

Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'Etoile*:
Why Name a Narrator "Raphaël Schlemilovitch"?

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Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'Etoile* invites attention on at least two accounts. First, its appearance in 1968 marked an event in French publishing history, since Modiano used this, his first major work, to storm the French literary establishment as a mere twenty-year-old. Second, the book, a first-person narrative, is suffused by the theme of movement, a theme of no little critical interest: on the one hand it is as venerable as Odysseus' voyages and the wanderings of the Israelites; on the other, it is as contemporary as our distinctively twentieth-century art form, the cinema, the essence of which is obviously movement (witness the Greek etymon *kin* behind "cinema" and the English "motion pictures").

In a paper entitled "The Theme of Movement in Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'Etoile*" (read at the Twelfth Annual Conference on Literature and Film held at Florida State University, January 29–31, 1987), I discussed how in Modiano's bewildering text, narrated by the young Jew Raphaël Schlemilovitch, the apparent spatial movement that makes up much of the tale is hallucinatory, arising from Raphaël's disturbed feelings as he confronts in imagination collaborationist France of the early 1940's. Late in the story, the text offers a metaphor, that of the kaleidoscope, which conveys nicely the serial nature of the book's key scenes which evolve drastically in overall appearance while keeping, kaleidoscope-like, essentially the same constitutive elements. Furthermore, the metaphor anchors the narration and its many allusions to Chaplin, the Marx brothers, et al. in a cinematic frame of reference, in that, like a surreal hand-held movie screen, the kaleidoscope of *La Place de l'Etoile* shows "un visage humain composé de mille facettes lumineuses et qui change sans arrêt de forme..." ["a human face composed of a thousand luminous facets constantly changing its shape"].¹

It is, moreover, Raphaël's rage over the Holocaust, the subject underlying *La Place de l'Etoile*, that feeds the growing frenzy with which the kaleidoscope – the barrel of observation, so to speak – is twisted. But throughout this book, incongruity destabilizes and adds equivocation to rage as, for example, in the prickly pun of the title. The words "la place de l'étoile" evoke most familiarly the major intersection in Paris, the intersection (*place*) of the Star (*étoile*) where the Arc de Triomphe, monument to France's unknown dead soldier, glorifies that nation's military past. But Modiano plays cleverly, almost offhandedly, on the words, reminding the reader that they also mean "the place of the star (of David)" worn obligatorily by Jews during the shameful period of official anti-Semitism that France would forget.² No less disturbing examples of arch humor are the Rabelaisian quality of the verbal gratuitousness found in the anti-Semitic diatribe that opens the book, and Raphaël's vision of a disneyesque, almost funny Hitler. Such incongruities make the reader's response an unsettled, unsettling one suited to the text's matrix, æsthetic instability, that is, ceaseless perceptual uncertainty that must result when the mind attempts but necessarily fails to grasp through language the reality of the Holocaust. So, to conclude this *précis* of my earlier paper, Raphaël's hallucinatory metamorphosing of scenes and characters, the image of the kaleidoscope, and the text's disturbing incongruities serve to advance the theme of unstable

movement, in such a way that motion pictures become the “objective correlative” of Raphaël’s haunting tale.

As the following pages will endeavor to show, all three themes – incongruity, rage, and movement – intertwine in the name Raphaël Schlemilovitch (which is only appropriate, for those two words become of course for the reader the *persona* of the narrator out of whom the whole tale spills forth in the first place). Regarding incongruity, Raphaël Schlemilovitch is first of all a funny name whose ring alone seems vaguely burlesque. It certainly brings an immediate smile to anyone even casually familiar with Yiddish folklore, for *schlemiel* carries the promise of a chuckle, meaning as it does the inept fool, the unlucky but somehow appealing bungler who is the classic subject of so much Yiddish humor. But when *schlemiel*, coupled with the slavic suffix *vitch*, becomes the pompous and silly patronymic “Schlemilovitch,” son of Schlemiel, one finds oneself primed indeed for a laugh. When, finally, we give thought to how the given name and the surname work together, we find ourselves in the presence of hilarious inconsistency, for while “Schlemilovitch” is a one-word gag of popular background, “Raphaël” pulls in a totally different direction, toward, for instance, the sophistication of the Latin-Romance tradition. It quickly brings to mind Italy’s “divine Raphaël” and the high seriousness of so much Hispanic culture in which “Raphaël” enjoys wide popularity (such as the culture of Caracas, Venezuela, from which our narrator’s father is said to come). So the dignified urbanity of the name “Raphaël” is uneasily coupled to the almost slap-stick traditions coming out of the *shtetl* where the *schlemiel* was probably born.³

