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4 In the introduction to Jean Echenoz: «une tentative modeste de description du monde», ed. by Christine Jérusalem and Jean-Bernard Vray (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2006), Jérusalem describes how the esthétique propre à l’écrivain (pratique de collage, de la reprise, dilecction pour la forme hybride, art de la variation et de la métamorphose) est comme la manifestation d’un certain rapport au monde: les romans de Jean Echenoz excellent à représenter un monde où les identités sont inconstants, changeantes’, p.8.


which took place in Saint-Étienne in November 2004, published in Jean Echenoz: «une tentative modeste de description du monde», acknowledge both the ethnographic possibilities of his narratives and their openness to discussions of spatio-temporal representations, with titles such as ‘L’espace d’un an’ by Aline Mura-Brunel, ‘Le Mouvement perpétuel’ by Sylviane Coyault, and ‘Le retour du réel dans l’espace’ by Catherine Douzou. Echenoz himself, in an interview with Jean-Baptiste Harang, said, ‘J’écris des romans géographiques, comme d’autres écrivent des romans historiques’, and it is in the geography and architecture of Echenoz’s work that we will begin our study.

Unlike Ernaux and Modiano whose literary quest is to regain and restrain time past and time passing, Echenoz writes a different type of novel, situated in a present time and in places that are recognisable but sometimes fantastical. There is a shift of focus, as he admits, from the temporal to the spatial and he carefully constructs the settings and scene changes for his stories. Interaction with place and movement between places generate or arrest action in the novels and play a significant role in the progression of the narratives.

The seven short stories collected in *Caprice de la reine* (2014), written for various media between 2002 and 2014, serve as a touchstone for themes and devices employed across the entirety of the author’s corpus. The stories take us to a park, a bridge, underwater, to Suffolk, Mayenne, Babylon and Le Bourget, and repeatedly underline Echenoz’s obsession with location, time and movement. Take, for example, this quotation from ‘Génie civil’ in which the aptly named Gluck, ‘luck’ or ‘chance’ in German, is driving an equally aptly named Chevrolet Caprice across the southern United States:

> Aussi s’est-il borne à brancher le régulateur de vitesse pour n’avoir pas à s’occuper de l’allure du véhicule, laissant ses mains sur le volant tout en regardant sans le voir le décor suburbain surchargé d’équipements touristiques et brouillé par le movement des essuie-glaces, nous étions au printemps 1980.


We are reminded not only of Marc Augé’s autoroutes with their cultural signposts in *Introduction à la surmodernité*, but of Jean Baudrillard’s *Amérique* viewed through the windscreen of the car.⁹ The piece that precedes this, written for a photographic art exhibition in Paris in 2002, describes statues in the Jardin de Luxembourg in brief, heavily punctuated, almost list-like detail. The repeated format of the taxonomy allows us to juxtapose and compare the figures, these frozen bodies holding symbols of their station, solidifying the past and decorating a public space, and the title of the text points us to the temporal importance as well as the physical: ‘Vingt femmes dans le jardin du Luxembourg et dans le sens des aiguilles d’une montre’.¹⁰ The confluence of time and space also underscores the opening tale, ‘Nelson’, which, in the vein of *Ravel* or *Courir*, fictionalises an historic figure and mixes factual detail, such as the names of ships and battles, with whimsical fancy.¹¹ The Admiral, returned from sea, seeks out the forest and the garden and proceeds to reconnect with the earth, ‘éloigné de la mer il se retrouve en pleine terre’ (p.13). Reaching the edge of the forest, the mariner pulls a handful of acorns from his pocket and, sticking his fingers in the soil, plants them carefully, twenty yards apart. The work is not just about interacting with nature but is about regeneration and renewal in a larger sense and about reaffirming the links between the land and the sea, as the trees planted will one day build a new fleet of ships. In this snapshot of Echenoz’s inventive prose we see patterns of return and circularity, history and geography, rootedness and movement that are familiar from our examination of fiction and theory in earlier chapters and are recurrent in works by Jean Echenoz.

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Christine Jérusalem’s published thesis, Jean Echenoz: géographies du vide, explores the gaps and dead-ends in Echenoz’s work, interpreting his landscape as empty and pessimistic. She begins by noting that Echenoz writes, ‘à un moment où la littérature est arrivée à un épuisement des lieux et de leurs parcours’, and suggests that what is missing is the possibility for deterritorialisation, a sense of dépaysement, and, therefore, of adventure. 12 While Echenoz seems in constant search for virgin spaces in which to set his fictions, seeking ultimate deterritorialisation in outer space and the afterlife, these spaces too become redundant and empty. ‘Aucun espace – pas même l’espace intersidéral de Nous trois – ne peut plus apporter le sentiment du dépaysement. Les fictions de Jean Echenoz déroulent des lieux de nulle part qui se fondent dans la même uniformité aliénante’. 13 While agreeing that place has become problematic, I would argue, however, that this may be due more to abundance than exhaustion, that disorientation, difference and change can be experienced by moving through these places, and that there may be a positive creative force in that movement and, potentially, the possibility of adventure.

Echenoz’s first three novels explored extremities of place from Le Méridien de Greenwich (1979) to Malaysia in L’Équipée malaise (1986), before honing in on a single building in L’Occupation des sols (1988). 14 After experimenting with the roman noir, biographical fiction and a war novel, Echenoz returned with Envoyée spéciale (2016) to the playful adventure novel that moves from Parisian streets, through rural France to exotic locations such as Zimbabwe and North Korea. However, it is in one of his most popular works, Lac (1989), that we find some of his most pertinent observations of place and space. 15 A reworking of the spy novel genre, Lac leads the reader on a number of wild goose chases

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13 Ibid., p.43.
through a detailed and disconcerting landscape. The text is rich in numeric and geometric specificity, but this precision creates a rather bland and unremarkable urban backdrop against which the confusing and inconsequential plot is written. The spaces are physically measurable, but ultimately forgettable since they reflect so many similar and equally alienating spaces we encounter daily. Named and described places remain blank in *Lac*, with, as Jérusalem affirms, Le Parc Palace du Lac, where the central characters find themselves for the denouement, epitomising the presence and absence of place. The novel’s title, which can be read as ‘lake’ or ‘lack’, plays on this duplicity and further exposes the game when we discover that the lake itself is artificial. The opening scene, which disorientates the reader immediately with the unlikely second sentence, ‘Il remettait sa jambe avant son pantalon’ (p.7), sets up a series of absences, lacks, negations and detours for the text.

Le Parc Palace du Lac se trouve au milieu d’une étendue boisée bordant une ample nappe d’eau douce, sur laquelle un bateau plat promène parfois les pensionnaires. Cet établissement d’une vingtaine de chambres et suites met à la disposition de ses hôtes un restaurant, deux bars, trois salles de conference ainsi qu’un service de blanchissage et de nettoyage à sec….Hors de circuit des hôtels habituels, le Parc Palace est une résidence calme et retirée, souvent fréquentée par des clients incognito, trop riches et trop puissants de toute façon pour être connus du grand public. Il n’est inscrit dans aucun guide.16

The introductory sentence here carries the reader along on the gentle, rocking rhythm of the words, propelled by the repeated plosive sounds of the ‘p’ and ‘b’, drawing our attention not only to the careful construction of the phrase but also the artifice behind the whole enterprise.17 While the secrecy surrounding the Parc Palace may be entirely in keeping with the suspense of a spy drama, the irony which undercuts Echenoz’s prose and the banality of

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17 In her article ‘Les fins de l’écriture: Réflection et pratique du style dans les œuvres de Jean Echenoz et Pierre Michon’, Oana Panaîtê draws our attention to ‘la gamme très vaste des assonances et des allitérations, procédés recurrents dans l’écriture échenozienne. Elle inclut la simple répétition de certaines sonorités (…) la recurrence syntagmatique des mêmes phonèmes comme les consonnes frictives (…) ou sibilantes (…), l’alternance vocalique organisée selon un principe rythmique (…) ou rimique’ (p.99).
the setting for his outrageous scenario force us to look closer at the aesthetically insignificant hotel and realise that the lack of information shrouds nothing mysterious. Instead the hotel is impersonal and characterless. The guest we have followed here, the poetically named Vital Veber, ‘ne figure pas dans le Who’s who’(p.66), and is another shadowy presence in the narrative, no more substantial than the Parc palace itself, ‘Nul panonceau ne signalait l’existence du Parc Palace du Lac, invisible depuis la départementale’(p.68), and, as we discover, there was never even a lake here. It is not only a lack of information that is troubling here, but a lack of action and consequence. Characters are sometimes superfluous and disappear part way through the narrative. They miss the clues and intrigue, leave their posts before the drama unfolds, spend time working on useless inventions and fail to secure a romantic ending. The anti-hero, Franck Chopin, leads a mundane and hazy existence: ‘Un autre surlendemain matin, Chopin se tenait chez lui, comme toujours pas trop loin de la fenêtre, inactif comme souvent tôt le matin, seul comme la plupart du temps’.\(^\text{18}\) The characters react only according to specific orders given as spatio-temporal co-ordinates and exhibit neither freewill nor self-determination. Sjef Houppermans, examining Parisian spaces in Echenoz’s work, suggests that ‘il [Paris] paraît partout déterminer la marge de liberté des personnages’.\(^\text{19}\) They are merely pawns on the giant chess set in front of the Parc Palace hotel, following classic manoeuvres or coded routes, just like Vito Piranese, who, at the beginning of the novel, receives the instruction 13, 47, 14 which directs him to take the number 47 bus at 1pm to the 14th stop.\(^\text{20}\) In the end, Chopin, conscious of his lowly status, 

\(^{18}\) Echenoz, *Lac*, p.52. It is interesting to note here the unusual and playful temporal indicator, ‘Un autre surlendemain matin…’ pushing an extension of time and leaving blank what may have occurred in between.


\(^{20}\) Echenoz, *Lac*, pp. 11-12. Later Chopin imagines his route to a meeting with Colonel Seck : ‘Pour s’y rendre il dut appliquer la procédure classique de dissuasion des filatures par le zigzag, et c’était encore et toujours le même cirque: et je te saute du taxi devant l’entrée d’un métro, puis d’un autre taxi dans un autre métro, et je te bondis dans la rame au dernier moment, je te rebondis sur le quai juste avant la fermeture des portes et je traverse et retraverse l’immeuble à double entrée, puis l’autre, et je reprends un taxi qui me laisse à cinquante mètres de l’allée dérobée où je parviens en nage, hors d’haleine et certain que tout ça ne sert à rien.’ p.53.
displays neither the inclination to protest nor the desire to change: ‘Chopin de toute façon ne regardait plus rien non plus, réfléchissant vaguement à son état de pion, de figurant, myope comme une taupe enfouie dans le sol natal’ (p.188).

However, it is not only Echenoz’s protagonists who move along well-defined paths. Through his detailed description of the roads and motorways surrounding Paris, Echenoz exposes the set routes we all follow. The complicated diagrams Echenoz traces through the suburbs and industrial sites of Paris disorientate rather than direct the reader and reduce the geographical to the geometric: ‘Un sombre boulevard à six voies, scandé de réverbères glacés, encerclait la vaste zone marchande coupée d’allées et de rues à l’angle droit’ (p.76). The urban landscapes surrounding these motorways are equally reduced to blanks and gaps, missing any recognisable landmarks, dotted with shopping centres and roadworks, roundabouts and crossroads, and they lead Chopin to rendezvous which habitually take place in sinister places which lack or extinguish life, such as abattoirs and cemeteries. It is interesting to note, however, that none of these places are in Paris. They are on the peripheries of the city, in that liminal zone, that strange no man’s land that is neither city nor countryside. Paris maintains its recognisable and reassuring quality and can be contrasted with the Parc Palace du Lac, which is its direct opposite, devoid of any specificity. Paris can be located, described and navigated and provides refuge from the nondescript labyrinth of the suburbs: ‘sous l’apparente diversité de la banlieue, toutes les choses y semblaient affectées du même poids, du même goût, nulle forme sur nul fond ne faisait sens, tout était flou…. Enfin on rentra dans Paris’ (p.188). In the capital the arteries of circulation allow for encounters and adventures but, again, they are

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fruitless. Vito Piranese follows his instructions carefully and exchanges a briefcase as arranged, but the information leads to nothing and he disappears from the story. Equally, Chopin first encounters Suzy Clair on place de la Concorde, where the moment of meeting becomes eternal, as he falls in love at first sight. Again their story remains unfinished at the end of the novel. Much has been written on the games and complications in *Lac*, so we will not linger on this work, but instead highlight two important points to explore further. The first is to investigate the alienating places identified in the novel, including Paris, its surrounding area and its lines of transport. The second is the disturbing sense of absence which we have already encountered in our discussions of Modiano and Ernaux. In particular, we will need to address the lack of action and consequence in the narrative.

The places Echenoz’s characters find troubling in *Lac* are the uninhabited spaces of commerce, industry and transit. They are not places of meeting and exchange, but places of glances, near-misses and lost opportunities. They are spaces which lack definition and historical or cultural identity. They are, in fact, the spaces Marc Augé labels ‘non-lieux’. We will remember from our earlier discussion that non-places are, for Augé, the natural expression of the contemporary period he has named supermodernity, ‘qui procède simultanément des trois figures de l’excès que sont la surabondance événementielle, la surabondance spatiale et l’individualisation des références’. We have already seen that Echenoz engages with the chaos and excess of contemporary society, but his preoccupation with spaces of transit, exit routes, movement and travel, here and in each one of his novels, suggests that he is also exploring non-places. According to Augé, ‘nous empruntons [les non-lieux] quand nous roulons sur l’autoroute, faisons les courses au supermarché ou attendons le prochain vol pour

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He asserts that ‘l’espace du voyageur serait ainsi l’archétype du non-lieu’, but the idea of the traveller here expressed is not that of the exotic explorer but simply of a person in motion. It is clear that Augé’s Introduction à la surmodernité raises questions about the production and definition of non-place partly, I would argue, because it is just that, an introduction, an invitation to look a little more closely at our experience of the urban environment at the end of the 20th century. The currency of the term ‘non-lieu’, a term that comes from the French legal system in which it denotes a case that cannot be judged due to lack of evidence, confirms the need for a means of discussing the experience which is other, different and new, and which continues to exercise philosophers, critics, geographers and novelists, as we have seen. Augé himself explored different possible configurations of space and movement in works such as Un ethnologue dans le métro (1986), to which he would return some twenty years later in Le métro revisité (2008) and in his fictional texts, including La Mère d’Arthur (2005), which, like so many of the novels we are studying by Echenoz and Modiano, begins with the disappearance of a young man. The difficulty in fixing meaning reflects the crises associated with supermodernity, in which the acceleration of events engenders a fictional quality in the production and consumption of news stories, and lines blurred through expansion, contraction and overlap require renewed exploration. As Verena Andermatt Conley puts it, ‘the intelligibility of space is not lost; it too has been complicated by an overabundance and also by

24 Augé, Non-lieux, p.120.
25 Ibid., p.110.
a different notion of scale’. What results from this is a certain freedom. With the removal of identifiers, both for the place and for the individual, new liberties open up, and it is into this possibility that Echenoz writes his fiction. In his essay, ‘Space, Place and Non-places’, Peter Merriman recognises the popularity of Augé’s ideas but criticises ‘scholars who have been taken in by “sound-bite” theoretical concepts’ and argues that:

Augé fails to account for the complex social and material production of place and non-place, and it is perhaps unsurprising that many commentators have presented ‘empirical non-places’ such as airports and motorways as absolute, universal, placeless spaces, leaving no room for consumers to experience and inhabit these spaces ‘otherwise’.

This may be true of some commentators, but Augé recognised the liberating possibilities of non-place in which ‘l’anonymat relatif qui tient à cette identité provisoire peut-il être ressenti comme une libération par ceux qui, pour un temps, n’ont plus à tenir leur rang, à se tenir à leur place, à surveiller leur apparence’. The lack of stability and definition attributed to non-place may not be as unsettling and destructive as some suggest, but instead provide opportunities for invention and reinvention. In ‘Navigating “Non-Lieux” in Contemporary Fiction: Houellebecq, Darrieussecq, Echenoz and Augé’, Emer O’Beirne confirms that ‘it is precisely this permanent openness to new adventures in all settings that preserves Echenoz’s characters from distress at their estrangement from the non-places they spend their lives passing through’. Two key points become apparent here: that the experience of non-place is not pre-determined and that non-places are spaces of transition. Herein lies the difficulty in negotiating place and non-place.

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28 Verena Andermatt Conlet, Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, State and World-Space in French Cultural Theory, p. 66.
30 Augé, Non-lieux, p.127.
For Edward Casey, non-place is not possible because the very fact of a person being in a space renders it a place. A place is linked to the presence of the body, and our existence means we are automatically in *place*. For Casey, the movement of a person from one space into another creates place, and therefore our experience will always be of implacement. For Michel de Certeau, the opposite is true. In *L’art du quotidien*, Certeau suggests, in terms Augé finds too negative, that ‘Marcher, c’est manquer de lieu. C’est le procès indéfini d’être absent et en quête d’un propre’ (p.155) and that an individual’s movement undoes place. This destruction of place leads to the production of non-place, a positive rather than negative shift. What Augé and Certeau agree on is that non-place is a space of transit and that this experience can be disconcerting. For both, something has changed in how we interact with our urban environment, and negotiations between place and lack of place are ongoing, as is an investigation around passivity and agency. There are transformative possibilities in the way in which we move through our environment, and stasis is not an option. In this we can see a version of Deleuze’s deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, and perhaps a constant quest for place, which Augé sees as ‘le recours de celui qui fréquente les non-lieux’ (p.134). In an unfinished process of creation and destruction, the practitioner, the writer and his wandering protagonists or, indeed, wandering narrative, may offer illuminating representations of the experience, although, as Christine Jérusalem quite rightly states, ‘le flâneur a cédé la place au passant’. Therefore, in order to appreciate the complexities and possibilities of non-place, we will look closely at a second text by Jean Echenoz, *Au piano* (2003), in which we encounter the non-lieu par excellence, purgatory.

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32 Jérusalem, Jean Echenoz: géographies du vide, p.137.
We have seen that Echenoz is in search of virgin spaces in which to set his novels and has experimented with extreme locations, including extraterrestrial settings. It is therefore not surprising that he has stretched the temporal boundaries as well, and ignored traditional frontiers between the natural and supernatural. *Un An* (1997), the short novel which prefigured the award-winning *Je m’en vais* (1999), was an unexpected, contemporary ghost story, and *Nous trois* (1992) introduced the prototype of an angel which we will meet again.\(^{33}\) His 2003 novel, *Au piano*, is not, therefore, his first communication with the afterlife, but it is his most thorough. Although the central character, the celebrated concert pianist Max Delmarc, is murdered a third of the way into the novel, we continue to follow the anti-hero’s adventures after his death.\(^{34}\) Like many of his other novels, *Au piano* tells the story of a single man’s odyssey, but, no longer content with merely mingling the spiritual and the actual, Echenoz builds an imaginary cosmos based on the Christian division of purgatory, heaven and hell.

*Au piano* opens on a specific Parisian street in the present moment: ‘Deux hommes paraissent au fond du boulevard de Courcelles, en provenance de la rue de Rome’.\(^{35}\) One of these men, we are told, will die violently in twenty-two days. Immediately, therefore, Echenoz introduces the voice of a powerful narrator and establishes his god-game. The two figures, Max and his pre-death guardian angel Bernie, enter *le parc Monceau*. The familiar park serves as an important point of reference, locating us in a recognisable Paris, and as a monument to France’s

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\(^{33}\) Spatio-temporal concerns are obvious in the titles of the diptyque *Un An* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1997) and its flip-side *Je m’en vais* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1999) both of which follow characters as they perform personal odysseys, and see familiar faces cropping up across the two novels.