While the incongruity that results from joining “Raphaël” to “Schlemilovitch” seems at first only to add to the surname’s potential for humor, it will slowly turn as wry and troublesome as the pun in the title. In the course of the book’s development, we watch Raphaël becoming more and more unhinged by the question of his Jewishness, as in his mind he moves in increasing delirium from one hostile place to another, from one Jewish identity to another, reimagining in his own way the myth of the Wandering Jew (referred to for example on p. 45). But as Jews often realize, the myth is not that much of a myth. When the Israelites left the Mediterranean basin, slowly spreading to the eastern limits of European civilization, it was not out of a taste for travel. When, furthermore, so many Jews subsequently left Europe for the other, Western limits of European civilization – South and North America – it too was hardly for frivolous reasons. So in this book the funny name “Raphaël Schlemilovitch” progressively realizes its capacity to become an echo of the Eastern and Western limits of Jewish dispersion, an echo of the relentlessly unstable movement imposed on Jews. In fulfilling this potential, the name makes our response to it evolve, a process fed by allusions to Jews of Italy, Spain, Russia, and of course Germany. Italy gave the world the “divine Raphaël,” but it also gave the Jews the word *ghetto* (used for instance on p. 14), and the experience that the word has come to imply. The Iberian peninsula enriched both Sephardic Jewish life within itself and Western culture in general, but it also spawned the Inquisition and the *auto-da-fé* (a word used on p. 190). The Jews took from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe the *schlemiel*, but they took as well, for example, the Russian word *pogrom* (p. 70), “thunder,” no doubt from the thunder of horses’ hooves that so often announced still another episode of victimization. So not only is recalled pain

turning humor unstable and uncertain again (see above, the discussion of the punning title), the reader is also harking back to Jewish geographic instability already evoked in Raphaël's delirium of displacement.

An important moment in Jewish awareness of that instability occurs with the Book of Tobit of the Apocrypha, where we find the basis for another dimension in the study of our narrator's name, a dimension that gets to the essence of things, time. Written in about the third century B.C. and directed toward Jews of the Dispersion precisely about their problems,⁴ the Book of Tobit raises the questions of how one can be Jewish, and of why one should remain Jewish, while separated from Israel in an environment hostile to Judaism. Part of an answer to these perennial questions for Jews is offered by the archangel Raphael, the character who first introduced that name into Western culture upon the Christian absorption of Hebrew religious texts. Since, true to the Hebrew etymons of his name ("healing" and "God"), the archangel heals those who suffer for clinging to their Jewishness while outside of Israel, Modiano's choice of the name "Raphaël" introduces into his narrative that primary issue of the Book of Tobit. Moreover, Modiano establishes that text's concerns at the heart of his own Raphaël's identity by having him struggle increasingly in the course of the story with the questions of whether and how to be a Jew in a Gentile culture. By interweaving that ancient name and problem into a contemporary setting where Raphaël's hallucinations and fractious memory work together to defy time, Modiano's text suggests that Diaspora is an enduring, timeless reality lived by all Jews who have found themselves outside of Israel.

But the theme of time takes on an added and different cast when we probe further into the history of the name of our hero, because another important literary antecedent for the use of the name "Raphaël" is found in the eponymous narrator of Alphonse de Lamartine's *Raphaël*. Published in 1849, about thirty years after the famous poet's anguished *Méditations poétiques* on love, nature, and time, the voice of this prose narrative confronts the same setting and subjects as the poetic *Méditations*. As will be the case with Raphaël Schlemilovitch, Lamartine's Raphaël found that time is of the essence. Only this Raphaël, a very Christian one, suffered because he yearned for but could not sustain timelessness:

Oh! qui n'a pas eu ainsi dans sa vie de ces bonheurs sans sécurité
et sans lendemain, où la vie se concentre dans une heure qu'on
voudrait rendre éternelle et qu'on sent vous échapper minute à
minute, en écoutant le balancier de la pendule qui bat la seconde,
en regardant l'aiguille qui dévore l'heure sur le cadran, et sentant
la roue de la voiture dont chaque tour abrège l'espace, ou en
écoutant le bruit d'une proue qui laisse le flot en arrière et qui
vous approche du bord où il faudra descendre du ciel de vos rêves
sur la grève dure et froide de la réalité.⁵

[Oh! who in his life has not had such fleeting, insecure moments of
bliss, when life is concentrated into an hour that one would make
eternal and that one feels slipping away minute by minute. And

this even as one listens to the pendulum of the clock marking the seconds, and watches its hands consuming time, and feels the carriage wheel each turn of which is shortening space, or hears the noise of the prow leaving the waves behind and bringing one closer to the shore where it will be necessary to climb down from the heaven of one's dreams onto the hard and cold bank of reality.]

The relationship vis-à-vis time of the two Raphaëls, the Jew and the Christian, reflects an idea dealt with by Franz Rosenzweig, a modern Jewish theologian who has had considerable impact on several prominent Jewish thinkers. (Since Rosenzweig named his own son Raphaël and entitled his most famous work *Stern der Erlösung*, 'The Star of Redemption,' he may well have influenced Modiano when the latter chose his narrator's name and his novel's title.) According to Rosenzweig, because of Christianity's need of Christ, that is, of a mediator between people and God, and because of its need to make converts and to spread, it is inextricably bound to process, to time, whereas Judaism functions on a plane above history and is timeless because of God's choosing once and for ever the Jews as His people. Thus, Modiano's Raphaël bears a name that, within the referential confines of *La Place de l'Etoile*, is made to operate antithetically. While his Jewishness holds out the promise of release from temporal limits (a promise fulfilled at least emotionally for him and imaginatively for readers by his combination of lively memory and dementia), his being an integral part of a French and predominantly Christian culture inhibits that release. The antithesis at work within him centers around the essence of all movement and instability, time itself.

Antithesis brings us back to our third theme, rage. As indicated above, the rage that fuels *La Place de l'Etoile* comes, to be sure, from memories of the Holocaust (e.g., pp. 42–46), the fruit of a Western tendency become systematic Nazi policy. But rage also springs from ambivalence about Jewishness, particularly about stereotypic Jewishness. On the one hand, Raphaël's narrative makes us wince at its racist stereotypes and at the evocation of the suffering inflicted through them. But on the other hand, and perversely enough, his narrative also makes us wince at those who attack the stereotypes. In a section at the end of the book that has caused anguish among Israeli critics,⁶ Raphaël escapes back to his ancestral home Israel, but an Israel become a 1940's police state run by Gestapo agents that happen to be Zionist Jews. Raphaël envisions it that way at any rate, apparently because he insists on clinging to and living out old Western stereotypes about the Jews, stereotypes that he fancies would infuriate future-oriented Israelis to the point that they too would persecute him. In the homeland of his imagination, Raphaël is upbraided in the following terms:

— Alors, écoutez-moi: vous vous trouvez maintenant dans un pays jeune, vigoureux, dynamique. De Tel-Aviv à la mer Morte, de Haïfa à Eilat, l'inquiétude, la fièvre, les larmes, la POISSE juives n'intéressent plus personne. Plus personne! Nous ne voulons plus entendre parler de l'esprit critique juif, de l'intelligence juive, du scepticisme juif, des contorsions juives, de l'humiliation, du malheur juif... (Les larmes inondaient son visage.) Nous laissons tout cela aux jeunes esthètes européens de votre espèce! Nous

sommes des types énergiques, des mâchoires carrées, des pionniers et pas du tout des chanteuses yiddish, à la Proust, à la Kafka, à la Chaplin! je vous signale que nous avons fait récemment un autodafé sur la grand-place de Tel-Aviv: les ouvrages de Proust, Kafka et consorts, les reproductions de Soutine, Modigliani et autres invertébrés, ont été brûlés par notre jeunesse, des gars et des filles qui n'ont rien à envier aux Hitlerjugend blonds, l'oeil bleu, larges d'épaules, la démarche assurée, aimant l'action et la bagarre! (Il poussa un gémissement.) Pendant que vous cultiviez nos [sic] névroses, ils se musclaient. Pendant que vous vous lamentiez, ils travaillaient dans les kibboutzim! N'avez-vous pas honte, Schlemilovitch? (pp. 189-191)

[So listen to me: now you are in a young, vigorous, dynamic country. From Tel-Aviv to the Dead Sea, from Haïfa to Eilat, Jewish anxiety, fever, tears, Jewish TOUGH LUCK do not interest anyone anymore. No one, not any more! We do not want to hear any more about the Jewish critical spirit, about Jewish intelligence, about Jewish skepticism, Jewish contortions, about Jewish humiliation, misfortune... We leave all that stuff to the young European aesthetes like you. We are energetic guys, with square jaws, pioneers and not at all yiddish *chanteuses à la Proust, Kafka, and Chaplin!* Let me point out to you that we recently had an auto-da-fé on Tel-Aviv's main square: the works of Proust, Kafka, and consorts, the reproductions of Soutine, Modigliani, and other invertebrates were burned by our youth, guys and women who do not have any reason to envy the blond *Hitlerjugend*. They have blue eyes, broad shoulders, a firm step, and they like action, they like mixing it up! (He sighs.) While you were cultivating our [sic] neuroses, they were developing their muscles. While you were out lamenting, they were working in the kibboutzim! Aren't you ashamed, Schlemilovitch?]