\(^{34}\) It is interesting to note the musical motif present here. Music is a recurrent theme in much of Echenoz’s work, from the jazz-inspired *Cherokee* to his recent novel about the composer, *Ravel*. Echenoz’s connection between music and fiction is far from arbitrary. Poetic rhythms and musical beats underlie his prose, giving movement and geometry to the narrative, which is often reflected in the structure of his novels, where chapters will follow each other in counterpoint or harmony. The musical motif reminds us of Bergson’s metaphor for temporal movement and Lefebvre’s rhythm-analysis.

\(^{35}\) Echenoz, *Au piano* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit), p.9. In keeping with the cyclical style of some of his earlier novels and the theme of return, the novel also ends on Rue de Rome.
artistic heritage in the description of its statues commemorating artists, writers and composers, including Chopin, whose concerto Max plays at the end of the first chapter and who reminds us of the earlier Chopin we met in *Lac. Au piano*’s Paris is a city of concert halls and dog-walkers, of packed metro platforms and wide boulevards, the romantic and cultural capital we have come to expect. It is a city steeped in literature and possibly full of stories, the Paris of the Baudelairean flâneur and of Flaubert’s Frédéric Moreau, whose name echoes in that of the park.  

Paris, therefore, is the point of departure for the novel, but it, too, is given to shifting and changing, as mirrored in Max’s agent monsieur Parisy, ‘qui indique donc littéralement l’itinéraire souhaitable: par ici’, as well as a play on the capital city. The security of a stable place does not last, therefore, since, even in the early stages of the novel, certain details and scenes foreshadow events in the upside-down world to follow. As Max, suffering from stage fright, arrives for his recital, we see the spatial contrast between the public garden, with its potential calm, and the enclosed maze of the concert hall.

On entra. Escaliers, corridors, passages, portes qu’on ouvrait et refermait jusqu’à parvenir dans un vaste espace sombre encombré de cordages, de poulies, de grandes caisses ouvertes et de meubles déplacés. Dans l’air flottait une rumeur de houle et de foule. Il était alors vingt heures trente pile, Max venait d’ôter son imperméable et soudain, quand il s’y attendait le moins, Bernie le poussa vivement au-delà d’un rideau, et la houle se transforma aussitôt en tempête et il était là, le piano.

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36 In ‘Pour une meilleure occupation des sols: le Paris de Jean Echenoz’, *Relief* 2.1 (2008), Sjef Houppermans studies the detail of Echenoz’s Paris, particularly in *Au piano*, and points out that Bernie’s new apartment in the second part of the novel is at 42 Boulevard du Temple, which, Houppermans discovers, in reality sports a plaque indicating that ‘Gustave Flaubert a vécu dans cette maison de 1856 à 1869’, p.58.

37 Sjef Houppermans, p.52.

38 Max, at home practising the piano, plays two movements from Janácek’s sonata I.X. 1905, ‘Pressentiment suivi de Mort’ (p.35). Also, Bernie is a reflection of the angel/demon Béliard, directing and comforting Max. Guiding him through the earthy park, ‘Il changea précipitamment de direction, faisant faire volteface à Max et détournant son attention en louant la variété, l’abondance et la polychromie de la végétation…Le monde est beau’ (p.13).

The claustrophobic clustering of ‘escaliers, corridors, passages, portes’ leads the reader into a dark and confusing space. Max finds himself before the monstrous piano. Its gaping mouth bristling with menacing teeth, it stands waiting, he tells himself, ‘pour [me] déchiqueter’ (p.15). An inversion of this scene will appear later when Max, alone in an empty room, caresses the locked lid of another piano.

Before starting a journey into the unknown, therefore, Echenoz sets up two worlds: the pianist’s private hell in the midst of a reassuringly familiar Paris. It is interesting to note that, while the internal spaces seem to be either lonely and cramped (Max’s apartment) or crowded and stressful (the concert hall and television studio), external spaces, such as the park and the boulevards, are introduced as places of leisure. This idyll is shattered, however, by Max’s murder on a residential street. By the time we leave Paris at the end of section one we have a strong sense of the city against which to contrast the world we enter. *Au piano* is divided into three sections: part I follows Max’s story until his death, part II is set in a purgatory-like centre, and part III follows Max back to Paris. My focus here is on the middle section and the importance of its centrality.

When *Au piano* was published in January 2003, critics acclaimed it as Echenoz’s most beautiful work, his most personal and his most risky. All commented on the strange worlds he created beyond the contemporary city and on the surprising trips he leads through paradise, hell and purgatory. Patrick Kéchichian, writing for *Le Monde*, describes Echenoz’s fictional world as ‘Non pas un monde de simple gratuité concocté pour nous distraire et nous éloigner de ce qui vaut et importe, mais comme un envers du nôtre. Non par son imitation mais sa reconstruction, son invention’. Echenoz’s imaginary after-world begins rather ominously in Chapter Thirteen. Leaving Max bleeding to death on the pavement, witnessed

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only by a neighbour’s dog who is watching from the fourth floor window of number 55, we
turn the page and enter a negative world where things are the reverse of what we, or the
protagonist, expect. This central section begins emphatically:

Non.
Non, pas d’élévation, pas d’éther, pas d’histoires.42

The negative mode continues as Echenoz sets up a world of absences reminiscent of Lac.
Max awakens in a windowless room and tries to gauge his surroundings. The reader, equally
adrift, pieces together the scene from his perspective. The description of the bedroom is first
built up by establishing the positions of objects relative to the body: ‘Il se trouvait nu dans le
lit monoplace occupant le quart d’une petite chambre obscure’ (p.90).
But since the lack of light casts doubt even on perceived distances, Max instead tries to make
sense of the space by listing what is not there:

Rien ne décorait les murs; pas de bibelots, pas de revues, pas un livre en vue, ni Bible
des Gédéons dans le tiroir de la table de nuit, ni prospectus touristique dépliant qui
indiquerait où en est, ce qu’on peut y faire et ce qu’il y a à voir dans le coin, avec tous
les horaires et les tarifs.43

According to Gaston Bachelard, the room is our first universe, and it shapes our
understanding and expectation of subsequent spaces we encounter. In La Poétique de
l’espace, Bachelard studies our domestic environment and demonstrates how inhabiting or
investing in a space turns it into a place.44 For Bachelard, a space becomes a place with the
passage of time, which leaves traces and memories on the landscape. This can be applied to
the bedroom as well as the city. Here, though, since traces of the past are missing, the
description must revert to the basics of geometry, so that at least an outline may be drawn of

42 Echenoz, Au piano, p.89.
43 Ibid., p.92.
the unfamiliar world. Echenoz, in order to present us with an uninhabited world, disrobes our idea of a room, declutters our expectation and leaves us with an empty shell. He does, however, follow Bachelard in so far as he builds his universe from the inside out. The atmosphere and image created in this initial scene lay the foundations for what is to come. In order to construct a fictional world which lies outside our human experience, Echenoz is forced to define it in contrast to the world we know. He must, therefore, mould it from negation. Certain connections and relationships remain; the lamp is on the table, the table is by the bed and the bed is within the walls which contain, reflect or, in this case, absorb the light. As proposed by Georges Perec, our understanding of space, when it cannot be described as place, depends on formal opposition, placement and displacement. This would suggest, then, that, in creating an imaginary fictional world, the timespace must obey the geometric rules we understand and bear some relationship to the world we know, either reflecting or negating it.

Although the room Max finds himself in is clearly not an inhabited domestic space such as Bachelard describes, it is, nonetheless, recognisable to the contemporary reader. Sterile and functional, lacking décor and character, the room could well be in a hospital or basic hotel. Such spaces do lie within our everyday experience, and therefore we can sympathise with the protagonist in his cold, clinical box and understand the feelings of isolation, imprisonment and disorientation suggested. Max believes that this room is the total extent of the new universe to which he has access. He can see a door but assumes it will be locked. The pattern of negation is taken up again and doubled. The room is not locked, but it may as well be:

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Non plus. Mais, si cette porte s’ouvrait sans mal, elle donnait sur un long couloir vide, percé de portes closes entre lesquelles des appliques, régulièrement disposées, délivraient elles aussi des halos assoupis de veilleuses. Couloir si long qu’on ne distinguait pas ses limites, ni d’un coté ni de l’autre, si vide qu’il n’était rien, ne donnant sur rien, délivrant pas plus d’information que si la porte avait été verrouillée pour de bon.  

Boundless space is unfathomable. A void without break or obstacle cannot be perceived. The corridor Echenoz describes carries on to infinity, a single pattern of doors and light fixtures endlessly replicated. Rather than serving the expected function of a corridor, it does not seem to lead anywhere, but is a *mise en abyme*. The straight pathway becomes monstrously labyrinthine in the absence of stable reference points, and the numberless doors, frustrating any sense of progression, offer not the promise of escape or adventure, but a return to an identical starting point. As Georges Perec explains:

> Lorsque rien n’arrête notre regard, notre regard porte très loin. Mais si il ne rencontre rien, il ne voit rien; il ne voit que ce qu’il rencontre: l’espace, c’est ce qui arrete le regard, ce sur quoi la rue bute: l’obstacle, des briques, un angle, un point de fuite: l’espace, c’est quand ça fait un angle, quand ça s’arrete, quand il faut tourner pour que ça reparte.

Space, like time, can only be understood when we perceive a difference. Space, then, like time, depends on change. Our movement in timespace can only be written in relation to changing timespace models around us. By removing the element of change necessary to time and space, Echenoz creates a hellish desert in which time and space stand still. A space without issue, without horizon and without end is a dead space.

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47 This corresponds with Gilles Lipovetsky’s work on the hypermodern in *L’Ère du vide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).
48 ‘On sortit de la chambre pour s’engager dans le couloir, le long duquel s’alignaient donc des deux côtés, séparées par ces appliques qui étaient des sortes de torchères en bois doré, des portes semblable à celle de la chambre de Max. Ces portes, qui n’étaient pas numérotées, étaient fermées sauf une seule entrouverte laissant apercevoir une cellule également identique à la sienne’, *Au piano*, p.95.
49 Perec, *Espèces d’espace*, p.159-60.
The more we read, the more we realise that, following Bachelard, Echenoz has set up our expectation of his imagined world through the initial inventory of the bedroom. Max is enclosed in a timeless void. This universe seems to turn all our timespace ideas upside down. We have no point of reference, only endless reproductions, swelling and superimposing themselves until they build a blank and confusing maze. Luckily, however, Max has a guide – a guardian angel named Béliard – and it is through him that we learn that, despite appearances, Max is in a transitory state.

Already we have seen that spaces do not function as we expect in this world; the corridor acts as a closed room and now we are told that the Centre, which we have guessed is made up of multiple closed rooms, is, in fact, a passage of sorts. After a short period in this holding bay, and an apparently arbitrary selection process, Max will be issued into either a paradisiacal garden – an obvious reinterpretation of Eden, with Candidian references - ‘Mais regardez-moi ça comme c’est joli, s’émerveilla Béliard, ils peuvent même cultiver leur jardin’ – or ‘la section urbaine’ which, presented as the alternative, we take to mean hell. In contrast to the stasis and sterility of the Centre, the garden is a place of movement and diversity. It is described as ‘de forme à peu près ronde’ (p.137), reflecting the perfection of

50 This replication seems to differ from the repetition we looked at in Chapter Three regarding Modiano, where we saw that some form of progress and change was inherent in the idea of ‘eternal return’, whereas here no change is perceptible.
52 Echenoz, Au piano, p.94.
53 Ibid., p.141.
the circle and contrasting with the horizontal and vertical linearity of the building. The people there lead a nomadic existence, living peacefully apart, enjoying space, autonomy and nature.

A shadow of the parc Monceau described earlier in the novel in ‘la variété, l’abondance et la polychromie de la végétation’ (p.13), is recalled in the ‘paysages étonnamment variés, heuresement combinés, montage de toutes les entités géomorphologiques imaginables’ (p.137) and, just as the Parisien park offered an oasis of calm amid the bustle of the city, so the garden affords tranquility and repose in natural beauty. On the other hand, the urban sector turns out to be a dismal and crowded Paris. We understand, therefore, that Max is in some kind of purgatory, but one which differs from the received Catholic construct. Traditionally, purgatory is held to be an intermediate stage from which heaven is reached, a place of trial, for the penance of sins, before the souls attain everlasting peace. Common church teaching placed it in the bowels of earth, not far from hell.\footnote{At the turn of the last century a French Jesuit, Fr F X Shouppe, compiled a guide to purgatory using the doctrine of the church, the teachings of theologians and the revelations and apparitions of saints, including ideas on its location and helpful chapters on how to avoid it. Abbé François-Xavier Shouppe, \textit{Le Dogme du Purgatoire illustrés par des Faits et de Révélations Particulières} (Bruxelles: Société belge de librairie, 1891).} Purgatory had a hierarchical system in which there were levels of suffering, an idea familiar to us from Dante’s \textit{Divine Comedy} and a place of temporal confusion where hours can seem like years and where time is relative, proportional to the suffering. Christian themes run throughout \textit{Au piano}. Apart from the character of Béliard, the guardian angel, whose Christian name is ‘Christian’, references are made in descriptions – ‘Chambre sombre et plutôt confortable, donc, comme il doit s’en trouver dans certaines abbayes aménagées en lieux de retraite spirituelle, destinés à des âmes disposant de revenus également confortables’ (p.92) – and in, for instance, the books left for Max, among them Dante, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, hrétien de Troyes and ‘\textit{Jérusalem délivrée} dans la vieille traduction (1840) d’Auguste Desplaces’.\footnote{\textit{Au piano}, pp.102-3. Max’s pursuit of Rose through purgatory and hell recalls not only Dante and Beatrice but also the Orpheus myth. For further examples, see Dominique Jullien, ‘Echenoz’s Modern-Day Mystics’, \textit{SubStance}, 111. 35.3 (2006), 51-63.}
Although time stretches and shrinks in this section of *Au piano*, it is not in any way linked to punishment for the expiation of sins. Without sunlight, the passage of days is unclear, and Max is unsure when he arrived and when he is due to leave. Time, punctuated only by mealtimes, drags on in boredom or slips by while he is sleeping. Chapter Eighteen gives a good example of Echenoz’s time-play, which observes tense and sequence but condenses action. Far from a punishment, it is the realisation of a dream.

Preceded by the promise ‘Et c’est ainsi que Max Delmarc, un beau soir, posséderait Doris Day’ (p. 143) and followed by the perfectly mundane ‘Le lendemain matin, Max s’éveilla très tard et tout seul dans son lit’ (p. 145), Chapter Eighteen is one of the author’s little jokes. Its inclusion is unnecessary and adds no information at all; in fact, it interrupts the flow of the narrative, but, in so doing, underlines its strangeness. The chapter in its entirety reads:

*Nuit d’amour avec Doris Day*

It should be pointed out that, centred and unpunctuated, this line is not a continuation of the prose. Perhaps it could be read as a single line of verse, a Mallarmé-like typographical game with its regular rhythm underlined by the repeated sonority and verticality of the ‘d’. On the other hand, it functions rather like a title. The chronology of the novel is observed in the inclusion of chapter and page number, but the text itself is missing. The absent scene has duration and movement but is left as a fantasy. We have already seen how what is lacking can be key. The lack of change and action in this section of *Au piano* underlines the passivity of Max’s existence in the Centre. When things do happen, they are left unwritten because they are outside the life, or rather, death of the Centre. Even Max’s attempt to escape leads nowhere.
Our one external perspective of the Centre only confirms what we have already guessed. Bored and frustrated and taking advantage of the Sunday stillness, Max, with no clear objective, decides to escape. Although daylight floods the reception area, the immediate surroundings of the Centre differ from what can be seen from the windows. ‘L’extérieur consistait en un paysage minimum’, ‘un stade intermédiaire, gris neutre et plutôt frais de la nature’ (p.124). From here Max sees exactly what he had imagined the Centre would look like, an image he had built up from his various rides in the elevator and, therefore, one of verticality rather than expanse.56 The Centre is a tall building about forty storeys high, tower-like, flanked with various wings and lower buildings. With nowhere to go, and feeling just as lost outside the Centre as in, Max wanders alone until he is picked up and brought back. His plan is aborted and his action leads to nothing, but no further information is necessary in describing his prison; the universe already exists in our imagination, or rather in our memory.

What is so familiar about Echenoz’s purgatory? Labelled the Centre in Au piano, this lifeless building lies at the centre of the novel, at the centre of Max’s story, between heaven and hell, between life and death, between the pre-death Paris of section one and the post-death Paris of section three. In fact, the Centre may lie in Paris itself.

In anthropological terms, a centre is the hub of social life, a meeting place for the passing on of information and goods. It is also a position of power and control. The very notion of centrality is problematised in the contemporary city. No longer distinguished as an important intersection – the convergence of roads, the market place, etc. – the centre has been multiplied and fragmented, and its significance diluted. Centres now proliferate and, paradoxically, surround us. In many ways, the anonymity of Echenoz’s purgatory is recognisable and calls to mind other centres we have known. Through its identical rooms and

long corridors we see a conference centre or bland hotel; in its lifts and lobbies and monotonous décor we recognise shopping centres and airport lounges. In a darker sense there may also be the image of a migrant holding centre, a triage point with the promise of freedom or deportation. The Centre, instead of being a landmark, is a non-place and, as such, is not static; it is an in-between place which cannot be inhabited but must be passed through.

Jean Echenoz attempts to incorporate Augé’s non-places into his novels by writing of motorways, railway stations and shopping centres. In *Au piano* he constructs the non-place par excellence, a timespace of inbetweenness and passing-through. It is as if he has lifted the non-place out of its context in order to scrutinise it from all angles and test its possibilities and limitations as a fictional landscape. Inverting our imagined location of purgatory, the Centre is apparently raised. Although we are told that Max is not elevated after death, the view of Paris from the Centre is from above and from a great distance, and the only way out seems to be by plane.\(^57\) This is not, however, the first non-place in *Au piano*. If we look at the chase sequence in Chapter Ten, we find a confirmation of the inaction and anonymity of non-places.

Max is pursuing his lost love, Rose, whom he believes to have glimpsed entering the Paris underground system. While recognising the futility of his project – ‘L’entreprise est absurde. On ne suit pas un métro’ (p. 68) – Max travels in first one direction, then the other, barely noticing the station platforms which all merge into one. The chase ends in failure and the narrator admits, ‘il ne se passe pas grand-chose dans cette scène’ (p. 71). In the same way, Max’s wanderings in the Centre come to nothing. They add little information and do not improve our understanding of the timespace. He meets no one, the corridors are deserted and we get the impression of a true wasteland.\(^58\) If, on the other hand, we turn our attention to

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\(^57\) In another perversion of Augé’s idea of contractually entered non-places requiring passports and credit cards etc., Max, in returning to Paris, must change his identity and forge his own papers.

\(^58\) In *Lac*, too, Echenoz uses transport systems in his narrative but, although briefcase switches are made on bus lines, they have no real effect on the story and nothing changes.
scene changes and action, we see the importance of liminality and that each event is preceded by a knock at the door.