One way of dealing with the whole troubling section from which these lines come is to dwell on the passage that follows it immediately at the very close of the book. This capital scene pits Raphaël against no less a figure than Sigmund Freud, himself of course a Jew. We watch Modiano's Freud – reductive, soothing analyzer of the irrational, the German *Freude* meaning “pleasure” after all – as he tries to tempt Raphaël away from pain by appealing to that other major refuge for Jews, assimilation, a topic raised before in the book in a reference (cf. pp. 42, 68) to J. P. Sartre's notorious observation on Jewishness. Repeating Sartre's notion, Modiano's Freud pleads with Raphaël:

LE JUIF N'EXISTE PAS... VOUS N'ETES PAS JUIF, vous êtes un homme parmi d'autres hommes, voilà tout. Vous n'êtes pas juif, je vous le répète, vous avez simplement des délires hallucinatoires, des fantasmes, rien de plus, une très légère paranoïa... Personne

ne vous veut du mal, mon petit, on ne demande qu'à être gentil avec vous. Nous vivons actuellement dans un monde pacifié. (pp. 213–214)

[THE JEW DOES NOT EXIST. YOU ARE NOT A JEW, you are a man among other men, that's all. You are not a Jew, I repeat, you simply have hallucinatory deliria, phantasms, nothing more, a very slight paranoia... No one wants to hurt you, my friend, they are just asking to be nice to you. We are currently living in a pacified world.]

So Raphaël's problems with time and insecurity, together with a people's Diaspora, would dissolve into mere difficulties of psychological and social adjustment. But Raphaël just gets up from the couch, pats Freud on the head, and asks perversely enough for the anti-Semitic doctor Bardamu, whose racist diatribe opened the book (see above). This response on Raphaël's part can be taken to suggest that anti-Semitism, like the stereotypes flaunted by Raphaël in his imaginary Israel, at least offers a back-handed recognition of the mysteries of community and of suffering shared through the ages, mysteries that rise above glib assertions about the need to turn away from the past toward the future, about the uniqueness of individuals, and about the primacy of the psychological over the transcendental.

But is Raphaël's call for Bardamu an act of choice or an expression of literary necessity? Arguing for the latter, there is one final element tying his given and family names together, the logic of which must be given its due. Since he is burdened with the Hebrew etymon for God ("el") in both his given and family names (*Raphaël Schlemilovitch*), as a literary character he would seem incapable of cutting himself free from a transcendental reality that ties past to present, incapable of renouncing the timeless community of God's chosen persecuted.

Whatever the reasons for his insisting on being treated by Doctor Bardamu, to a character of Raphaël's delirious imagination it means ultimately that he will become a victim instrumental in his own torture, a role adumbrated early in the narrative by his imaginary play (pp. 50–51) in which a Jewish son tortures his own father. For one suffering from hallucinations, to be reminded of immediate and extended kin victimized by anti-Semitism means becoming their medium in a highly personal way that is more vivid than so-called healthy memory that in its necessary distancing spares much direct pain. (As Modiano declared in his preface: "A travers lui [Raphaël], en trajets délirants, mille identités qui pourraient être les siennes passent et repassent dans une émouvante fantasmagorie" (p. 7). ["Through him a thousand identities that could be his own pass back and forth in a moving phantasmagoria."]) The role of victim/torturer, then, whether the product of choice or necessity for Raphaël, would be still another source of the anguish and rage fueling *La Place de l'Etoile*.