**Thresholds**

In *Au piano* thresholds are timespaces of change and action. According to Bachelard, the door is an entire cosmos of the half-open. The door in Echenoz marks anticipation, surprise (more often than not Max is wrong about who is about to come in) and heralds a scene change. Each extra piece of information, each step along the story, requires the crossing of a threshold – either Max to explore and escape, or other characters to enter and explain. Doors break space, they protect or barricade, hide or reveal, and necessitate some sort of movement. They are dynamic and are spaces of transition and change. The opening door regularly interrupts stasis and moves the narrative forward:

> ….on frappa à sa porte. Encore Béliard, sans doute, mais non, ce n’était pas lui (p.103)
> Puis on frappa de nouveau à la porte – grands dieux, ça n’arrêtait pas – et cette fois-ci c’était encore le sourire de Doris Day (p.104)
> et la porte, justement, s’ouvrit sur Béliard (p.108)
> Puis Max n’était pas rentré dans sa chambre depuis trois minutes qu’on frappa à la porte. C’était encore Doris qui entra sous un pretexte futile (p.143)

The door referred to above is the door of Max’s room, the drab windowless room we have already described. Within the Centre, this room is the pivotal location of narrative and acts like a theatrical stage or sit-com set where we focus on a confined space and watch characters enter and exit, moving the story on with dialogue rather than action. On a larger scale, the thresholds of the Centre also yield information. It is through the hall’s bay windows that Max first sees Paris and the park. The curvature of these windows gives an impression of vast dimension but also of slight distortion, an idea reaffirmed when, moved to a new windowed room, Max is given binoculars through which to contemplate the park.
The Centre has multiple common rooms and restaurants in which residents can interact, but its most prominent and elaborate feature is the entrance:

Des couloirs, toujours des couloirs qui aboutirent enfin dans un hall gigantesque éclairé à giorno par des lustres en cristal et en bronze éclatants, secondés par d’oblongs vitraux pastel, et d’où s’élevait un escalier monumental à double révolution. Voilà, dit Béliard, c’est ici l’entrée du Centre.59

Strangely, apart from Max, we never see anyone use this entrance. In a particularly intriguing scene Max, escaping from the building, finds himself trapped momentarily inside a revolving door.60 Reflecting on this timespace, we can see that the threshold, here expanded and frozen long enough to excite our attention, is a literary timespace invested with a potential future. When the doors open, something will change.

A similar scene appears in Nous trois. While an earthquake and tidal wave destroy Marseille, the hero is stuck in a lift, and it is only when the doors open and he emerges into the changed landscape that the story moves forward. It is interesting to note that lifts play the role of moving corridors in Echenoz’s works, so that a vertical rather than horizontal movement often dominates. This is true, of course, of Nous trois, where the hero is launched on a space mission, but can also be said of Au piano.61 In the Centre the corridors are confusing, but lifts bring Max directly to where he wants to be. They are passages, empty of action but accessing it. They transport and communicate but enforce passivity on the part of the character.

59 Echenoz, Au piano, p.111.
60 ‘Cependant un objectif régissait sa déambulation: se rapprocher, par cercles concentriques et l’air de rien, de la porte à tambour du hall; celle-ci atteinte, la pousser légèremenent pour s’assurer qu’elle n’était pas bloquée; puis, cela vérifié, la pousser fermement, entrer dans son espace et sortir le plus naturellement du monde. Il éprouva une brève sensation claustrophobique quand il se retrouva trois secondes enfermé dans le sas rotatif de la porte, cependant que la petit idée quittait l’arrière de sa tête pour grandir et envahir entièrement celle-ci – je vais me tirer, bon Dieu, je me tire d’ici’, pp.122-123
61 Nous trois is full of non-places – chance meetings on motorways, shopping centres and outer space – but again, despite these adventures, the hero exhibits no perceptible change apart from the fact that he can no longer choose a shirt with the confidence he showed at the beginning.
If we bring together the properties of the threshold we find that it symbolises the characteristics we have been searching for in literary timespaces. The threshold marks a defined and functional space, it has a recognisable and unchanging geometry, it is charged with temporality, particularly a potential future, and it is dynamic, requiring action and movement, a passing-through. Within common speech, too, thresholds symbolise spatio-temporal division. Phrases such as ‘closing the door’ are used to refer metaphorically to ‘moving on’ and exiting a specific past. In the same way, the Centre, Echenoz’s purgatory, reflects all these elements. It is a threshold, an entre-deux and, while nothing significant happens in the Centre itself, it acts as a division within the novel and marks a change in the protagonist. Perhaps the term ‘threshold’ or ‘entre-deux’ is more useful than ‘non-place’, which suggests fixity and negation rather than the transitory nature both Augé and Certeau were describing.

**Paris as Hell**

Max, after his stay in the Centre, is told that he is being sent to ‘la section urbaine’, a place we have been told little about and which has ‘ce nom idiot récupéré sur les anciens tickets de métro’ (p.148). We have guessed that, in opposition to the garden ‘la section urbaine’ is hell, but Béliard explains, ‘On va tout simplement vous renvoyer chez vous, voilà. Enfin, quand je dis chez vous, je veux dire à Paris’ (p.149). So if Max is merely being sent home, what is it that makes it so hellish?

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63 Again we see that Perec has also set up this opposition. ‘Le problème n’est pas tellement de savoir comment on est arrivé là, mais simplement de reconnaître qu’on est arrivé là: il n’y a pas un espace, un bel espace, un bel espace alentour, un bel espace tout autour de nous, il y a plein de petits bouts d’espace, et l’un de ces bouts est un couloir de métropolitain, et un autre de ces bouts est un jardin public… Espèces d’espaces, p.14.
Firstly, Max has already recognised the city from his limbo but the image is grey and nightmarish:

L’une de ces baies donnait sur une ville ressemblant comme une soeur à Paris car balisée par ses repères classiques – diverses tours d’époques et de fonctions variées, d’Eiffel à Maine-Montparnasse et Jussieu, basilique et monuments variés – mais vue de très loin en plongée. Il n’était pas possible d’établir sous quel angle on distinguait cette ville et surtout où l’on se trouvait au juste, une telle perspective de Paris n’étant envisageable d’aucun point de vue connu de Max. Quoi qu’il en fût, comme Paris ou son sosie paraissait étouffer sous une pluie noire et synthétique déversée par des nuages de pollution, brunâtres et gonflés comme des outres, la lumière arrivant de ce côté était opaque, dépressive, presque éteinte alors qu’elle arrivait doucement, affectueusement et clairement par l’autre baie.  

In the second place, our pianist must obey three rules: he must change his identity, change his profession and refrain from contacting his family and friends. The punishment, then, we could say, is a change or loss of identity. Isn’t this one of the concerns Augé expresses in his call for an ethnology of solitude and isn’t it the anonymity of non-places that forces an analysis of this environment? Max, therefore, is being banished to the supermodern city – he will find himself alone and disorientated in his own hometown. As Jean-Pierre Le Dantec writes in Jean Echenoz: « une tentative modeste de description du monde »,

l’enfer, il me semble c’est pour lui [Max] deux choses, hormis le regret d’être passé à côté de l’amour avec Rose: l’impossibilité de boire et l’interdiction de jouer du piano, c’est-à-dire les seules échappatoires dont il disposait dans sa vie antérieure pour échapper de temps à autre, quelque peu, à l’enfer.

Max’s return is reflective of many contemporary journeys. In his confusion and frustration we can see the lot of immigrant and migrant workers. He must find (or rather forge) identity papers, he needs a job and accommodation, and he has been robbed of his past. He cannot explain where he has come from or who he was before, so his rebirth is just that. In fact, there

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64 Echenoz, Au piano, pp.98-99.
has been no change in the city. Max is the only one to have undergone a transformation, and it is his new position within the city that makes it hellish. After his experience, Max’s view of the world is altered: ‘Max considérait tout cela d’un oeil intéressé mais détaché, oeil de ressuscité revenu au monde et regardant ce monde comme à travers une vitre’.66

In the third part of the novel, post-death Paris, windows feature significantly. In the taxi from the airport, his first image of Paris is the suburbs:

À travers la vitre du taxi, il aperçut les longues barres et les hautes tours de la banlieue est qu’on voit du côté de Bagnolet, quand on revient de l’aéroport par l’autoroute A3. Max avait toujours du mal à croire que ces constructions contenaient de vrais appartements qu’occupaient de vrais gens, dans de vraies cuisines et de vraies salles de bains, de vraies chambres où l’on s’accouplait authentiquement, où l’on se reproduisait réellement, c’était à peine imaginable.67

The sense of unreality fades as Max moves from the numbered labyrinth of ring roads to the named streets of east Paris. The heavy rain, like that he had seen falling on the city from purgatory, also clouds perception, so that Paris is in a grey haze, slightly blurred. We can see in the network of transport systems, motorways, bus lanes and roundabouts the grids of line and intersection, a geometry which has an aesthetic of its own. Indeed, non-place falls readily into shapes we recognise and is close to our initial understanding of space. It is a space based on and filled with figures instead of words. In the digital age this is hardly surprising, and we can talk about non-place in terms of number, which, among the road signposts and multistorey floor references, is based on the zero and one of the isolated individual. We can see, too, a Wizard of Oz-like quality to Max’s journey into the afterlife, although, instead of finding a paradise in technicolour, he lands in a subdued reality. In fact, we could discount the whole central sequence of the novel as delirium, the confused imagination of an unconscious, injured man. There are, after all, no human witnesses to Max’s death; we leave

66 Echenoz, Au piano, p.167.
67 Echenoz, Ibid., p.182.
himm bleeding on a pavement and, if we skip to section three, find him awakening in an airplane. Could this be a post-operative amnesiac waking from a dream or could the non-place of the Centre be a grotesque representation of the liminal space of the airport lounge?

In the third section of Au piano the theme of centrality is continued, with Max flying to Iquitos, near the Equator, and then back to Paris, with its reverberating debates of decentralisation. Loneliness and loss, too, pervade. Max has moved from an elite concert hall to a dingy pick-up joint where he falls for another of Echenoz’s ‘grandes blondes’. The image of the perfect woman is replaced by that of the single mother, and Max becomes a house-husband. ‘Le temps passait ainsi dans une ambience de salle d’attente’ (p.196). Of course, the twist in the tale, the cruel hell of the story, is that Max’s true love, Rose, the woman he has been searching for for years, is stolen from him by Béliard, his guardian angel. The scene is played out in a shopping centre, one of the grands magasins, and mixes the pathetic denouement with commercial brand names:

Ce fut alors que, paraissant au fond du magasin puis traversant tout le département des parfums, Max vit Béliard se diriger vers Rose et l’aborder, lui, frontalement et sans préambule comme s’il l’avait toujours connue. Entre Chanel et Shiseido, ils se lancèrent aussitôt dans un échange animé.68

Parts I and III, therefore, while set in a single Paris, manage to highlight the modern in one and the supermodern in the other, and describe the shift from community to isolation.

The identity of a modern place, as we saw in Chapter Three, is constructed over time, and its definition as a space with a past comes from the fact that people have passed through and changed the landscape either by participating in it or writing about it – it is a poetic or narrative timespace full of stories. In this way, we could say that places are inhabited; they conserve and hold the past. The non-places of the contemporary city, on the other hand, do not retain the traces of history, but remain blank. Modern places have a fixity and stasis uncommon

68 Echenoz, Au piano, p.221.
in contemporary non-places. They can be described and named, as in the case of *le parc Monceau* or simply ‘Paris’, so that setting a scene in a recognisable place adds colour and depth to the story. In the Paris of section one Max has a career and a certain celebrity, a daily routine and a love interest. He has family and a close friend, and, as we know, he has a past. All of this is erased when he returns to life and, instead of a past, he is faced with an eternal future. We said earlier that it is Max rather than Paris that has changed during his period in limbo, but, like his cosmetic surgery, the transformation is superficial and barely perceptible. The alterations in his lifestyle are imposed rather than derived from a personality shift and, if his stay in purgatory was meant to cleanse him of any sin, it has only replaced his alcoholism with an aversion to drink. The single real change is in his perspective due to his new position in society.

We defined non-places in the negative, lacking history, community and individuality. Max himself reflects these absences in section three of *Au piano* and suffers the dislocation we have already associated with works by Annie Ernaux, for example. Unlike places, non-places do not hold a past and are therefore uninhabited. Max is forced to operate in a monotonous present, and it is loneliness and loss that shadow his days. Georges Perec, in listing ‘L’inhabitable’, could be describing this post-death Paris:

> L’hostile, le gris, l’anonyme, le laid, les couloirs du métro, les bains-douches, les hangars, les parkings, les centres de tri, les guichets, les chambres d’hôtel.\(^{69}\)

These hostile, uninhabited non-places are instead usually spaces of transit. Augé describes them as spaces of circulation, communication and consumption. In each of these cases, however, they are spaces with issue; they are transitional, and human presence in them is temporary. As we have said, non-places encourage movement. Max is told at the beginning of section two that he is ‘en transit’, so even the Centre is a communication from one state or

\(^{69}\) Perec, *Espèces d’espaces*, p176.
place to another. Since these non-places have release, they are inscribed in time – they have a future. Therefore, non-places are spaces with a future rather than spaces with a past.

**Pas d’histoires**

As a basis for storytelling we can imagine that the blankness of non-places provides the ultimate virgin backdrop against which to draw an adventure. However, it appears that, in the books of Echenoz and others, these spaces remain just that in the text: absent. As a timespace, non-places are spaces with a future, but a literary timespace tells a story. If we think back to our study of Patrick Modiano in Chapter Three, we see that the human experience of literary timespaces nurtures the creation of literature and fiction. When Modiano’s heroes pass through a place, they emerge enriched with stories. In this way, a place has a literary value and adds something to the narrative. A literary timespace, we have established, is a place in which something happens or has happened. Since non-place retains no past, it tells no story. We remember the difficulties Annie Ernaux faced in describing her no-man’s land, and Jean Echenoz begins his passage in the Centre with negation and the phrase, ‘pas d’histoires’ (p.89).

Are non-places, then, devoid of the possibility of fiction? The readability of non-places is, on one level, rather simple. We are directed by signs and screens, announcements and arrows; there is a system and a routine. In this fact lies a possible comfort – if all non-places are the same, we can move easily from one to another, obeying instructions. On the other hand, the lack of change is exactly what strikes us as disturbing. Max in the Centre is an extended study of the movement of an individual through a non-place, and we have already detailed his exploration of the building. He is disorientated by the lack of reference points and easily lost in the maze of corridors. Ernaux, in an effort to map her way through the *ville nouvelle*, plotted her passage in note-form. So far we see no satisfactory rendering of the timespace. Or is that
so? Perhaps the fragmentary and incomplete descriptions are, in fact, most representative of both the timespace and the experience of it.

_Au piano_’s Centre is an excellent test bed for our investigation of non-place as a literary timespace. Echenoz stretches our understanding of time and space by placing it after death and ‘out of this world’ but, contrary to Patrick Kéchichian’s assertion that it is an inverse of our world, we have seen that, in fact, it is very much part of our world.

Dans la réalité concrète du monde d’aujourd’hui, les lieux et les espaces, les lieux et les non-lieux s’enchevêtront, s’interpénètrent…Le retour au lieu est le recours de celui qui fréquente les non-lieux.70

Since non-places are uninhabitable they must give way to something else and lead us back to a place. They must be considered in terms of the movement they encourage and not merely as static deserts; while in themselves they are usually spaces of passivity, they perform a dynamic function in propelling us towards the future.

**Non-places as literary timespaces**

The Centre in _Au piano_ bears little transformative power: ‘Si Max, à l’évidence, était méconnaissable, on ne pouvait attribuer sa transformation à rien de particulier’.71 If a literary timespace is a space in which something happens, then the lack of action in a non-place complicates our investigation. It could be that, by setting stories in non-places, authors are endeavouring to, over time, transform them into places so that tales will be associated with specific non-places and a literary and cultural history begun. However, this seems neither possible nor desirable. Stories slip from the surface of non-places, which do not serve the same function as place within the text. They are not the literary timespaces we discussed in relation

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70 Augé, _Non-lieux_, p.134.
71 Echenoz, _Au piano_, p.162.
to Modiano and, as we saw in our study of Annie Ernaux, these spaces were reflected in a piece of non-fiction and even a non-narrative, reduced to snapshot descriptions and disjointed portraits. In Chapter Eleven of *Au piano* examples of this difference are presented in close succession. Returning from his abortive search for Rose in the Paris underground system, Max thinks he spots her in Bel-Air:

On aurait à première vue peu de raisons de s’appesantir sur cette station sauf que c’est là, contre tout vraisemblance, que Max a cru reconnaître à nouveau Rose. Et ça s’est passé comme ça. Max arrivait sur un quai désert, direction Nation, quand une rame s’est présentée qui venait en sens inverse, vers Étoile – ces histoires de rames, ça n’en finit pas. Des passagers sont descendus, presque aucun n’est monté puis la rame s’est éloignée. Max a distraitement posé son regard sur les voyageurs se dirigeant vers la sortie du quai avant de disparaître dans l’escalier. Or parmi eux, de dos, trois quarts dos, on aurait bien dit que c’était encore elle…tout s’est encore passé en peu de secondes.72

Again, the passage is full of movement – directional, and repetitive. We have Max, alone, opposite a faceless crowd, and his view of the supposed Rose is only partial. Of course, this second pursuit is just as fruitless as the first, and the phantom Rose is lost once more. This scene is followed immediately by an encounter on a city street:

Mais le lendemain matin, comme il sortait de chez lui, Max croisa de nouveau la femme au chien. Elle déployait cette fois son élégance de base…et à peine l’eut-elle vue qu’elle marcha fermement vers lui. Ah, monsieur, dit-elle aussitôt, je vous ai vu hier soir à la télévision, par hasard, en zappant.73

We learn from the conversation that the woman is married and the husband later attends Max’s final concert, so the story progresses from here in the usual way. But what did the metro scene add to the narrative? Max’s journeys on the underground can be confusing to read. There are detailed itineraries to be followed, which merely lead us back to where he started. In order to fill the time he muses on ticket stubs and subway hygiene, but nothing

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72 Echenoz, *Au piano*, p.75.
73 Ibid., pp.77-78.
significant happens during the excursions. Nothing changes. However, the scenes are not
void. As we accompany Max across Paris, we feel the tension of a possible outcome. In
choosing to set the middle section of *Au piano* in an imaginary world, Echenoz affords
himself the freedom to test some possible encounters. He allows the fantastic to unfold,
giving Max Doris Day as a nurse and introducing a repressed Dean Martin. Perhaps his
reduction of Chapter Eighteen to a single line proves that it is the anticipation rather than the
resolution that counts in the text. Clearly, the novelist, hoping to carry his readers along to the
end, employs various tactics in order to postpone the denouement. We know that Max is in
transit, and a certain tension is built up in the opposition of heaven and hell, but it is quite
clear from the extensive description of the garden and relative mystery surrounding *la section urbaine* which direction has been chosen for him. Echenoz uses his non-places to entertain, to
intrigue and to effect a scene change. Although no change happens within the non-place, in
its function as a threshold it marks a division and can, therefore, move the story forward.

*Envoyée spéciale*

It will come as no surprise that, in returning to the sort of adventure or detective novel
Echenoz parodied in earlier works, such as *Le Méridien de Greenwich* and *Cherokee*, in
*Envoyée spéciale* the author plays on his own corpus and on similar themes, tropes and
patterns he has experimented with elsewhere. Envoyée spéciale recalls *Au piano* in its
three-part structure, the central character Constance’s cyclical journey and passage through
captivity, her walks in the *cimetière de Passy*, and in more knowing nods, such as the
rendezvous in *parc Monceau* where the characters pass the statues of Maupassant, Musset
and Chopin, and the unexpected appearance of a piano in the farmyard where Constance is
being held:

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Il y a quelques fois des pianos là où on les attend le moins: celui-ci, droit, vermoulo, déverni, sans marque de fabrique à l’entrée de la grange, tenait d’abord lieu d’étagère où s’entassaient des contenants vides de produits agricoles. Constance, ayant soulevé son abattant dans un bruit chuintant de bouche pâteuse, découvrit un clavier auquel restaient presque toutes ses dents, quoique fort jaunes et cariées par leurs dièses et bémols. Pas moyen d’en extraire un son: on avait dû recycler ses cordes à des fins de jardinage, user comme petit bois de sa table d’harmonie puis grillager son cadre métallique et ses pieds pour y inventer un clapier.  