If it is permissible to end on a note of paradox, we may ponder that *La Place de l'Etoile*, in both its “cinematic,” movie-like delirium and its rage over the Holocaust, would appear to be quintessential of the twentieth century. Yet, because of the themes of movement and rage, this book has to struggle against becoming one more footnote to Homer. For the name of the much traveled hero of the Greek bard is “Odysseus,” coming arguably from the classical Greek verb *Odysseomai* ‘to be angry,’ ‘to be wroth.’ *Odysseos*, then, would be “the Angry One,” another literary forebear to Raphaël. In the opening line of Homer’s tale, moreover, we read of the quality so distinctive of the Angry One: he is “ingenious, clever,” an adjective that becomes one of his principal epithets. The original Greek adjective so often translated by “ingenious, clever,” however, is *polytropos*, made up of *poly*, that is, ‘much,’ and *tropos*, ‘turned.’ Together they mean ‘much-turned,’ ‘wandering,’ ‘unstable,’ and only finally ‘clever’ because of the way in which the Angry One consistently demonstrates his “much-turnedness.” Moreover, the dramatic run-on between the great epic’s first two lines offers an emphatic reprise of *polytropos*, beginning the second line with the forceful *plangthē*, ‘he wandered.’ So in listening to a very contemporary, very Jewish narrative about an angry soul in the throes of ceaseless movement, one can hear a distant but captivating echo of a text that reflective readers through the centuries have maintained is really the story of what it is – and always has been – to be human.

Notes

¹ Patrick Modiano, *La Place de l'Etoile* (Editions Gallimard, 1968), p. 156. In this paper all quotations of *La Place de l'Etoile* will be from the Gallimard edition and all translations will be my own.

² Moreover, for readers of *S/Z* the pun on “étoile” and the kaleidoscopic narrative structure of *La Place de l'Etoile* can overlap in a recollection of Roland Barthes’ famous critical imperative to “étoiler le texte” [“star-burst the text”].

³ We should note that the incongruity resulting from the linking of “Raphaël” to a humorous surname has a precedent in what is doubtless one of the *hypotextes* (to borrow a term from Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsestes*) of *La Place de l'Etoile*: in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, in spite of all the seriousness with which the principal narrator Raphael must be taken, he has a comic surname “Hythlodæus,” which was concocted from Greek by the author to mean “speaker of nonsense.”

We can be sure, moreover, that the precedent does not signal a merely perfunctory parallel between the two texts, for they share genre as well. Hythlodæus’ tale belongs to a special category of the travel tale, that recounted by the more explicitly mental voyager: “[Raphael Hythlodæus] is not the ordinary traveler, Peter Giles tells More as Book I [of *Utopia*] opens..., who comes back, like Ulysses, with wild tales of monsters; nor is he a mere sailor like Palinurus [mentioned in Books V and VI of the *Æneid*], who traverses everything in a sleepy dream. He has traveled, Giles says, like Plato, through a mental landscape” (R. S. Sylvester, “Si Hythlodæo Credimus’: Vision and Revision in Thomas More’s *Utopia*,” p. 296, in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, edited with an Introduction and Bibliography by R. S. Sylvester and G. P. Marc’hadour

[Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977]). It will be recalled (see beginning of this article above) that Schlemilovitch's travels too are not to be taken as physical.

One senses, moreover, the profound affinity of the two works in realizing that, as in the case of Raphaël Schlemilovitch, the paradoxical quality of Raphael Hythlodæus' name is of a piece with his tale. To appreciate quickly how **Utopia** teems with ambiguous inconsistencies, one need go no farther than observing its markedly divergent interpretations among critics: "Some [critics] make **Utopia** a fighting-treatise for socialism or a source for communist ideas, or they take More for a herald of liberalism. Others recognize in the booklet a blueprint for Christian policy, or they take its utopian social statements as if they were written with the encyclical letters **Rerum novarum** and **Quadragesimo anno** in mind. Others again seem to espy in it the *cant* of one whom they believe to be a pharisaical imperialist of a typically British brand; others take him for an ideologist of the English insular welfare-state who is possessed by the demoniacism of power and whose methods, translated into practical policy, would not be distinguishable from the imperialism of modern empires" (Hubertus Schulte Herbrüggen, "More's **Utopia** as a Paradigm," pp. 256–257, in **Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More**).

⁴ See "Tobit," pp. 1–13 in **The Shorter Books of the Apocrypha** (Cambridge UP, 1972), commentary by J. C. Dancy, with contributions by W. J. Fuerst and R. J. Hammer.

⁵ Alphonse de Lamartine, **Raphaël: Pages de la vingtième année** (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1960), p. 206.

⁶ See for instance Charlotte Wardi, "Mémoire et identité dans **La Place de l'Etoile** et **Rue des Boutiques obscures** de Patrick Modiano," **Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France**, 14, 1 (1981), 87–96.

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