Names are, again, important, with Constance remaining one of the few characters without a double identity, despite the lingering celebrity of her one-off pop hit that makes her a perfect honey-trap in the third act of the novel, so she serves as a reproach for her uninterested and disloyal husband, Lou Tausk, real name Louis-Charles Coste. The aptly named Passy cemetery marks a liminal space between the present and the afterlife and between Constance’s everyday existence and the drama that befalls her. The novel opens with Constance being abducted from the graveyard by a man asking directions for rue Pétrarque, and closes with Constance once again being approached by a man asking the way to the same street. Constance answers, ‘naturellement’ and, in that final word, we can read a resignation to the order of things, the inevitability of recurrence, the punctuated laugh of the author, and possibly an openness to adventure.  

In Envoyée spéciale, Echenoz shows the rural to be just as much a non-place as the urban. Constance wakes to find herself in a series of nondescript locked rooms reminiscent of the Centre or ‘une chambre d’hôtel maigrement étoilé’. The descriptions are, again, in the negative: ‘la chambre ne présentait aucun signe distinctif, nul detail pertinent permettant d’identifier dans quelle construction, quelle ville et même sur quel continent elle pouvait bien se trouver’ (p.36). Moved from the city to the central department of la Creuse – the name and location cannot be accidental – aside from the ‘bande-son rurale’, Constance has no way of

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75 Echenoz, Envoyée spéciale, p.109. In an interview with Mollat in March 2016, Echenoz tells us that this house, in fact, belongs to his good friend Pierre Michon.  
76 Echenoz, Envoyée spéciale, p.313.  
77 Ibid., p.35
discovering where she is and, having searched the room for clues and found nothing more than ten volumes of an encyclopedia, she realises, ‘nul autre ouvrage ne se trouvait là qui aurait pu – annuaire ou guide locale – lui indiquer dans quelle région, quel pays elle se trouvait’. What is familiar and local becomes other-worldly and terrifying:

le hurlement lointain d’un animal a tranché soudain le calme des choses: cri puissant, déchirant qui a saisi Constance tel un jet d’acide, coupe de rasoir ou mine antipersonnel et dont elle n’aurait pu dire, onagre ou glyptodon, quel genre de bête venait de l’émettre.

And, of course, the reverse is true too. Dramatic, even tragic events are passed over as mundane and boring, the bank robbery Tausk carried out with Pognel as a youth is barely worth mentioning, and Constance’s kidnapping is treated as an inconvenience or embarrassment in which not even the delivery of a severed finger can provoke a reaction from her husband, who is more concerned, ironically, with clipping his nails. Echenoz highlights this in the structure and pace of the narrative by dedicating long, detailed passages to, for example, the subway journey from Tausk’s apartment to his brother’s law offices (pp.41-43), followed by the brief and off-hand description of the crime:

Tausk y a exposé la situation. Constance enlevée, rançon demandée, photo préoccupante, menaces traditionnelles et qu’est-ce qu’on fait? Situation à vrai dire si banale, comme on en voit tellement souvent, que nous sommes tous un peu embarrassés.

Temporal and authorial games are at play throughout the novel, with the narrator directly addressing the reader and commenting on over-long sentences or incongruous interruptions. Chapter Thirty attempts simultaneous action with humorous interjections from the narrator:

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78 Echenoz, Envoyée spéciale, pp.62-3. Stylistically, Echenoz’s writing remains poetic and plays with what is and isn’t there, as in this description of the same room: ‘Produit probable de décennies d’absence ou de negligence, englué de couches poussiéreuses coagulées, conglomerées, coalescentes, l’ensemble était à peine visible dans une pénombre excluant tout idée de couleur’, p.62.

79 Ibid., p.63.

80 Ibid., p.47.
Et au même instant…

Toujours dans le même instant…

Et pas du tout au même instant, car juste après le début de ce chapitre…

This pattern of upending expectations continues with the truly dramatic happening off-stage and the minutiae of everyday life being afforded disproportionate detail. Stasis and movement are juxtaposed in the comings and goings of characters across Paris in metros and taxis, and between the city and the rural hideaway, but nothing happens, Tausk takes no action to liberate his wife and she ‘s’habiterait à son état de recluse, au point de ne plus se considérer comme telle’ (p.106). Despite the promises of intrigue and suspense, the Chekovian appearance of a gun and the vulnerable situation of our heroine, nothing comes of the kidnapping, and Constance, two-thirds of the way through the novel, is returned home. Her captivity has been, we are told, a way of conditioning her for what is about to come, and, we imagine, of conditioning our own expectations for the denouement.

Clues about exotic and dangerous locations have been sprinkled throughout the novel in street names, such as ‘passage de Pékin, rue du Sénégal, rue de Pali-Kao’ (p.25), and in a vocabulary of landmines, treason and nuclear fractures, but there is still an element of surprise when Constance asks where she is being sent and is told, ‘C’est très simple, a répondu le general, vous aller déstabiliser la Corée du Nord’ (p.192). All the action and adventure of the spy mission we have been waiting for will, therefore, be condensed into the third section of the novel. However, here again, things are not what they seem, and Echenoz teases us with cliff-hangers and deflated resolutions and, after a typically detailed description of the flight on Air China’s B777-300ER, our protagonists arrive in Pyongyang to find that

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81 Echenoz, Envoyée spéciale, pp.228-233.
82 Both Constance’s abduction and Max’s period in purgatory can be read in terms of carceral spatiality as explored by Dominique Moran, Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration (Ashgate: Farnham, 2015), and Carceral Spatiality: Dialogues between Geography ad Criminology (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
‘tout avait l’air paisible, normal, neuf’ and ‘manquait fort d’exotisme’ (p.213-14).\(^{83}\) Installed in her hotel, Constance finds nothing to suggest she is in Asia. The hotel could be in any large city, and, escorted on trips around the city, the shopping centres have nothing exceptional about them and the night clubs resemble nightclubs across the planet. This would seem to support Marc Augé’s assertions on the proliferation of non-places and their identity crises. Despite Constance’s travels, she finds nothing new: ‘Adieu sauvages! Adieu voyages!’ as Claude Lévi-Strauss lamented at the end of *Tristes Tropiques*, anticipating perhaps Augé’s anthropology of the near.\(^{84}\) Structurally reminiscent of *Au piano, Envoyée spéciale* forces Constance into a type of purgatory during her captivity in the countryside for an extended period of time – about one year, we are told – but where there occurs no obvious change or action, and then, like Max, she is returned to Paris. In a double of this move, she is then transported to North Korea, which, because of its secrecy and mystery, can be perceived as a type of non-place on the face of the globe, and this is exactly what it turns out to be: nothing different to the sterile, supermodern spaces we encounter in subway stations. Here again, the action shrinks, the agents stick to their hotel rooms, and the reconnaissance mission takes second place to the inevitable love affair between Constance and the target, Comrade Gang Un-ok. However, Echenoz pushes his exploration of the fictional possibilities of non-place further still by placing his trio of protagonists, Constance, Gang and Lieutenant Paul Objat, in the DMZ, the Demilitarised Zone separating North and South Korea. Echenoz has moved his non-place from the fantastical to the actual, but the function is the same – and what more

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\(^{83}\) Despite repeated references to ‘tourner la page’ and ending Chapter 29 with the ruthless Clément Pognel brandishing his pistol, we find, on turning that page, that he put it back in his pocket and left after a quarter of an hour.

virgin no man’s land than the DMZ?\textsuperscript{85} In the absence of all other information, the author has recourse to geographical facts:

c’est une vaste bande de terre longue d’à peu près deux cent cinquante kilomètres, large de quatre et qui, chevauchant le 38e parallèle, couvre donc un millier de kilomètres carrés, soit la surface d’un gros département français. Zone démilitarisée, donc. Mais surveillée par près de deux millions de soldats […] elle est la plus sensible et dangereuse du monde, voire, prétendent certains, de l’histoire du monde. Monde qui d’ailleurs s’accorde à la tenir pour infranchissable.\textsuperscript{86}

However, here, where we expect sterility, instead we get exotic riches. The DMZ, Echenoz tells us anecdotally, is teeming with wildlife, including black bears, spotted deer, Chinese panthers and angora goats. The DMZ, then, suddenly becomes the backdrop for possible adventure complete with opposing armies, political stand-offs, dangerous animals and no map through this jungle, but this promise is again frustrated as the narrator has us wait for nightfall – ‘ça a été long’ – and, in the meantime – ‘au même moment à Paris’ – has us listen in on an inane conversation over what drinks to order at a bar (p.285). The Godot-game continues, with Echenoz repeatedly teasing the reader, Chapter Thirty-Nine opens with,

Mais finalement, une fois la nuit tombée: Non, a murmuré Gang, on va attendre encore un peu.\textsuperscript{87}

We are now only about twenty pages from the end of the book, so any action will be brief, in stark contrast to the almost 300 pages that have clearly been a set-up. The quickening pace adds to the suspense and tension, and the incongruity of the setting allows us to examine the narrative tricks at play. The crossing of the DMZ is, as we anticipated, condensed into pages

\textsuperscript{85} In his interview with Mollat in March 2016, Echenoz explained how, in returning to the adventure novel, he very much wanted to set it in the present day and ensure it was of its time.
\textsuperscript{86} Echenoz, Envoyée spéciale, pp.282-83.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p.289. It is clear that something of the Absurd runs through all of Echenoz’s fiction. In the Telerama interview, ‘Jean Echenoz: “Dire que je suis écrivain me paraît toujours un peu ridicule” in March 2013, the author admits that he was influenced by the work of Samuel Beckett more than by the nouveaux romanciers and that what was important was ‘cette présence du rire chez lui, qui n’est pas réductible à l’humour ni à la drôlerie, ni à l’ironie: le rire de l’existence et du monde’.
290-295, and involves more standing about and waiting. In typically blasé fashion, the characters, unperturbed by the surrounding mines, find that ‘au moins, au rythme où l’on progressait, on avait le temps de regarder le paysage’ (p.292). The trio encounter a tiger and two panthers, but have only little time to admire the abundance of natural beauty around them. They have discovered a utopia of sorts, but cannot afford to remain in this wonderland, and, in fact, the crossing is dismissed as uninteresting: ‘Il serait long, pénible de décrire en détail le parcours des fugitifs vers le sud, parcours lui-même fort pénible et n’en finissant pas’ (p.293). Reaching the southern border of the DMZ, before even this mission ends in failure and in a final wink to the non-lieu nature of the space, Echenoz has Gang open the barrier with a magnetic card that he pulls from his jacket.

Perhaps what Echenoz is trying to do, in his outrageous settings and thwarted missions, is suggest that the possibility of adventure is always present, that even anonymous or alienating spaces serve a purpose, and that distinctions between place and non-place are not necessarily defined or desirable. Given his propensity for rule-breaking and playful disrespect of narrative conventions, and perhaps his choice of North Korea in this novel, we could consider that his fictions are a comment on freedom and, particularly, on freedom of movement. Even the virtual prisons Echenoz constructs for his protagonists do not confine the characters for long. In each case there is a lack of fear. Urban non-places such as metro lines are not necessarily the alienating spaces Marc Augé suggests. In Envoyée spéciale, Lou Tausk, who we are introduced to ‘quelque part sur la ligne 2 qui traverse le nord de Paris, d’ouest en est’, finds comfort in the familiarity of his regular journeys across the city and he is attracted to the female voice announcing the stations.88 In fact the narrator highlights the possibility of diversity in the names of the stations and suggests the announcer could use ‘un

accent dramatique à Stalingrad, flamand à Anvers, dévot à La Chapelle ou cornélien à Rome – qui n’est plus dans Rome elle est toute où je suis’.  

If we review the novel as a whole, we can see that action and adventure come from encounters with other people, and that these can happen in clearly defined places, such as Passy cemetery and parc Monceau, but are also possible in the more sterile spaces of subway stations and at the southern border of the DMZ. In each case, what is paramount is the movement through the space. Although Patrick Modiano seeks out specific places for his fiction, his protagonists are aware of the possibilities surrounding them in the city:

Paris est une grande ville, mais je crois que l’on peut y rencontrer plusieurs fois la même personne et souvent dans les lieux où cela paraîtrait le plus difficile: le métro, les boulevards…Une, deux, trois fois, on dirait que le destin – ou le hasard – insiste, voudrait provoquer une rencontre et orienter notre vie vers une nouvelle direction, mais souvent vous ne repondez pas à l’appel. Vous laissez passer ce visage qui restera pour toujours inconnu et vous en éprouvez un soulagement, mais aussi un remords.  

Chance encounters direct the story and these happen by moving through the city, thereby constantly creating and destroying place and non-place and carrying that creative potential forward. Modiano’s heroes are so fearful of the emptiness and absence they sometimes feel in the city that they are constantly charting and marking their progress through the streets, ascribing a memory to each one. The Modiano hero flees non-places, repeating his itinerary to himself like a mantra, so that, while constructing a personal place for himself in Paris, he regards non-places as spaces of frightening possibility. Non-places are spaces of passage, and therefore of issue. They are spaces with future, and therefore possess an important resource for story-telling. They possess potential. Could this be a significant difference between modern place and supermodern non-place? The first may be saturated with the past and the second imbued with a future.

89 Ibid., p.42.
If we look back at the structure of *Au piano*, section one highlights Paris as a place, and hence the literary timespace of space plus past. From this stable and recognisable city, we pass through purgatory. This is dislocating within the narrative and remains detached from the rest. It is, like the farmhouse in la Creuse in *Envoyée spéciale*, a non-place in which time and space are confused, but which must give way to somewhere else. It is charged with potential outcome, a space plus future. In the final section our perspective on Paris has altered, and the hell of Max’s situation is that it is never-ending. We leave him without a past or any future possibility of change. What is becoming apparent is that, despite the spaces of lack and negation, of inaction and indecipherability that Echenoz explores in his fiction, these spaces are never wholly static but are points of departure and passage through which change happens. Just as our understanding of space depends on its limits, on where it stops or turns, and our reading of time depends on the differences we record, so our understanding of timespace depends on change. In narrative terms, this means that action must happen or the story be moved on. A literary timespace holds stories, past and future, but it is only in passing through literary timespaces that change occurs.

Christine Jérusalem writes of Echenoz that ‘Ces trajectoires chaotiques ancrées dans une géographie atopique s’imposent comme l’expression de la condition postmoderne’. For Jérusalem, Echenoz’s novels are works of deconstruction and reconstruction – deconstruction because of the gaps and voids left in the narrative, and reconstruction because of the freedom to create and their dynamic movement. In Deleuzean terms, we can see this as a process of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation in which the author defamiliarises the everyday, exoticises the banal and demystifies the extraordinary. Echenoz undermines assumptions about place and non-place and, through blurring the boundaries and stretching their

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definition, challenges the need for the distinction at all and demonstrates the fictional possibilities of both.
Chapter 5  Movement and implacement in Marie Darrieussecq

Marie Darrieussecq’s literary universe, in contrast to that of Patrick Modiano, whom she cites as an influence, focuses on female protagonists, mother-daughter relationships, the female body, reproduction and the constant presence of that feminine element, the sea. While she rejects being labelled as a feminist writer and counters arguments for gendered difference in the authorial voice, her inclusion in collections of contemporary women’s writing positions her within this framework and underlines recurrent themes that contribute, according to Shirley Jordan, to a ‘collective sense of feminine identity’. Her novels are rich exposés of human understanding of time and space and treat the interactions of body and space, movement and identity in almost forensic detail, fashioning stories from sensual and elemental experiences and blurring distinctions between interior and exterior, past and

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1 Parts of this chapter have been published previously in Brenda Garvey, ‘Embodied Spaces and Out-of-Body Experiences in Le Pays’ in Marie Darrieussecq, special issue of Dalhousie French Studies, ed. by Helena Chadderton and Gill Rye, 98 (2012), 41-49.
4 ‘Pour les femmes, cela m’est naturel d’écrire sur elles. Je suis féministe dans la vie, pas nécessairement dans mon écriture. Je ne crois pas à une écriture féminine. Idée dangeureuse, ghettoïsante, minorisante. Il y a des thèmes féminins, mais l’écriture est sans sexe, de même que le cerveau’. Marie Darrieussecq in interview with Amy Concannon and Kerry Sweeney.
present, absence and presence. Her literary experimentation reflects the flux she endeavours to represent, and challenges the reader while lulling him/her into a world that is both familiar and unusual. While her style is recognisable in its very complexity, each text employs a different rhythm and language to portray its story. Recurrent themes and motifs include: metamorphoses and the animal kingdom; death, birth and ghostly presences; emptiness, space and a search for belonging; all of which can be summarised in the notion of change and the porosity of traditionally conceived frontiers between the internal and external, between bodies and spaces and the past and the present. Her narratives rely on a belief not only in the inter-connectedness of time and space, but in its non-linear movement and a constantly renewed present that allows for spatial and temporal simultaneity of experience.

Marie Darrieussecq’s first novel, *Truismes* (1996), set explicit foundations for her future work, since it explored the interaction between the individual and society, a woman’s relationship with her changing body, and overlaps between the physical and the psychological. The novel, about a young woman’s metamorphosis into a sow, is, as Darrieussecq says, the story ‘du corps, vécu de l’intérieur’, and fantastically visualises and perverts society’s perception and expectation of the female form. The interplay between exterior and interior is essential to her subsequent works, and this extreme depiction of transformation firmly established the body as the centre for her study of space, time, place, creation and identity. It is also because of this first novel that critics began to discern Darrieussecq’s feminist sensibilities, to draw comparisons with works by Annie Ernaux and

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to discuss her writing in relation to the corporeal. While Ernaux never ventures into the fantastical, her candid accounts of sexual awakening, maternity, abortion and social definition in novels such as *La place*, *L’occupation* and *Mémoire de fille* set the scene for a re-examination of womanhood, femininity and the territory of the body. In *Truismes* Darrieussecq exposes the sexualised and objectified female body, simultaneously experienced from the inside and viewed from the outside, and suggests shifts between the particular and universal that will become more obvious in later novels, including the controversial *Clèves*.

While the female body remains central to Darrieussecq, its later depictions, though still sexualised, move towards the organic and procreative and away from notions of objectification and dominance, but in *Truismes* we see illustrations of Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘être perçu’ in which:

Tout, dans la genèse de l’habitus féminin et dans les conditions sociales de son actualisation, concourt à faire de l’expérience féminine du corps la limite de l’expérience universelle du corps-pour-autrui, sans cesse exposé à l’objectivation opérée par le regard et le discours des autres.

From the exaggerated, fleshy body of *Truismes*, Darrieussecq’s second novel, *Naissance des fantômes* (1998), concentrated instead on the absence of a body and the disappearance of the protagonist’s husband. As in Ernaux’s *Passion simple*, a woman waits, passively hoping for her lover’s return. But here we begin to glimpse Darrieussecq’s understanding of space, in its layered, fluid and permeable complexity. We may observe that this space appears to be infinite in extension and depth and to hold multiple times and spaces,

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so bodies may be present but not necessarily visible. In fact, space is heavy with the presence of bodies and their movements, and is altered by and around these bodies:

Il se mit lentement debout. Si lent que fût son mouvement je n’enregistrai qu’une sorte de dépliement de l’espace, comme si son corps, en plus de se dresser, avait déplacé les dimensions pour y retrouver un lieu problématique. L’espace semble se regrouper autour de lui, le dessiner à nouveau à peu près, l’admettre sur la longueur, la largeur et la profondeur; pourtant les murs avaient l’air perplexes quant à la position à prendre.11

Space takes on a tangible, material quality linked physically to the human body and interacting and changing with it as it moves, in a way suggested theoretically by Henri Lefebvbre and Edward Casey. The disconcerting shift described above leads to new and subtle definitions of both the body and its surrounding space, mirrored in the interplay of the past historic tense, which unconditionally charts the movement of the body and the less certain expressions of perception related to the environment, ‘comme si….. semble….avaient l’air’.

The body itself is not stable; its limits no longer confine or endure; it can spread, diminish and disappear altogether, so its efficacy in defining our location is called into question.

However, space, too, is different in the power and the absence of the void. In an interview for The French Review, Darrieussecq admitted to a need to fill this void:

Le vide est au coeur de la matière. C’est principalement fait de vide. On est toujours en train de tournoyer autour du vide. Quand le vide est trop insupportable, on le peuple de fantômes.12

These themes return in Darrieussecq’s short stories, collected and published in 2006 in Zoo, which she introduces as a collection of ‘…ces animaux un peu hagards, ces spectres à la recherche d’un corps, ces mères problématiques, ces bords de mer, ces clones tristes ou joyeux.’13 Here we find brief death and out-of-body experiences in ‘Nathanaël’; the

technology of cloning that eliminates the differences between bodies and which Darrieussecq will explore in more depth in *Notre vie dans les forêts*; the photographing of the inside of bodies in ‘Juergen, Gendre idéal’; and, in ‘Plages’, the boundary of the beach, which appears to unite dichotomies and which the narrator describes in terms of binary opposites: ‘La plage est mâle et femelle, cambouis et crinolines, abîmes et cachalots’. Again, the pattern of Darrieussecq’s obsession emerges, an exploration of limits, of the physical body, the physical environment and the fragility of identity and selfhood. The themes are interlinked and unified by an understanding of the fluidity and porosity of boundaries which I will explore in the course of this chapter though a close reading of *Le Pays* (2005) and with reference to *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (2001) and *Notre vie dans les forêts* (2017). I will focus on the examination of three spatial groupings: geography and landscape; the body as agent in the creation of place; centrality and liminality.

**Geography and landscape**

Only the most superficial knowledge of Darrieussecq’s work is necessary to recognise the importance she places on geographical entities and the physical landscape. The autobiographical short story ‘BAB’, taking its title from the former name of the conurbation of Bayonne, Anglet, Biarritz, now known as the Côte Basque-Adour, describes Darrieussecq’s native French Basque country as ‘le centre du monde’:


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The story exposes a preoccupation with origins, boundaries and situation that is reflected not only in her longer texts but also in their titles, such as *Le Mal de mer* (1999), *Claire dans la forêt* (2004) and *Le Pays* (2005). However, her geographical points of reference are not necessarily stable but often disorientating and alienating, or shifting so as to alter perspectives and challenge stasis. *Le Mal de mer*, whose English translation *Undercurrents* suitably captures the dangerous shifts of the ocean, follows a woman in flight and in search of liberty while exploring her relationship with her daughter and the anguish and instability of the mer/mère. Just as Jean Echenoz’s *Un an* can be read against *Je m’en vais*, *Le Mal de mer* follows *Naissance des fantômes* in concentrating on the woman who leaves rather than the one who is left. In *Le Mal de mer* the sea is a constant but changing presence which, rather than contrasting with the stability of the land, swallows the cliffs as they collapse, and erodes, physically and metaphorically, the frontier between earth and water. Darrieussecq explores the sea in more detail in her brief text *Précisions sur les vagues*, published in 2008, and begins by wondering about the land/sea relationship: ‘Est-ce la mer qui arrive sur la côte? Ou la côte qui arrive sur la mer? Est-ce la terre qui interrompt la masse de l’eau, ou l’eau qui limite la terre?’.

Even the sea fluctuates, so it is not a single entity but contains holes and gaps. In writing specifically about the waves off the Basque coast, Darrieussecq is fascinated by the breakers so popular with surfers and which depend on land formations for both their existence and their demise – ‘le tube, est cet espace béant qui resterait ouvert si la mer ne touchait pas la terre’ – and which contain ‘géométriquement le vide […] un phénomène ailleurs banni par la nature’.

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19 Ibid., pp.9-10.
*Claire dans la forêt* also begins by the sea in a nameless but specifically situated place reminiscent of the description in ‘BAB’:

> Je suis née dans un petit village, au bord de la mer. Les habitants de ce village ont les idées claires; c’est sans doute dû à la géographie. Ouest, Est, Sud et Nord, les points cardinaux quadrillent la région, et les habitants disent qu’ils vivent au centre de la boussole comme au centre du monde.  

However, this sense of place and origin is not comforting but alienating for the protagonist, who feels exiled and ‘maudite par cette géographie’. The forest, like the sea, represents a forceful shifting space in which one can be lost, nowhere and, at the same time, free. Its darkness contrasts with the ‘claire’ of the title, which, in typical Darrieussecq style, can have multiple meanings and is the protagonist’s name as well as an image of light and comprehension. Likewise, Claire’s lover, Pierre, represents the elemental ‘other’ and is the man from the disordered wilderness of the forest – as opposed to the ordered village – with whom Claire betrays her people in this reversed fairy tale. Pierre is a medicine man who heals people by lifting them from the ground and detaching them from their earth-bound maladies. He is a personification of the mountain that recurs in Darrieussecq’s tales and particularly in *Le Pays*, where elevation offers new perspectives on and clearer understanding of the landscape below. Landscape, therefore, rather than remaining a static backdrop to buildings and journeys, influences ideas, movements and identity. Likewise, geographical points of reference are not sufficient to dispel feelings of homelessness or placelessness, and the lack of a sense of spatial location and belonging can be dangerous. It can lead, as in Claire’s case, to trespassing and a betrayal of her roots. However, it can also encourage

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21 Darrieussecq, *Claire dans la forêt*, ‘en dépit de cette géographie j’ai hérité le sentiment de l’exil’ (p.9), ‘J’étais maudite par le paysage, par le village et sa géographie, par le clocher sur son ciel mort, maudite d’avoir trompé mon monde avec un homme de la forêt, maudite d’avoir confondu les points cardinaux, de ne pas être cette nuit dans mon lit, fidèle, vierge, et fille de mes parents’ (p.55).  
detachment from one place and provoke the move towards another, during which process change occurs.

The transformative power of a disorientating landscape and the effects of loss and detachment are taken to the extreme in White (2003), which is set in the wilderness of the Antarctic and disrupts traditional forms of story-telling in its internalised, sensation-based narrative.23 Darrieussecq, like Ernaux, looks for language specific to each text and here develops an open, fluid style which Nelly Kaprièlian, reviewing White for ‘Les Inrockuptibles’, describes as a ‘deterritorialisation des genres…non pas écriture blanche, mais écriture “white”’.24 Discussing White in an interview with Amy Concannon and Kerry Sweeney in March 2004, Marie Darrieussecq reveals that:

Depuis longtemps je travaille sur le thème du vide, et sur deux questions: que fait-on quand on ne fait rien? et où est le centre du monde?...perdu dans un temps et un espace problématiques, était une expérience que je voulais explorer. Cela dirait forcément quelque chose de l’humain.25

Citing Patrick Modiano as an influence in this questioning of the void,26 Marie Darrieussecq voices her concerns about stasis and situation by choosing extremes of setting and isolating her characters in problematic spaces so as to better investigate the relationship between the self and its surroundings. Her protagonists are always lost, usually both geographically and emotionally, and are actively searching for a sense of place and belonging. Her stories fluctuate between centres and edges, between poles and frontiers, and are, ultimately, internal stories in which physical movement brings a certain identity which does not itself remain fixed. The alien landscapes are coupled with temporal lapses which further disorientate the reader, with some works such as Le Pays, Bref séjour chez les vivants and Notre vie dans les

26 Ibid., Darrieussecq, ‘Questionner le vide. Mes romanciers préférés tentent tous à répondre à ces questions, chacun à leur façon: Melville à Modiano’.
forêts being set in a near future that allows for the employment of futuristic but perfectly imaginable technologies which make possible and visible the absences and interiors present. The stories weave a web of bodies and consciousnesses past and present that trouble physical, temporal and spatial boundaries. Darrieussecq’s novels are concerned with the interrelationship of different spheres of being and existing, and she attempts to represent the human experience in her literature. Like Echenoz, she recognises her work as geographic and, indeed, she attempts to express thought, language and identity spatially: ‘Tout est géographique dans mes livres. La psychologie, l’histoire, sont des géographies’.27 Even grief and mourning are treated spatially, as seen in Darrieussecq’s 2007 novel Tom est mort, for example, which is more about geography than death and poses a single central question about belonging as a mother decides where her son’s body should rest.28 The eponymous Tom was born of a French mother and spoke more French than English, although he was raised in Vancouver and knew nothing of France other than Souillac and Étretat, but died on the other side of the world in Australia where he had spent insufficient time to call it home.29 So where should his body be buried, if it is buried at all? Where does he belong and how does he remain part of his grieving family? This quest is accompanied by the mother’s search for her own place and her identity as the mother of a dead son, her changed relationship with time and space, and the transformative influence of the removed body. Death and the disappearance of a body (although in Darrieussecq this disappearance is only partial since ghostly presences permeate layers of her geography) send destabilising shock waves through

27 Interview with Amy Concannon and Kerry Sweeney, March 2004.
29 ‘Est-ce que Tom est d’une terre? Où enterre-t-on son petit garçon de quatre ans, quel est son paysage, où se sent-il chez lui? Il ne me l’a pas dit. Il commençait à peine à se situer dans l’espace, à nommer des lieux, à faire la différence entre une ville et un quartier. Il comptait en « dodos » le temps comme la distance, c’était son unité de mesure: la nuit, la durée de sommeil’ (p.71).
time and space, distorting its familiar fabric, as shown in *Naissance des fantômes*, and the narrator of *Tom est mort* attempts to extract fixed points in the blur:

> Je n’arrive pas à commencer. Dans ma tête tout pense à Tom et les idées mènent à d’autres idées comme les escaliers mécaniques des centres commerciaux à Vancouver, des escaliers à plusieurs embranchements, plusieurs directions, alors qu’il faudrait commencer par le commencement, c’est-à-dire le jour où Tom est mort. La date. Mais rien ne me semble chronologique là-dedans. Remonter le temps, jusqu’où? Dérouler quoi? Quel fil, qui irait vers cette conclusion sans rapport avec le reste? Comme si les vies avaient de façon sérielle, a + b + c …. Ou alors remonter jusqu’à sa conception, comme font les Chinois.\(^{30}\)

While most of Darrieussecq’s landscapes are natural, rural and maritime, she here draws parallels between contemporary urban routes of transportation and the narrator’s divergent, labyrinthine thought patterns, underlining the incessant movement, the inability to resist or arrest this movement and the apparent lack of any point of origin. There is no obvious linear path of cause and effect, and the order we attempt to bestow on any sequence of events is undermined. The story of *Tom est mort* begins with death rather than birth and the role of the mother is perverted by the absence of her child. In the search for Tom’s homeland the narrator cannot conceive of it as anything other than the literal motherland and wants to bury her son in the womb from which he was born, thereby completing a cyclical journey illustrative of Deleuze’s reterritorialised and differentiated subject in which both the subject (Tom) and the territory (his mother) are changed:


Just as in works by Annie Ernaux, such as *Passion simple* or *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, absence and death are equated with stillness and lack of interaction with time and space, so

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\(^{30}\) Darrieussecq, *Tom est mort*, p.16, italics as in original.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., pp.72-73.
too in Darrieussecq do we see loss associated with first a disappearance of time and space and then a renewed relationship with the two. Referring to the cataclysmic disasters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to find a way of expressing the obliteration of place and, therefore, the disintegration of time and space, the narrator evokes ‘la disparition de l’espace, l’espace désintégré, et le temps qui tombe avec’, and underlines the necessity of our presence in the construction of time and place:

Le temps n’était plus avec moi. Les murs, le frigo, les lits restaient, les appartements n’avaient jamais été que de passage, on n’y pensait pas, ça fonctionnait sans nous. Mais le temps. Une origine retournée, où les objets ne deviennent pas rien, mais leur équivalent négatif. Une spirale dans laquelle les galaxies s’enroulent sur elles-mêmes jusqu’à devenir invisibles. Nébuleuses, choses impensables, et pourtant elles sont là autour de nous, elles forment un lieu quelque part. Et Tom est là, dans l’envers du monde.32

The mother/narrator needs to invent a place for her lost son, who has slipped between ‘deux feuilles de temps’, and she settles on the island of Vancouver, which she associates with life in contrast to that other island, Australia, now tainted with death.33 These two islands, poles apart, are similar in that they are both far from France, anglophone, foreign to the narrator, and now united by the absent body of her son Tom: ‘La vérité est dans la géographie. Le temps avait défait Tom, mais il était resté fixé dans l’espace, immuable, un point tellurique que j’avais identifié: l’île de Vancouver’.34 This need for situation and belonging leads the narrator to literature since, as in Ernaux, language can be lost in the rupture of time and space caused by an absence.35 For the narrator of Tom est mort, the grief manifests itself in a loss of speech and action, in the inability to form words in English and, as the years pass, in the realisation that her other children now speak English and it is only Tom who addressed her in her mother tongue. Just as she perceives Tom’s presence in an alternative reality, so she turns

32 Darrieussecq, Tom est mort, pp.60-61.
33 Ibid., p.186.
34 Ibid., pp.152-153.
to writing as a means of re-establishing some sort of order in her disintegrated universe: ‘Je me suis lancée. J’ai dessiné, sur des transparents, un schéma gradué pour essayer de comprendre ce que la littérature pouvait pour nous, si elle pouvait quelque chose’. 36 These same themes of language and literature, belonging and landscape are more explicitly explored in the novel *Le Pays*, in which the writing of the book coincides with the gestation of a child, and both are born together, linking body and literature as creative agents in spatio-temporal construction.

*Le Pays*

*Le Pays* is divided into five parts, reflecting the themes listed above and the concerns particular to this novel: *le sol; l’état civil; la langue; les morts; naissances*. These subheadings cover the range of questions Darrieussecq habitually explores, from the geographical and genealogical to geopolitical and linguistic terms of belonging and identity and, ultimately, to the presence-absence dichotomy at the root of her work. 37 Set slightly into the future, the novel follows a writer’s return to her homeland, a fictional version of the Basque country which has now gained independence. 38 The text blurs distinctions between the fictional and the autobiographical in such a way as to set itself up as a possible alternative

38 In ‘L’Euskadi m’a dit’ in Le Figaro, 15 September 2005, Olivier Delacroix writes: ‘On reconnaît le Pays basque (Euskadi pour les intimes), cher à une Marie Darrieussecq née du côté d’Anglet, au cœur du «BAB» (Bayonne, Anglet, Biarritz), territoire sentimental, autant que géographique, que l’on retrouve d’ailleurs dans le roman, à peine transfiguré sous la dénomination «BCB»’. For a discussion of the complexity of the notion of *homeland* in Darrieussecq’s work, see Simon Kemp, *Homeland: Voyageurs et patrie dans les romans de Marie Darrieussecq* in *Nomadismes des romancières contemporaines de langue française*, ed. by Audrey Lasserre and Anne Simon.
reality; recognisable geographical, political and autobiographical facts are shifted ever so slightly to create a new, plausible world against which the actual can be read.

The narrator, a writer by the name of Marie Rivière, moves her young family back to her place of birth, where she rediscovers the landscape of her youth, the Basque language of her childhood and reawakens past traumas in the history of her family. It is here that Rivière begins to write ‘Le Pays’, a text embedded in the larger work. Like Ernaux, the narrator discusses the writing process through a typographical switch between standard type, used for the text within the text and expressed largely in the third person, and bold face, which indicates the first person internal monologue, but, unlike Ernaux’s authorial interventions, this game remains at one remove from the author, who never once claims to speak with her ‘own’ voice.\(^{39}\) While the text normally alternates between passages in one font or another, the two at times blend so that the transition comes mid-sentence and the duality is more forcefully expressed:

Comme je venais de lancer une machine de blan, assise devant le hublot avec Tiot sur les genoux, tous deux intéressés comme toujours par le spectacle – une ligne droite, à peine ondulée, monte en transparence dans le tambour, et comme par un mouvement de hanche, hop, la masse du linge est jetée de côté, une fois deux fois, ça se met à tourner, le linge se broie, s’emmêle, bruits de tuyauterie pleine et vide – comme elle venait de lancer une machine de blanc la nausée se coula en elle.\(^{40}\)

The first person narrator is further fragmented by the use of the unstable subject j/e, which signifies a separation between the thinking self and the body, so that the narrator can detach herself from her body and explore it as one more space among others.

\(^{39}\) ‘Deux fils parallèles soutiennent la narration: le récit, à la première personne et au présent, de Marie Rivière; celui, à la troisième personne qui, dans le même temps, la met en scène, l’observe, la regarde vivre et évoluer, l’écoute penser tout en la tenant à distance’, Natalie Crom, ‘Marie Darrieussecq née quelque part…’, La Croix, 18 September 2005. In the first book-length study of Darrieussecq’s work, Helena Chadderton describes how the author’s narrative techniques allow for a doubling of the self and underline formal and linguistic experimentation. ‘Her techniques – a concentration on sound and rhythm, the privileging of the graphic surface of text, the use of plural and unstable narrative voices – not only allow Darrieussecq to embody her protagonists, but they also suggest the active role of linguistic and textual features in the process of meaning creation’, Marie Darrieussecq’s Textual Worlds: Self, Society, Language (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), p.4.

\(^{40}\) Darrieussecq, Le Pays, p. 39.
Il aurait fallu écrire j/e. Un sujet ni brisé ni schizoïde, mais fendu, décollé. Comme les éléments séparés d’un module, qui continuent à tourner sur orbite. J/e courais, devenue bulle de pensée. La route était libre, j/e courait. J/e devenait la route, les arbres, le pays.41

We see here, by the switch in pronoun agreement from j/e courais to j/e courait, that the subject has become double – not parts of herself but more than herself – the self plus other. She becomes both her physical presence and her transcendent self, and an interpenetration of self and environment is realised:

je somnole. Je suis bien. J/e me dissocie lentement. Quelqu’un est à côté de moi…. J/e me diffuse…J/e me regarde assise dans l’avion, j/e me regarde à travers le hublot. Le temps se dédouble. Il y a le curseur sur lequel l’avion avance; et le présent actif dans mes veines, dans mon souffle et dans mes neurones. Si j/e m’endors, le présent va s’effondrer, et l’avion va tomber. J/e me concentre pour que l’avion reste en l’air. Tout se détermine, l’avant et l’après, autour de ce point…42

She is aware of other presences and recognises her own body but has already moved beyond it to become an integral and essential part of the wider universe. There is a doubling of the self, of time and of space, and this doubling spills over into the narrative. *Le Pays* has a dual voice: the first person narration, printed in bold type in the text, and the largely embedded third person narration that repeats and expands on the first. The concept of ‘Le Pays’ itself is duplicated, not only in the assimilation of body and country, but because Rivière, the narrator-author, is writing a book called *Le Pays*. It is also through the act of writing that Rivière can attain ‘une porosité cosmique’, when ‘la page prend tout le corps, ça écrit, ça écrit; et on oublie qu’on a un corps situé dans l’espace, un volume fait d’os, de muscles, de sang et de tendons (et en l’occurrence, d’un deuxième être humain)’.43 This further doubling,

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42 Darrieussecq, *Le Pays*, p.42. While Monique Wittig’s use of the split pronoun ‘j/e’ in *Le corps lesbien* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973) challenges notions of identity and the singularity of the self, the subject, despite this violence, remains whole. For Darrieussecq, this split allows for the expansion and multiplication of the self.

the reproduction of the body within the body, adds another layer to Rivière’s exploration of self and identity.

For Patrick Modiano, place allowed his characters to inhabit multiple temporal spheres simultaneously; for Darrieussecq, the present moment offers her characters the possibility of occupying more than one space. Space is porous and unstable. In their writings on time in *La durée et la simultanéité* and *L’image-temps*, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze respectively suggest that each present moment carries with it all previous and possible moments. As time and space are interconnected, a similar simultaneity may be attributable to space, and it would appear that this multiplicity of location or spatial experience is what Darrieussecq is attempting to express by ignoring physical boundaries and allowing space the same freedom of movement as time. In *Le Pays*, the construction of the homeland depends on the appropriation of the space by the subject, and this process, in turn, develops the identity of that subject. In this novel, the corporeal and the geographic are inextricably linked, and themes of nationhood, maternity and the search for origins are highlighted in ways that foreshadow *Tom est mort*. Let us look more closely at the geographic before turning our attention to the space of the body.

‘Il était temps de rentrer au pays, il était temps de rentrer au pays’: this phrase is a repeated refrain in the text and describes the return as a process rather than a simple displacement.⁴⁴ Indeed, the French verb *rentrer* suggests a more profound action of penetration than the English *return* and lends itself more readily to the corporeal imagery Darrieussecq employs. However, the act of returning is not only performed by the narrator,

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⁴⁴ As in Annie Ernaux’s *Passion simple*, where we encounter the opening line repeated later in the book when the author describes herself writing, in *Le Pays* this initial phrase of ‘il était temps de rentrer au pays’ is repeated halfway through the work by the narrator (indicated by bold type) as she explains how she started writing the book within the book we are reading: ‘Un jour, alors qu’il restait encore une douzaine de cartons à ranger, j’ouvrais mon cahier et j’écrivais une phrase qui me tournait dans la tête, une phrase comme un air de chanson: « Il était temps de rentrer au pays. » Ça faisait un programme, un rythme, un horizon, <ça faisait une première phrase>’. *Le Pays* (p.84-85).
but is a two-way movement that relies equally on the pull of the country which unfolds around the family, and is described in dynamic terms:

Il suffirait pourtant de se laisser glisser au Sud en tenant l’Atlantique à sa droite, de dévaler la France comme on dévale une dune et de s’arrêter à l’ancienne frontière espagnole; et d’attendre là, que le pays se redéploye autour de nous. Les montagnes pousseraient, la mer se déroulerait, tout se remettrait d’aplomb.45

The country is a perfect whole, made up of all the elements necessary for a fictional land. It has mountains and sea, borders and throughways, independence and heritage.46 The narrator herself forms part of the country and has an elemental surname, Rivière, reminiscent of her father’s dictum about life, *la vie est une rivière*, which the narrator finally accepts at the end of the novel, but which also alludes to one of the most classical representations of the spatial movement of time. This name suggests motion and a pull towards the sea in keeping with the character herself, who is, however, also conscious of the earth underfoot, the ‘pli sur pli d’herbe et d’humus’, the clay and stone and molten rock, and tries to understand the earth as a cosmic whole, from its mysterious centre to its place in the solar system.47 The layers of earth form ‘un carottage de siècles’, compacting past invaders and inhabitants of the country so that the past contributes to the very make-up of the soil and time not only erodes but builds the landscape.48 This concerted effort to situate the self is a reaction to the experience of displacement and deterritorialisation which troubles the narrator and which is recalled in the unfortunate character of her adopted brother, who no longer knows who he is and has invented an alternative and implausible identity for himself. As in other works by Darrieussecq, such as *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and, of course, *Tom est mort*, there is the

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46 ‘C’est un climat d’île, pourtant le pays n’est pas une île. C’est une sorte de pièce de puzzle, de celles en angle avec une langue. Elle s’imbrique entre la France et l’Espagne, avec une façade océanique, une chaîne de montagnes, de la plaine agricole et des zones industrielles, et plusieurs pôles urbains; combinaison satisfaisante pour un pays européen de petite envergure’, pp.54-55.
47 Ibid., p.23.
48 Ibid., p.45.
ghostly presence of a lost boy. *Le Pays* is haunted by the disappearance of the narrator’s blood brother. The lost child has a semi-autobiographical root, since the author’s brother died before she was born, but the ghostly male presence in Darrieussecq’s work, from *Naissance des fantômes* on, sets up a gendered dichotomy between the male as a symbol of death and loss and the female as the source of life and origin. In this way, the mother is associated with stability, groundedness and identity, while the brother figure, perhaps a reversal or mirror image of the author herself, is fluid, ephemeral and eternal. While Marie Rivièrè is returning to her place of birth in order to complete her identity and build a country in which to live, her brother inhabits the void. He is nowhere and his ‘lieu de naissance: néant’. 49

**Body as agent**

A text of rhythms and digressions, *Le Pays* begins with the body in movement and maintains an organic beat throughout with short staccato, repetitive sentences and onomatopoeic phrases, paralleling the movement of time through the body of the narrator.


The narrator, Marie Rivièrè, is in full possession of her body. She inhabits it and trusts it; it has become a home, not only to her but to one child already, and she is cognisant of its capacities and limitations. However, her body is not entirely known to her and still holds secrets from her, as here, where she is unaware of her new pregnancy. She scrutinises every

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50 Ibid., p.9.
detail of her body, able to visualise her internal organs as well as her limbs and muscles, and thereby recognises her body as external to herself, so that she is able to detach herself from its confines and reside in her thoughts rather than her physique: ‘On a un corps et il faut bien le poser quelque part, et s’en extraire, par moments’; 51

Darrieussecq, from the very beginning of the text, sets up rhythms and oscillations that continue throughout the work. The presence-absence opposition is transposed on to the figure of the narrator Rivière, who is, by moments, present and absent within her own body, conscious of its internal mechanisms and then detached from its physicality. The reader too swings between the internalised and externalised voice of the narrator and between the bold face and standard type of the text. This sets up a rhythm which represents the fluidity between boundaries in Darrieussecq’s work and the relationship between body and landscape in Le Pays. Rhythm is inseparable from time-space involutions and is inherently dynamic. Darrieussecq’s protagonist is here practising rhythmanalysis as defined by Henri Lefebvre. Marie Rivière is using her body as a metronome and as a means of experiencing and creating

51 Darrieussecq, Le Pays, pp.59-60. In ‘Aux limites du moi, des mots et du monde: questions d’identité dans Le Pays de Marie Darrieussecq’ in Le roman français de l’extrême contemporain: écritures, engagements, énonciations, ed. by Barbara Havercroft, Pascal Michelucci and Pascal Riendeau, pp.403-422, (p.405), Catherine Rodgers discusses the spatial and textual limits Darrieussecq explores and shows how these experiments pose questions about identity. Writing about Le Pays, she demonstrates how Marie Rivière ‘fait donc l’expérience de l’anéantissement de son moi et de l’union avec son environnement’ and how she is able to recreate a sense of self through her writing.

52 Ibid., p.11.
rhythm in the interaction ‘d’un lieu, d’un temps et d’une dépense d’énergie’. By concentrating on the biological rhythms within, Marie is able to detach herself from her body, experience other rhythms and become part of a larger movement. She performs and unites the binary categories Lefebvre sets out:

répétition et différence
mécanique et organique
découverte et création
cyclique et linéaire

At the most basic level, the *tam, tam* beat of the narrator’s feet against the road marks a physical connection between the body and its environment, and illustrates the spatial and temporal distance covered by the runner. Likewise, the slower rhythm of the breathing lungs, illustrated for the reader in the more drawn-out *hah*, requires a spatial change, since air passes through the body and the external becomes internal before being expelled again. The runner begins to disconnect from her body so that she can rest on her feet and eventually feel that some other force is propelling her forward – ‘tout ce qui courait en moi me tenait debout’ – until finally the separation is complete, and she merges with the landscape so that she is at once herself and more: ‘Je devenais j/e’. Darrieussecq’s protagonist therefore manages to integrate the external and internal, as described by Lefebvre, and, in so doing, demonstrates the porosity of traditional spatial boundaries. Just as Marie Rivière’s name suggests movement and lack of containment, so Lefebvre uses a fluid metaphor to explain this interaction of body and space: ‘Dans le corps et autour de lui, comme à la surface d’une eau,

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54 Lefebvre, *Éléments de rythmanalyse*, p.18.
The body and the creation of place

For Edward Casey, too, the body is the starting point for an understanding of space. Casey advises that we return to a study of the relative stability of the body in order to best comprehend our movements through place.

Whether guided by landmarks or by one’s own pathmarks, I rely on my body as the primary agent in the landscape. Landscapes call for perception (typically, but not exclusively, visual), while the trailsigns of my own trajectory are the concrete precipitates of my bodily movements on the land. In the latter case, my body marks its way through an otherwise unmarked landscape. To retrace the steps of one’s own marks, and thus to find one’s way.

For Edward Casey, place is what happens at the intersection of body and its surroundings, and the conscious inhabitation of one is not possible without the other. In a similar way, the search for place in Darrieussecq’s work happens in the dynamic interconnection between rhythm and landscape. The body is a place because it is inhabited by a conscious being, and the alien community or country around that body only becomes a place when it has been explored, understood, colonised and appropriated by that body.

It is this separation of the self and complete externalisation of the physical world that allows Darrieussecq’s narrator to portray the other realms of existence she perceives. Her characters have broken through the traditional boundaries, and a rhythmic flow passes in both directions through the body, linking the internal and external worlds. Although no longer

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57 Ibid., p.29.
58 We have already explored inhabited spaces and places, particularly with regard to Georges Perec, Michel de Certeau and the novels of Jean Echenoz, but Darrieussecq’s change from space to place requires duration and repetition, and the narrator of *Le Pays* writes: *Je me demande si habiter et habitude ont la même racine* (p.230).
confined by the body, her characters remain as spatial as well as temporal beings, since space, like time, is endless. Therefore, in Darrieussecq’s perception of space’s multiplicity and temporal extension, disappeared and dead (or past) bodies inhabit a parallel universe which overlaps with her own. Our very act of being means that we are situated and ‘in place’, even if our relationship to that place is incomplete and problematic. Whatever our understanding of our place or our definition of its boundaries, we are, by our very nature, constantly implanted:

Place provides the absolute edge of everything, including itself. At the same time, place serves as the condition of all existing things. This means that, far from being merely locator or situational, place belongs to the concept of existence.\(^{59}\)

However, because place is never stable, the act of implacement is constantly threatened by displacement. The body is important as vehicle as well as agent, since it continually carries us into place and is largely responsible for our understanding of both dynamics and our changing relationship to space and place. The movement which brings us to a new place requires the vacation of a previous place and therefore the joint action of displacement and implacement, or, to use Deleuze’s terms, of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. The body, therefore, provides a constant point of reference from which we can gauge our surroundings, estimate distances and describe relative positions.\(^{60}\) It is through our understanding of the self in the body that we are able to reterritorialise ourselves, comparing our position from ‘here’ to ‘there’ and re-establishing the new environment in connection with the relative stability of our bodies, which, while constantly changing and moving, remains our most intimate understanding of our inhabited place. Bergson lamented that our understanding of time was hindered by our inability to experience it from within its flux, but this clearly underestimates the body as vehicle and agent, views time as exterior to the body, and surrenders to the distinction between body and place, which, Casey tells us, reduces body

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\(^{59}\) Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, p.15.  
\(^{60}\) Ibid., p.48.
to the ‘hard physical body of res extensa’ and place to a ‘mere segment of infinite space’. In Le Pays we see that neither the body nor space is as confined or limited as Bergson suggests and that, because of the continually changing relationship between the body and the spaces through which it moves, we should no longer distinguish between the body and what surrounds it, since this suggests the limits Darrieussecq is trying to dispel – the body is not within space, it is spatial itself.

The phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty focused much of his work on the existential space of the body, and his seminal text, Phénoménologie de la perception, distinguishes between the body as object and the body as agent while rejecting the ‘implacement’ of the body that Casey suggests. Merleau-Ponty believes that bodies and places are closely linked and that, through the process of inhabitation, built places are extensions of our bodies. For Merleau-Ponty, place cannot exist without bodies and vice versa, but since the body is an intricate part of time and space and is our means of perceiving both, ‘Il ne faut donc pas dire que notre corps est dans l’espace ni ailleurs qu’il est dans le temps’. The body does, however, provide us with a point of reference from which to understand time and space, although we must understand too our dynamic place within that flux. The body is essentially ‘here and now’; it cannot be past, although, like time, it carries the past within it as part of its organic composition and process of change and growth, hence the body provides us with a relative understanding of time and space: ‘mon présent, qui est mon point de vue sur le temps, devient un moment du temps parmi tous les autres, ma durée un reflet ou un aspect abstrait du temps universel, comme mon corps un mode de l’espace objectif’. Again, though, it is not the static body that fully perceives time and space; the

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61 Casey, Getting Back into Place, p.46.
63 Ibid., p.162.
64 Merleau-Ponty, p.85 (see also p.163). For Darrieussecq, however, bodies can be both past and present, with absent bodies inhabiting other spaces that overlap with her own.
body must be in movement in order to comprehend and complete its involvement in the time-space dynamic:

c’est évidemment dans l’action que la spatialité du corps s’accomplit et l’analyse du mouvement propre doit nous permettre de la comprendre mieux. On voit mieux, en considérant le corps en mouvement, comment il habite l’espace (et d’ailleurs le temps) parce que le mouvement ne se contente pas de subir l’espace et le temps, il les assume activement.\(^{65}\)

So the body in movement is displaced and creates or completes a place to inhabit. These places are not the ones Modiano writes about – built places that somehow preserve the past and the stories of the bodies that have passed through – but are relative and often fleeting places, perceived only by the self, by that particular body in movement. However, just as each moment in time carries with it all past moments and the possibility of all future ones, so too must we recognise the multiplicity of space and realise that within each space lies the possibility of others, so that the impulse of movement, leaving and displacement is inherent at each point of implacement. Merleau-Ponty suggests that all possible times and places are present until the achievement of each movement. We are propelled by a desire to find our place, but this movement is accompanied by the need for displacement, which pushes us ever onwards so that there can be no stability and therefore no ultimate place, just as there was no ultimate origin:

A chaque instant d’un mouvement, l’instant précédent n’est pas ignoré, mais il est comme emboîté dans le présent et la perception présente consiste en somme à ressaisir, en s’appuyant sur la position actuelle, la série des positions antérieures, qui s’enveloppent l’une l’autre. Mais la position imminente est elle aussi enveloppé dans le présent, et par elle toutes celles qui viendront jusqu’au terme du mouvement. Chaque moment du mouvement en embrasse toute l’étendue et, en particulier, le premier moment, l’initiation cinétique inaugure la liaison d’un ici et d’un là-bas, d’un maintenant et d’un avenir que les autres moments se bornent à développer. En tant que j’ai un corps et que j’agis à travers lui dans le monde, l’espace et le temps ne sont pas pour moi une somme de points juxtaposés, pas davantage d’ailleurs une infinité de relations dont ma conscience opérerait la synthèse et où elle impliquerait mon corps; je ne suis pas dans l’espace et dans le temps; je ne pense pas l’espace et le temps; je suis à l’espace et au temps, mon corps s’applique à eux et les embrasse.\(^{66}\)

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\(^{65}\) Merleau-Ponty, p.119.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., p.164.
Therefore, it is natural to retreat into the body, but the body itself is not stable; it is constantly changing and reinventing itself, and this is particularly true of the female body in pregnancy and childbirth, on which Darrieussecq focuses in works such as *Le bébé* (2002) and here in *Le Pays*. As we have also seen in *Tom est mort*, Darrieussecq equates the mother’s body with a country of origin, reappropriating the motherland metaphor and rewriting it in a very physical sense. In *Le Pays* the narrator is creating two things at once, carrying a baby to term as she writes ‘Le Pays’, her version of which we see within the larger work. She is also creating a country in several respects, rediscovering her origins in the Basque country and language, enjoying the *petite naissance* of the fledgling state in its new-found independence, and therefore suggesting a possible future for the region itself. In addition, she is defining her son’s landscape as he grows into consciousness at school-going age and adopts the new language (one of her reasons for moving back to the region was that she did not want Paris to be his *pays*), preparing a world for her unborn child, whom she names Epiphanie in an underscoring of the cyclical temporal pattern of the text, and endeavouring to take possession of her own country through a full awareness of her body. The need for children to populate this new country and carry on its hard-won independence leads the narrator to declare that ‘Par le sexe des femmes le sol devient national.’ The power of the body to transform itself and change in order to accommodate and give life is a theme that fascinates Darrieussecq, and she portrays the female body as a traversable frontier that is stabilised in the sex act and breachable in giving birth. In *Le Bébé*, an account of the birth of her son and a book that, therefore, parallels *Le Pays*, she writes, ‘Être au centre de vortex, où le temps et l’espace se

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conjugent et s’ouvrent: mon sexe est cette brèche et je ne le savais pas’.\textsuperscript{70} And it is in \textit{Le Pays} that the narrator, making love to her husband Diego, manages to contract time and space into ‘une géographie rassemblée sur un point’.\textsuperscript{71} This narrator is well aware of the shifting of space and feels space on a molecular level as composing and reomposing itself into various forms: ‘Le monde était fait de corpuscules en liberté. Ils s’organisaient pour former les êtres et les choses, puis se défaisaient à nouveau’.\textsuperscript{72} Space, therefore, is not organised but fluid and it is easy to lose oneself in it. Marie Rivière perceives the interconnectedness of all things and the cyclical pattern of recomposition and reincarnation, with the decaying body becoming part of the countryside, the earth, the dust, the flowers and even the seasons. However, while she is aware of the presence and power of her body within the country she is rediscovering, she finds it more difficult to internalise the landscape and swell in a Whitmanesque fashion to encompass the world: ‘Le moi est un vaisseau spatial, capable de relier des univers, de rebattre les unes sur les autres des galaxies lointaines’.\textsuperscript{73} She wishes to experience the world physically by internalising it and containing it, but cannot manage to do so:

\begin{quote}
Elle ne parvenait pas à englober le pays. Le temps qui coule, qui bat, physique, le temps qui fait les enfants, il lui semblait pouvoir le sentir. L’espace, c’était une autre affaire. Habiter. Voyager. Partir. Revenir. Observer l’effet produit. Le temps était fait d’histoires, l’espace était fait de failles. La géographie découpaient le temps, par marches et par entailles. Elle arrêtait des bords, plantait les limites, creusait des lignes.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

The country, then, must clearly not be thought of only in spatial terms and is, equally, composed of temporal elements which the narrator experiences more easily, perceiving time biologically and in the gestation of her child, even though this happens within the physical space of her body and transforms her into ‘un pays amniotique’.\textsuperscript{75} It is through the passage

\begin{footnotes}
70 Darrieussecq, \textit{Le Bébé}, p.41.
71 Darrieussecq, \textit{Le Pays}, p.34.
72 Ibid., p.25.
73 Ibid., p.56.
74 Ibid., p.88.
75 Ibid., p.141.
\end{footnotes}
of time that the narrator realises that she has not returned to her native land, and that such a return is not possible because the country has changed and is no longer that of her childhood or even the one of her memory. While in Paris she felt exiled and thought of her homeland with nostalgia, she realises that she can never return to that remembered place but that, in fact, the difference between what she remembers and what she now perceives measures the distance she has travelled in time and space: ‘Elle avait eu, à Paris, le sentiment de l’exil. Elle avait pris ça pour de la nostalgie. Mais la nostalgie est le sentiment du retour: reconnaître et ne pas reconnaître, et dans cet écart, mesurer à quel point on était parti’.76 The country to which the narrator returns has to be rebuilt to incorporate her pasts, her present family and the future promised in her un born child: ‘Les plaques temporelles se superposaient, passerelles mentales et toboggans logiques. Le pays n’était pas un lieu, c’était du temps, du temps feuilleté, et elle était revenue y habiter’.77 Time, then, is not linear but layered, thickening with each passing moment, and this allows for a simultaneous view such as we have seen in Patrick Modiano’s works and in Henri Bergson’s theoretical writings. Time is folded over on itself, so that all moments are accessible, and this means that the ghosts that haunt Darrieussecq’s work can pass between the layers and penetrate our own present.78

In order to illustrate this possibility, in Le Pays Darrieussecq envisages a maison des morts in which holograms of the dead can be accessed. In this futuristic cemetery, the flick of a switch brings the face of the dead person flickering into view. Referring to this invention in an interview, Darrieussecq highlights its significance in visualising the presence of the dead: ‘L’hologramme...est une présence-absence très intéressante pour mes thèmes habituels. Le corps qui est là sans être là’.79 Darrieussecq, therefore, through the ghostly presences that

76 Darrieussecq, Le Pays, p.90.
77 Ibid., p.209.
78 Ibid., p.29.
pervade her works, effaces the distinctions between past and present, and any linear form of
time or finite model of space, further than either Lefebvre or Merleau-Ponty have suggested,
and takes the porosity and interconnectedness of time and space to the extreme, allowing for
the simultaneous existence of past and present beings in interrelated spaces. This layering of
time and presence of the past requires a new syntax, the narrator of Le Pays tells us, and
Darrieussecq’s typographical games attempt to represent this multiplicity of times and spaces
with the j/e symbolising the internal/external experience of space and the bold type indicating
Marie Rivière’s stream-of-consciousness as she reminisces, theorises and narrates her journey
as writer and mother. However, language and its relationship to time and space take on a
more solid example within Le Pays, since this fictional version of the Basque country has its
own language, yuoangui, here associated for the narrator with the past and the maternal line
of her family.

Le Pays’s central character Marie Rivière is a reflection of the author herself and
autobiographical details underlie the novel including Darrieussecq’s renewed interest in the
Basque language, which was the language her mother used with her as a child, and her
rediscovery of the Basque region of France after time in Paris. An interview question directed
at the fictional writer, echoes one Darrieussecq was asked and which led her to investigate
her background and heritage, ‘en tant qu’écrivain yuoangui de langue française, que
pensais-je de l’avenir du pays?’ The country is duplicated by being bi-lingual and being
given an internal and external language. Although language becomes a defining feature in
identity, it does not necessarily indicate nationality since, in the novel, it is possible to be
yuoangui and French speaking; however, the question suggests that this exteriority provides a
different perspective on the country itself. The yuoangui language is, for the narrator, a
language of the past and of childhood, a female language since that of her mother and

80 Darrieussecq, Le Pays, p.56.
grandmother but, since the independence of the country it has become the first language of communication and she finds herself alienated from old schoolfriends who have adopted their yuoangui name and speak only yuoangui, and even from her young son who, now at school-going age, learns the language and soon tires of translating for his mother and becomes frustrated with her lack of understanding. The reintroduction of the language strengthens the foundation of the yuoangui state in a move familiar from francophone and linguistic debates worldwide, but the naming of the country itself remains problematic since it is still referred to as an adjective rather than a proper noun:

Pays Yuoangui, pays sans nom, le pays avec adjectif comme il y a un pays dogon et un pays masaï. A la lettre P ou la lettre Y, dans l’hésitation de ce qui prime, le nom ou l’adjectif, le générique ou le particulier, Pays Yuoangui, pour lui, qu’est-ce que ça voulait dire?\(^{81}\)

However, the narrator begins to label things with their yuoangui name, referring to landmarks, mountains, towns and villages which emerge into something new with this renaming. We saw that in *Tom est mort*, the breakdown of language is equated with loss; in contrast, then, the rebuilding of a language and of a country through that language brings it fully into existence. An extension of this naming, labelling and creation is the written text, which, according to Darrieussecq, has a political motivation and which enables us to decipher the complexities of time and space:

Je cherche à inventer de nouvelles formes, à écrire de nouvelles phrases, parce que c’est le seul moyen de rendre compte du monde moderne, dont le mouvement sinon nous dépasse sans cesse, demeurant illisible, incompréhensible. […] En ce sens toute écriture exploratrice, novatrice, est politique: même apparemment éloignée du réel, des “événements”, elle fournit le langage moderne, elle bâtit les outils verbaux et mentaux qui permettent de penser le monde.\(^{82}\)

\(^{82}\) Interview with Becky Miller and Martha Holmes in December 2001.
This sentiment is echoed in *Le Pays* by Marie Rivière, who is sensitive, in choosing a name for her child, to the person that will be conjured up in the syllables and relies on the act of naming to somehow fix what is fluid and describe and transcribe the world. ‘Tant qu’il restait des mots, dans quelque langue que ce soit,’ she writes, ‘on pourrait encore les assembler à neuf pour décrire le monde et en repousser les limites’.\(^83\) The written text, though born at an intersection of time and space, manages to unite the two in a way that the narrator-author can record. This is the representational problem Bergson lamented, and the fictional writer of ‘Le Pays’ suggests that literature, and therefore the writability of the spatio-temporal flux, will inevitably both rely on and clarify its readability: ‘Si je trouvais une forme, un lien intuitif entre les éléments du mobile, il deviendrait lisible, il deviendrait un livre’.\(^84\) The writing of her experiences provides an alternative body and place through which to perceive time and space, and she inhabits the text as she inhabits her body.\(^85\) Rivière finds that her writing comes almost despite herself and that she is removed from her body and inhabits a larger sphere when she writes, that it is linked to her body and follows a biological rhythm like the beat of her running shoes on the road, and that the sentences flow from her body, so that here too boundaries are effaced. Writing appears as another rhythm superimposed on the body-space continuum and flows through the body to create another space:

les jours de grâce, quand la plage prend tout le corps, ça écrit, ça écrit; et on oublie qu’on a un corps situé dans l’espace, un volume fait d’os, de muscles, de sang et de tendons (et en l’occurrence, d’un deuxième être humain). On tend à une porosité cosmique mais quand le point final est posé, le trajet cerveau-main est un tortillon de métal qui prend la nuque, le cou et l’épaule, crispe le coude et pulse jusque dans l’index.(….) Phrases et corps étaient au bord de se confondre.\(^86\)

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\(^{83}\) *Le Pays*, p.135.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., p.79.
\(^{86}\) *Le Pays*, p.178.
Writing, Rivière tells us, comes from ‘une alternance, mais pas celle des états d’âme, plutôt celle des états de corps,’ and most specifically the struggle for the body to remain still, to remain seated and at work and to resist the desire to move and leave the room and the empty page. The act of writing requires a degree of stasis and waiting that is at odds with the desire of the body to be in motion, and takes place in the alternating presence and absence of the conscious self in the body. However, it is in an earlier novel that Darrieussecq first fully explores the detachment of self and body and the possibility of experiencing the world without a body.

**Bref séjour chez les vivants**

*Bref séjour chez les vivants* (2001) is a complicated multi-voiced narrative that covers vast distances in its 24-hour time frame and relates the disparate lives of a family across time and space. Influenced by James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the stream-of-consciousness novels of the early twentieth century, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* is an at times confusing and fragmented narrative that is not satisfied with inhabiting a single body but traverses frontiers so that we tune into different voices and spend short visits in different lives. Isabelle Martin’s ‘summary’ of the text for *Le Temps*, testifies to its scope and diversity:

> Fugue, fuite, disparition présence-absence, somnambulisme, accidents de mémoire: le roman joue de tous ces themes en d’infinies variations, sur le mode du fragment du collage, en n’utilisant que le seul monologue intérieur.

*Bref séjour chez les vivants* opens in the courtyard of the *bibliothèque nationale* in Paris in a stream of repeated phrases, incomplete and often unpunctuated sentences. This fragmented written style continues throughout the novel, portraying the stream of consciousness in long, flowing and twisting sentences:

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Darrieussecq denies that her novel is written in a stream-of-consciousness narrative, ‘Ce n’est pas le “stream-of-consciousness” qui est déjà très écrit. C’est vraiment très peu narratif et plus proche de la poésie’. The poetic can be seen here in the short, rhythmic lines and repeated sounds: ‘Pas Est ni Sud. Personne au pied des autres tours.’ And, indeed, the slippage of language, detached – or should we say liberated? – from a discernible speaker, associates it with Deleuze’s reading of free indirect discourse. The language becomes as fluid as the story itself and switches to Spanish and English in long, untranslated passages, introduces invented words and incorporates single letters, pen drawings and other texts into the novel. Again, both a Basque heritage and a lost boy are present, with the remembered drowned child addressing his sister Jeanne in Basque and this language evoking their childhood, a past time and abandoned place. Darrieussecq employs the disjointed _j/e_ she will later use in _Le Pays_ to indicate a simultaneous positioning in different times and spaces, with the character at once inhabiting herself and another place.

It is through the mother’s thoughts that we begin to understand the relative position and identity of the various voices, since she remains in the family home and provides a certain stability: ‘tous les matins la même histoire, reconstruire la famille: Anne à Paris, Nore ici encore dans son lit, Jeanne là-bas: la Terre comme un minuteur, ceux pour les œufs à la coque’. As we switch between the thoughts of these women, the mother and her three daughters, we build a picture of the family, its history and its relationships and, in their

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93 See for example, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, p.144
94 Ibid., p.15.
memories and stories, the past is recomposed as well as their present adventures. It is Anne, however, who is our vehicle and departure point, since she has been recruited by an organisation to penetrate the minds of others – a feat made possible by the belief in a single universal brain in which we are all included – and over a period of 24 hours will allow us access to the thoughts and memories of her family. This 24-hour block is stretched because her sister Jeanne lives in another time zone in Argentina, so even this basic temporal unit is disrupted geographically. There is nothing concrete in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* – all is in movement and flux. The landscape is built of words and languages and overlapping voices, and all takes place in that blurred space between dream and memory, fantasy and reality. Through Anne we tune into the student Nore with her daily routine and new lovers, to the mother as she thinks of her children, living and dead, and to Jeanne dreaming and waking on the other side of the world. The idea of dreaming is one that Darrieussecq uses to illustrate the out-of-body experience she is trying to describe. As we have seen in *Le Pays*, Darrieussecq’s characters are able to detach themselves from their body and inhabit other spheres. While in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* it is Anne who exploits this ability, we see that the dreaming Jeanne also splits into the physical self and the thinking self who is aware of another presence in her mind:

l’ensemble est beau, les dômes roses sous le soleil jaune, poudre de pierre, bâtiments gréseux, rien ne manque rien ne presse malgré notre mission importante vers ce point, ce point de convergence: j/e descends lentement, j/e m’ètre au soleil, une sorte d’Italie, j/e suis très grande, agrandie de haut en bas m/e dirigeant vers ce point, m/e dirigeant tout à fait normalement et impassiblement vers ce point de ralliement où quelqu’un nous attend….…)…rendors-toi, tout va bien, je rêve, je m’appelle Jeanne, je suis ici en Argentine avec Diego.  

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95 Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, p.16-17; the passage ends without a full stop.
The *j/e* here is Anne, or rather a double Anne or other Anne, the conscious Anne detached from her physical body but not from her senses. The solid and grounded *je* breaks its boundaries, yet this is more than telepathy since the fragmented *j/e* experiences movement, direction and extension. As Anne penetrates Jeanne’s thoughts, she becomes both Jeanne and Anne and refers to herself as *nous* before addressing her sister as *tu* and then in the first person. Anne explains how this is possible:

> il y a la pensée, flottante autour de la tête bleue du monde comme autour de chaque crâne: et moi pour être voyageuse, c’est-à-dire – après avoir *successfully* franchi tous les tests, surmonté toutes les épreuves – recrutée pour flotter, pour surfer sur cette conscience globale.\(^{96}\)

Thought, then, in Darrieussecq is spatial as well as temporal and extends geographically as well as historically, so Anne can travel across it and obliterate the distance between herself and her sisters. Thought ignores the physical distinction between internal and external and can objectify the body. As in Darrieussecq’s other works, the body is scrutinised in detail – ‘d’abord la peau, le derme, fine couche où s’enracinent les poils, puis le matelas graisseux’ – and explored as a sexualised and creative agent.\(^{97}\) The body is spatial, temporal and eternal, shifting from one sphere of being into another after death, and no longer situated in time and space but an intergral part of both:

> que son intérieur est aussi son extérieur; continuité: suivre le ruban de soi comme celui de Moebius. Dans un glissement de toboggan. Elle existe constamment, sans rupture ni pointillés. Et si un enfant croissait en elle et s’y multipliait, elle serait nourricière, d’un être dès l’origine hors d’elle.\(^{98}\)

Again, it is the female body that Darrieussecq treats and, as we saw in *Le Pays*, the female body is traversable. In *Bref séjour chez les vivants* the mind is another point of entry and escape: ‘membrane à membrane fibre à fibre nerf a nerf, deux organes ajustés, cerveau/vagin,

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\(^{96}\) Darrieussecq, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, p.29.
\(^{97}\) Ibid., p.62.
\(^{98}\) Ibid., p.49.
Anne achieves what Marie Rivière will strive for: the ability to encompass the world, to be everywhere and nowhere, to be extensive and yet at the very centre of the world.  

**Centrality and liminality**

The misconception of centrality forms the basis for Darrieussecq’s dystopian novel *Notre vie dans les forêts* (2017), which problematises questions of identity, selfhood and the body. The action is set in a bleak and disturbing future in which most natural life has been replaced by robots, drones and artificially created plants and creatures. Zoos exist, displaying short-lived cloned animals including reanimated dodos and mammoths, and are merely ‘des musées de la disparition’. The novel, therefore, addresses concerns we see raised in current theoretical literature on ecological spatialities and futures. The teachings of Western civilisation appear to have been forgotten or forbidden, so the narrator feels compelled to explain, in parentheses, ‘(la Joconde est un célèbre tableau du XVIe siècle)’, ‘(Pygmalion était un sculpteur grec)’, ‘(Apollinaire était un poète du XXe siècle)’. Even literature has disappeared, and yet the narrator feels compelled to write in a disjointed, often meandering style, addressing the reader directly in a desperate need to make sense of her existence and to

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99 *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, p.86
100 ‘à ce degré ultime de disponibilité au monde qui est d’être, où qu’on soit, dans son centre…s’atomiser dans la lumière, nulle part et partout, être un filtre à monde, une éponge’, Ibid., p.114. It is interesting to note that the earliest of the three novels discussed, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, is most formally successful in depicting the dissolved self.
101 Darrieussecq, *Notre vie dans les forêts*, p.73.
leave a trace of her story behind: ‘J’écris pour comprendre et témoigner’. An appreciation of language and understanding of the figurative would appear, according to the narrator – Marie once again – to be essential to what is human and part of what distinguishes us from the robots. Robots do not understand metaphor, they have difficulty with double negatives and seem unaware of the nuances of languages: ‘Les robots, surtout à l’oral, confondent cou et coup, foie et foi, chœur et Coeur, saint et sein, ratte et rat, chatte et chatte…’. However, Marie has difficulty constructing a chronology and frequently interrupts herself with the question, ‘Où j’en étais’.

J’essaie de suivre un fil chronologique mais ça rate. Il faudrait que je raconte dans l’ordre mais dans ma pauvre tête ça ressemble à un paysage feuilli avec des tas de vallées et de chemins possibles et des gens qui attendent, tous à moitié morts, que je leur passe la parole en vitesse. Ils causent tous en même temps, et tout me renvoie à tout : le passé au présent et au futur, ce qui est arrivé à ce qui va venir.

Time is imagined spatially as labyrinthine and multi-layered. There are multiple voices and stories to be told, and everything is interlinked. Time is not linear and needs to accommodate the simultaneity of multiple experiences. The repeated ‘Où j’en étais’ becomes a way of circling back around to where the narrative has taken a turn to recount a different story, but it also performs a unifying function, keeping the reader in the flow of the text and connecting the characters and events in a cyclical continuum.

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104Darrieussecq, *Notre vie dans les forêts*, p.15. The novel opens with the narrator explaining to the reader, ‘Il faut que je raconte cette histoire. Il faut que j’essaie de comprendre en mettant les choses bout à bout’ (p.9), admitting a sense of urgency and that she is running out of time: ‘J’ai peu de temps. Je le sens à mes os’ (p.10). This is similar to the start of *Truismes* (1996): ‘Mais il faut que j’écrive ce livre sans plus tarder’ (p.9). In a call for papers for the Contemporary Women’s Writing in French seminar in London in March 2018, Shirley Jordan asked ‘How does *Notre vie dans les forêts* take up once again some of the concerns expressed in *Truismes*?’ […] Why does the author choose to mirror her first novel so closely in her latest one?’ [https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-study-contemporary-womens-writing >]. Clearly this impulse to retell and rewrite that we have seen in the other authors studied is also present in Darrieussecq’s work.

105 In her article ‘Posthuman Encounters: Technology, Embodiment and Gender in Recent Feminist Thought and in the Work of Marie Darrieussecq’, *Comparative Critical Studies* 9 (2012), 303-318, Amaleena Damlé discusses the use of science and technology in Darrieussecq’s earlier texts, *Le Pays* and *Zoo*, but the ideas are also of particular interest in a reading of *Notre vie dans la forêt*.

106 Ibid., p.57. The narrator, therefore, makes use of these devices in order to speak to her human reader, for example in the footnote to p.186: ‘Et ne croyez pas que je ne sois pas sûre de ne pas être une non-personne’.

The title of the novel suggests a fairy tale or perhaps a reminiscence of a nomadic hunter-gatherer existence. Both, it turns out, are evoked in the novel, a dark, frightening fantasy and a return to a very basic means of survival. The forest, as we have seen before in *Claire dans la forêt*, can be a disorienting place, a non-place where one can get lost and, in this case, hide: ‘La forêt était étourdissante’. But it is also a refuge, a gathering point for the marginalised and, for our narrator, *un lieu sûr*. *Notre vie dans la forêt* begins with a group of rebels, including Marie, camped out in the forest, ‘dans une sorte d’envers du monde’, having fled the city where they have been controlled and watched and imprisoned by an army of programmed robots. Marie, like most of the rebels, is accompanied by her ‘moitié’, her other half or double, a cloned version of herself with whom she has a close but complicated relationship. Her double is also called Marie and resembles her physically but does not have the same emotional or mental capacity as the narrator, who, in choosing a new, fugitive name for herself, opts tellingly for Viviane. The rebels have freed their ‘moitiés’ from their somnolent existence in dormitories housed in the *Centre de repos*, a large facility built, of course, on the outskirts of the city: ‘Tous ces centres sont isolés très loin à la périphérie’.

Marie’s empathy for her double and her refusal to allow her to be exploited is a call for tolerance in a novel heavy with images that not only remind us of the atrocities of the twentieth century in the references to white supremacy, shaved heads and uniforms, gas masks, and maltreatment, but also point towards more recent crises in the descriptions of inhumane working conditions, kidnapping, disappearances and explosions: ‘On avait peur dans le tramway, dans les taxis, on avait peur à l’école et dans les centres commerciaux, plus personne n’allait dans la rue’. A further and even more disturbing shift has taken place in

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109 Ibid., p.50.
111 Ibid., p.75.
113 Ibid., p.104.
the definition of non-place. Where once the trauma experienced was a dislocation from a
sense of history and belonging, now the danger is very real, and spaces we associated with
‘passing through’ are seen instead as points of assembly. The character of Marie works as a
psychologist helping people deal with trauma and, through this, she discovers that a
difference between robots and people is the ability to cope with the ‘absence of transition’.
Robots have no difficulty assimilating sudden change but, for humans, this abrupt
deterritorialisation is overwhelming: ‘le cerveau ne peut pas suivre. Tout simplement.
L’avant et l’après ne sont pas connectés. Ça n’a aucun sens’.
Is this, then, Darrieussecq’s
warning, on the danger of not passing through, on a lack of liminality, a lack of non-place,
which is, in fact, essential to our comprehension of the world? The narrator of *Notre vie dans
les forêts* underlines the importance of duration and differentiates between the clones who
inhabit an eternal present and the humans who are part of a larger temporal framework,
linked again, she suggests, to a relationship with the body:

On ne sait pas comment vivre la minute qui vient. On est obligé de loger son corps
quelque part, dans l’espace, mais ça ne mène à rien. […] On voudrait nager comme un

Marie’s gradual realisation of the truth of her existence comes through an understanding of
her body in unexpected ways. Marie’s body is compromised and incomplete. She is missing
an eye, a lung and a kidney, her body is not functioning as it should, and she knows she has
not long to live. Having been shown a video of people lounging by a turquoise sea, Marie
identifies in the crowd the hologram image of herself, an older version of herself, now in
possession of her missing organs. She comes to understand that she is just one more
assemblage of spare parts, one more copy among multiple copies of this original ‘Marie’. Her

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114 Darrieussecq, *Notre vie dans les forêts*, p.27.
115 Ibid., p.28.
116 Ibid., p.130.
very being is called into question. The self is detached from the body through the
proliferation of bodies, and Marie tries to establish ‘le centre du Moi’ that exists beyond the
body.117 Suddenly her world view changes and she recognises that there is no centre: the
Earth is not the centre of the solar system, but moving constantly along a periphery; neither is
she the centre of her own world: ‘Ça demande une révolution mentale, vraiment de ne plus se
voir au centre. Au centre de sa propre vision du monde’.118 And so we are moved to the edges
of existence and to the sea which Marie perceives as ‘un immense réservoir de possible’.119

The sea is a constant presence in the works of Marie Darrieussecq, appearing to draw
the protagonists of her novels as they search for their identity or origins. It is not only the
backdrop for her narratives but plays an active role, consuming and defining the land and
providing support and escape for the characters. It is also a threshold through which bodies
pass, with the drowned boy a recurrent image of a body that inhabits a different but parallel
place. The sea facilitates the sensation of placelessness and the out-of-body experience, as
Darrieussecq writes in *Le Pays*:

Mais dès la saison des bains passée, la mer vous prend à part et vous dépossède. Ce
que vous êtes à l’intérieur se retrouve à l’extérieur. Vos molécules se mélangent au
ciel et à l’eau, la solitude se diffuse. Les mots et les choses s’écartent, la pensée ne
suit plus, les signes se désamarrent; et le moi devient une grande béance pleine d’eau
salée.120

Everything becomes fragmented, including thought and language, and this disintegration is
necessary to efface spatial and temporal boundaries and experience the self as a spatial and
temporal being.121 For Darrieussecq the sea is not a barrier between lands but a point of
connection, and ports are ‘les centres nerveux de réseau’ where, if we allow ourselves to be

118 Ibid., p.182.
119 Ibid., p.181.
121 In her essay, ‘Liminality and Fantasy in Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Ndiaye and Marie Redonnet’, MLN, 124
(2009), 901-928, (p.914), Jean H. Duffy subtitles the section on Darrieussecq, ‘Neither Here nor There, Between
the No Longer and the Not Yet’.
carried along by the tide, we too can become centres or rather ‘un des centres, un des univers-îles’, individual but encompassing all around.\textsuperscript{122} The sea, in constant movement, provides a metaphor for the dynamic relationship of time and space: an eternal, extensive, coherent and rhythmic motion made up of individual but indefinable parts. According to Darrieussecq, the sea is difficult to represent and it is ‘impossible de regarder la mer, et de s’en souvenir, de se souvenir de sa mobilité – ou alors, se souvenir de la mer comme d’un visage, par images arrêtées, comme on voit les fantômes sur les photos bougées’.\textsuperscript{123} Movement remains difficult to depict, as Henri Bergson warned, and yet the fragmented language of \textit{Bref séjour chez les vivants} conveys the disordered spatial and temporal leaps of the mind in a sea-like rhythmic flux:

\begin{quote}
Si j’étais autre chose, que ce corps cette conscience accouplés ayant attendu en vain stupidement ce matin sur le parvis, tap tap tap le chuintment de l’eau et ensuite, \textit{silk cut}, cette photo satellite de je ne sais quelle côte – Hollande, polders – avec les sillages entrecroisés des bateaux invisibles…\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

The movements and rhythms of the sea can be experienced elsewhere, in the ‘équivalents-mer’, and it is in these spaces, if we allow ourselves to be swept into the waves and detached from our bodies, that we may experience the interconnectedness of time and space:

\begin{quote}
des équivalents-mer: la mer qui stocke et combine et remue et ressasse, et s’apaise et recommence, cerveau bleu ce qui compte, c’est ce sentiment, d’être là pile au centre, pile où il faut être, au rendez-vous, les pieds bien à plat et la colonne droite, le creux humain cambré aux reins et le cerveau en équilibre, dansant sur les cervicales dans sa coquille à peu près ronde, à ce moment-là du temps, et à ce point-là de l’espace, vous êtes en phase, vous êtes susceptible d’être recruté susceptible de vous brancher à même le grand cerveau global.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{122} Darrieussecq, \textit{Bref séjour chez les vivants}, p.111.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p.105.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p.19.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., pp.112-113.
Marie Darrieussecq places the body, and specifically the female body, at the centre of her exploration of time and space and treats the body both as an inhabited place that provides relative stability and a point of reference, and as an agent in the creation of place. The movement of the body through place and the filtering of landscape through the body construct a sense of appropriation and belonging necessary for the confirmation of identity. The body, however, is not a fixed entity, but changes and develops, particularly through the process of pregnancy and birth, during which the body is first inhabited by another and then breached so that the internal is externalised. The body, therefore, is not confined and limited but a space of process and change with a constant exchange, in biological rhythms such as breathing and eating, between the inside and the outside. When Darrieussecq takes this interrelationship between the body and its surroundings to the extreme, rejecting the traditional situation of body in space in favour of the coexistence of body as space, her fantastical narratives become possible and absent bodies become present, if not visible. The absence-presence dichotomy with which she plays is resolved since all becomes present and possible. While Edward Casey called for a renewed study of place and suggested we put the body back ‘into place’, Darrieussecq sees place as an incorporation of space, so that rather than the very act of being resulting in situating the self, as Casey would suggest, being creates place and the movement of the body through space continues this creative process. Michel de Certeau’s claim that the movement of the body creates non-place is not, however, a contradiction of Casey but a complement since every act or movement generates displacement as well as implantation, or deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation and, therefore, the simultaneous creation of place and non-place.
Conclusions

It would appear, from a reading of the novels studied in this thesis, that the desire to express the human experience of time and space, of its interconnectedness and its dynamic qualities, not only exercises the authors studied but motivates their literary project. Spatio-temporal concerns permeate the very fabric of their texts and their literary explorations and experimentations communicate a sense of the continual flux we experience while attempting to offer models for making some sense of it all. Annie Ernaux, Patrick Modiano, Jean Echenoz and Marie Darrieussecq, each recognise historical and geographical impulses in their work and each offers a new means of negotiating the time and space in which we live. While strikingly different in their literary styles and in the tales that they choose to tell there are, nonetheless, points of commonality among the four authors including themes of life-writing, formal experimentation, rhythms and repetitions and a questioning of centrality and marginality.

Auto/biography

Critics such as Dominique Viart, Barbara Havercroft, Bruno Blanckeman and Yves Baudelle, have already commented on the predominance of autofictional, biographical and autobiographical texts at the end of the twentieth century.1 Annie Ernaux and Patrick Modiano, in particular, are concerned with writing and rewriting their life stories and the life stories of others. For Ernaux this manifests itself in an ever growing need to expose the self in increasingly documentary style renderings by publishing diaries, brouillons and intimate

scribblings, and by including photographs, absent in earlier versions of texts but reproduced in later collections such as *Écrire la vie*. There is an obsessive return to origins in her writing, partly in order to chart change and the distance travelled since Ernaux has no desire to go back to Yvetot but likewise, the degree of change makes return impossible since she now inhabits a very different socio-economic sphere. On the one hand, language and particularly literary language, defines Ernaux’s difference from her parents when she visits but, on the other she recognises that she carries her past with her and will never truly be rid of it. Instead, Ernaux returns to specific events, traumas and relationships in her life and attempts to shorten the gap between lived experience and written record by peeling back the layers of fictionality and presenting contemporaneous diary entries. She appears to be searching for a certain type of truth only accessible in the lived moment but the effort fails and exposes the fictionalising process of recounting past events. The desire to freeze time and preserve the past cannot succeed, as literature, by its very nature, is dynamic. In her later works, the author moves from the particular to the more general and there is not so much an effacing of the self as an extension of the self to communicate a collective memory and build a shared history through cultural reference points in texts like *Les années*. Instead of trying to arrest time she is forced to abandon herself to it and become part of the flux. The splintering and doubling of the narrator, *je/elle*, to attain or connect with a larger, shared community is taken to the extreme in Darrieussecq whose characters blend with the natural environment and form part of a global spirit, but it is also evident in Modiano’s sense of prehistory in which he returns to a time before his birth, so much part of the national psyche that he feels he is witness to it.

Modiano’s recurrent protagonist, the young man in search of a past, is as many clones or ghosts of himself as he seeks out his father in the streets of Paris. The presence of the past, particularly of World War II, is written into the architecture of the city and this spatio-temporal phenomenon allows Modiano to write, not only his own life story, but that of *Dora*
Bruder as well, a biography reconstructed through documentary research, a forceful imagination and a belief in the palimpsestic nature of time so that layers of the past are accessible through place and the individual can experience multiple times simultaneously. Modiano too is on an origin-quest but one which may not be feasible. He is seeking an absent father and trying to reconstruct his own past through unstable reference points such as phone numbers, misremembered names and partial addresses. Modiano’s protagonists, in order to make sense of the information they have, need to move, walk, wander and revisit sites in the city so as to physically connect with memories and past stories. For Modiano, traces of the past remain in the buildings and streets of the city and they stand as testimony to former events. It is important for Modiano that what is absent be made present, he questions what goes unseen and unheard and attempts, in his fiction, to reinstate what was lost and resurrect the dead. For Darrieussecq, this communion with ghosts is not dependent on geography since time is non-linear and the present is full of phantom figures of the past. She too has written a biography, Être ici est une splendeur, more objective in style than the biofictional triptyche Echenoz produced in Ravel, Courir and Les éclairs and, as we have seen, fictional versions of Darrieussecq recur in the narrators of Le Pays and Le Bébé for example. Are we also meant to see a version of her in the ‘Marie’ of Notre vie dans les forêts?

**Formal experimentation**

A blurring of distinctions between literary genres and between narrator and authorial voice is illustrative of the dynamic relationship between art and life and the questioning of boundaries in the literary project at the turn of the twenty-first century. Direct addresses to the reader, whether in authoritative footnotes in Ernaux or jokey asides from Echenoz, draw attention to the craft and artistry behind the text and democratise the experience of reading, bringing the

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reader into the text in a move of confidence and inclusion. Given that Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, following Immanuel Kant, argue that a true reflection of the movements of time and space can only happen from within, the presence of the authorial voice is to be expected. Therefore, formal experimentation is necessary in an attempt to convey something of the experience of dynamic timespaces. For Ernaux this is a generic confluence where her ethnographic study meets the literary. Her recordings of conversations, scenes and incidents on public transport and in supermarkets challenge Marc Augé’s assertions that non-places are merely spaces of transience and not of connection. Ernaux, instead, finds these spaces to be teeming with life and bringing together people of different socio-economic groups in ways that start to affect not only the individual but society itself. Her political project is very clearly part of the post-68 generation and her demystification of language parallels a cultural shift in the position and subject of literature. The brevity of most of her works, her concentration on self as subject, the minimalist, telegraphic style written in passé composé and in the first person pronoun and her revision of her personal past as social history exemplify the supermodern as outlined by Marc Augé in the contraction of space, the acceleration of history and the individualisation of reference points.

Modiano’s formal experimentation is, perhaps, more subtle, in the slippages between times and voices in his texts. His use, seen too in the work of the other writers, of gaps, spaces and jumps in the narrative reflect problematic chronologies and a need to represent the non-linear experience of time and memory. Echenoz pushes boundaries further still and his ludic prose crosses into the fantastical and improbable with talking furniture, guardian angels and spying flies. He reintroduces the playful into his novels which parody traditional genres and experiment with the limits of fiction. While he purports to concentrate on the geographical, we have seen how his use of pace and delay shape his plots and how he portrays simultaneous action. Spatially Echenoz’s texts explore not only extremes but also
the very familiar spaces of the contemporary urban environment. His choice of location defies any argument that spaces of transit and nondescript spaces such as conference centres are static and stultifying and he shows non-places to be pregnant with potential stories. Into these spaces he brings a language that is poetic and rich in vocabulary and invention and he deliberately applies classical prosody to descriptions of the contemporary urban landscape.

Darrieussecq too experiments with language and the formal breakdown we have seen elsewhere, in the lack of punctuation, the use of lists and narrative leaps evident in Ernaux, Modiano and Echenoz, disintegrates further. Voices become detached from their speaker, grammatical rules and spelling lose significance, ‘Je n’ai plus le temps de verifier si on dit un orbite ou une orbite’. However, she suggests that literature and the nuances of language are part of what makes us human. There is, again, a doubling and repetition as words and phrases return written by different versions of the narrator or the author so that, here too, we perceive a superimposition and build-up of language, images and stories that would appear to meet the need expressed by Henri Bergson to replicate both duration and the simultaneity of experience.

Rhythms and repetitions

Modiano admits to a compulsive need to rewrite adaptations of a similar plot or, perhaps, continue to write repeated scenes in an ongoing continuum. Repetition and rewriting are, perhaps, the most obvious similarities across the four writers studied, with the return to specific stories and texts in Ernaux, predictable plot patterns in Modiano or the composition of paired or complementary narratives in Echenoz and Darrieussecq. The impulse suggests an engagement with a circular rather than linear understanding of time and a concept of layering or spiralling that is perhaps meant to access a certain truth or designed to mirror the human

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3 Marie Darrieussecq, *Notre vie dans le forêts*, footnote to p.135, italics as in original.
experience of time. Repetition can function as a means of scaffolding a sense of time, place and story, a means of recalling memory as well as creating memory but it can also liberate the narrative from the story which, by virtue of being retold, fades and loses its significance. Once the plot is understood, even if the characters change, the story becomes merely a model or pattern and the real action takes place in the telling, in linguistic experimentation and literary games. The narrative can replicate the complexities of spatio-temporal dynamics in ways the story is chronologically not free to do and so the contortions and diversions of the narrative express something of our lived experience beyond the incidents and events being told.

Repetition is both spatial and temporal and creates rhythms which we perceive in the works by all four authors. For Ernaux, there is rhythm in the comings and goings of her lover, in the drudgery of everyday tasks and in the aging of her body. In Modiano, the external rhythms of seasons and weekdays provide a backdrop to the movement of the protagonists’ body through the city and the comforting sequence of street names and metro stops. Echenoz uses recurrent structural devices and poetic, linguistic rhythms in his prose and Darrieussecq focuses on biological and natural rhythms in motion in order to break down barriers between the self and the landscape and she contests the stability of the body as reference point in our understanding of time and place.

**Centrality and marginality**

A theme common to the four authors studied is an interrogation of identity, its formation, location and stability. Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Gille Deleuze and Edward Casey all argue for the centrality of the body as a reference point in understanding time and space and as an agent in the creation of place and non-place. However, the work of Ernaux, Modiano, Echenoz and Darrieussecq probes the validity and stability of the body and, therefore, its efficacy as a measure and standard. Beings without bodies people Modiano’s
Paris and the fantastical worlds of Echenoz and Darrieussecq, and Annie Ernaux too breaches the singular, physical divide in her historicising project. The female body, in particular, is called into question and its transformations or metamorphoses are explored by both of the female authors. The texts examine how sexuality, maternity, decay and deformation affect the physical body and the psychological self and show how the body can be doubled and breached, manipulated, objectified and destroyed. The body is perhaps the main locus of the self but it may not be the only one and the changes of the body, each affected by movements of time and space, in turn alter our perceptions of our surrounding time and place.

What can be agreed upon by the theorists and the authors is that the body is not static and that an understanding of time and space is only possible through movement. This movement, and at times its resistance, motivates the texts and generates the narratives in all their diversity. Each of the authors understands time to be non-linear and palimpsestic with multiple pasts and possible futures present in every moment. They also each represent place as unstable and ever changing and recognise the constant creative force of the movement of the body through space in a process of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation or a ‘création perpétuelle de possibilités et de réalités’.4

There is, perhaps, a romantic nostalgia for place in the work of Ernaux and Modiano that contrasts with the urban adventures of Echenoz’s characters and even more starkly with the dystopic settings of Darrieussecq’s near future in Notre vie dans les forêts. The supermodern spaces and non-places Echenoz explores are open towards the future rather than the past; however, each of the authors tests boundaries, either in the genre of their work or at the limits of the self as in Ernaux’s je/elle, Modiano’s prehistoric memory and Darrieussecq’s liminal spaces. There is a destabilising force at work in each of the narratives that opens them

up towards new beginnings, either in retelling a familiar tale without retracing the same path but spiralling along an ever thickening orbit or in the unresolved plots and disappearing characters that allow the stories to enter new territories. The four authors are also, therefore, writing at the edges of literature and raising political concerns about what is absent, invisible and marginal, who is forgotten, who is free and how might we live together.

New frontiers in French and Francophone writing

Patrick Modiano suggests in his *Discours à l’Académie suédoise* that he is part of a transitional generation between the writers of the long 19th century, urban wanderers with a sense of place, and a new literary period which is beyond the city, spreads into the virtual and experiences time and place in a completely different way. Towards the end of his speech he wonders about literature from the megacities and how writing will develop to express increasingly diverse experiences of time and place. The literature studied in this thesis, particularly in texts by Modiano and Ernaux, both born at the end of the Second World War and coming of age in the mid-sixties, is written against the backdrop of the twentieth century and addresses the disconcerting shift identified by Augé in the development of *villes nouvelles*, increased access to international travel, the proliferation of extra-urban shopping complexes and a changing understanding of the centre both politically and geographically. Although chronologically of the same generation as Modiano and Ernaux, Jean Echenoz joins Marie Darrieussecq in exploiting the *extrême contemporain* with texts that explore the possible and improbable and are open towards the future. There is an engagement with new technologies, particularly in Marie Darrieussecq that must surely be part of a literary understanding of time-space dynamics moving further into the 21st century. Something of the fantastical, present in the works of Echenoz and Darrieussecq, may be necessary as a means of modelling new futures and new stories and trying out continually changing relationships.
with where and when we are. Darrieussecq has indicated too the very real ecological concerns that now permeate society and, therefore, literature and which force a rethinking of spatial practices. As the centre continues to be dismantled, it is evenmore important to investigate the periphery and the margins.

Negotiations of time and space as on-going concerns are evident in the work of theoreticians such as Pierre Sansot, Christophe Guilluy and Chrystelle Gazeau and contemporary fiction too continues to address manipulations of time and space in, for example, Delphine de Vigan’s *Les heures souterraines* (2009) or Mathias Enard’s Prix Goncourt winning *Boussole* (2015). The genre-bending 75 (2016) by Anna-Louise Milne, marries poetry, history, archaeology and flânerie in the north of Paris and the work of Philippe Vasset and Jean Rolin wanders deeper into the capital’s suburbs and lost spaces. The city is still, however, a jungle, a possible hiding spot and a dangerous place, and in thinking about liminal spaces, we need to look too at where people fall between the cracks. Writing about or from clandestinity redraws the familiar urban landscape in new ways, from fresh perspectives that are at once at the centre but only in its shadows. This suggests too that we need to consider the historio-geographic constructs of francophone writers of the diaspora such as Fatou Diome and Léonora Miano who depicts an identity that is hybrid, *entre-deux*, neither African nor French but something in-between. Furthermore, since our relationship with time and space is

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8 See, for example, Christophe Boltanski, *La cache* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015) and Gauz, *Debout-Payé* (Paris: Le nouvel Atilla, 2014). Unfortunately, the experience of urban spaces and non-places is also changing because of terrorist attacks and so, a new literature is emerging such as Frederika Amalia Finklestein’s *Survivre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).
dynamic, transnational and transcultural developments contribute important models of expression and exploration.

The texts studied in this thesis have experimented with narrative techniques and linguistic expression in response to anxieties around spatio-temporal shifts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They have provided models for an understanding of our dynamic relationship with time and space and for navigating troubling spaces in the urban landscape. I would suggest that literary negotiations of time and space are becoming increasingly dynamic, unhitching from rooted places and histories and becoming more fluid and extensive, exploring new territories and possibilities of existence, connection and community in ways that may not only reflect our lived experience but suggest possibilities for our future.
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