

The Representation
of the Relationship
between Center
and Periphery in the
Contemporary Novel

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Edited by

Ruth Amar and Françoise Saquer-Sabin

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FOREWORD

The notion of the relationship between center and periphery, like that of physical space, which derives from the geographical domain, has entered the literary field. It is represented in literature with various linguistic and cultural roots. Writers “travel” in the urban periphery in spaces that are often omitted from the city community, the “polis.” In doing so, they strengthen the opposition between the center and the suburbs that become, in fact, the agents of a symbolic redefinition of the contemporary city. Difficult to define, the terms center and periphery are relative concepts, distinguishable by the gap between them. On the basis of a comparative perspective, through various cultural and linguistic lenses, we have tried to explore this gap and its representation in the contemporary novel.

The standpoint of this volume is not limited to the urban space or to the simple opposition of central location versus peripheral location, but to different forms of representation of social hybridity. The subcategories of their interdependent relationships are analyzed, including power and domination between hegemony and marginality. Although it was hard to draw a satisfying border around the subject, a given design draws a perimeter around the book, enclosing a large introduction and revolving around five axes.

In the **Introduction**, the influence philosophical doctrines of the twentieth century may have had on the French novel is the starting point for Ruth Amar’s article. Drawing on philosophical theories of the twentieth century, she considers some crucial novels of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Amar argues that the relationships between center and periphery are represented in a geographic, physical and literal manner (the theme of marginality) as well as in an emblematic, metaphorical manner, influenced by Derrida’s *logocentrism* and the notion of *otherness*; both have modified the very quintessence of the French novel. Introducing the Israeli novel, Nitza Ben-Dov’s article brings into light the myth of Abraham the Patriarch who was ordered by God to leave his land, and the divine decree that follows it, to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Ben-Dov examines some of the creative variations on these two intertwined themes—journeys and sacrifices—in Israeli literature, as well as its notions

of center and periphery since the establishment of Israel to now. In the last chapter of the introduction, Robert Elbaz presents the French Maghrebien novel, stating it is essentially a memorial novel, and its only obsession is to write the “total book” of the past before the colonial fall. However, this project is unrealizable, for this novel remains caught in aesthetics of the *impossible*, torn as it is between paradisiacal signified, and the forms of narrative, the signifier of the colonizer. This aesthetics of lack problematizes the dialectics of center and periphery, for the narrative is in a perpetual flight that can only accommodate a decentralized voice.

The passageway, the transitional place from a peripheral area, whether geographic, communal or sociological, to a more or less hospitable central space, is always problematic. It inevitably leads to a change, evidenced by the concepts of ideology that produce particular manners confined or institutionalized behaviors, consequences of a refusal to face reality. These aspects have been explored in Part I of the book, dedicated to **Writing Strategies and Reterritorialization**. Larisa Fialkova checks donor-recipient roles to understand actors on the center-periphery axis, taking into account that Russia is perceived as a periphery of Asia while Ukraine is perceived as the periphery of Europe. However, Ukraine is divided into western and southern-eastern parts, and only the European character of the former goes unquestioned. The dissolution of the USSR and a postcolonial tendency to transform the former periphery into self-sufficient centers is followed by the creation of a new periphery. These questions have continued to perplex researchers and Nicolas Dreyer examines some post-Soviet literary strategies of representing marginality, considering two short fictions by the post-Soviet Russian writers Vladimir Tuhkov and Aleksandr Khurgin. The article analyses the function of the grotesque and the narrative form of *skaz* used to label characters unable to cope socially with the consequences of the Soviet Union break up. In the last article of this part, Natasha Gordinsky argues that Anya Ulinich’s novel, *Pertopolis*, constitutes a literary space on the border of Russian and American contemporary culture, while seeking to negotiate between the notions of center and periphery. Gordinsky states that Ulinich’s text reflects the intertextual relationship with Osip Mandelstam’s poetry, both a historical document and a hidden source of Jewish tradition.

How is marginality manifested? Defined as a deviation from a center, its position generally refers to a center from which it is banned; it always relates to a specific society as a figure of lack and absence or loss. While focusing on works in the light of center-periphery relationship, the fluctuations between hegemony and marginalization are examined in the

second part—**Marginality and Intermediary Spaces**—which throws light on minor literature as explored by Silvia Adler and Galia Yanoshevsky in Ilana Zeffren’s *Pink Story*. They advance that it should be read as minor literature in a metaphorical way, as it refers to the tension between heterosexual and homosexual communities. They are equally attentive to the range of stylistic devices as they allude to center and periphery, through the treatment of page layout and graphics. In the second chapter, Yona Hanhart-Marmor interrogates Pierre Michon’s works, emphasizing that in the incessant whirling between center and periphery resides the desire as well as the necessary conditions for the realization of an art masterpiece. Stéphane Chaudier and Joël July carefully illustrate the notion of center (Paris) and the French periphery, which can either be a space of good living (the provinces) or a space of painful tensions (the suburbs). This structure is studied in two contemporary French narratives, a film: *De toutes mes forces*, (Chad Chenouga) is a story of learning—the lost center (Paris) is not found, and a novel: *Repose-toi sur moi*, (Serge Joncourt) takes places in a Parisian building, where the love story reveals how space intervenes in the game of affects. The question of how spatiality is related to power and freedom is examined by Dennis Sobolev who focuses on the understanding of space as contingent and constructed, as opposed to its understating as an objective reality and as foundational regarding human existence. Using the constructivist understanding of the problem of space, Sobolev underscores the problematic nature of *center* and *margin* taking as an example the twenty-first century fantastic series, *Firefly*.

The urban spaces are examined through their function within the fictional space. Thus new spaces are introduced in the narrative frame, that reflect the position and questioning of the writer in regard to conventional limitations or boundaries. In this perspective, the city acquires a kind of autonomy in the space of the novel and becomes somehow an actor of the fictional world as we can see in the third part **Revisited Urban Spaces**. France Grenaudier-Klijn, basing her argument on Patrick Modiano’s work, discusses the function of the “zone neutre” as a third category of space, added to the center-periphery paradigmatic binary, reflecting the ambiguity and reticence in Modiano’s fictional world. There, the city operates as a mnemonic trap, closing in on the subject. “Neutral” and blurry spaces, where identities are suspended, are therefore appropriated by protagonists to alleviate their mnemonic burden. A similar focus is characteristic of another author: Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Maria Giovanna Petrillo states that the city has acquired a “stage place” in the novel, perceived as a space, *latu sensu*, of the “modern” linguistic and literary

geography. She then analyzes the Italian city in the work of Jean-Philippe Toussaint, first introduced as a «non-lieu» where the narrator sees his image reflected in a Lacanian narcissistic mirror game, while in the second part of his literary production, outskirts and villages become a milestone, underlying a narrative evolution of the narrator's personality. Considering space as a trigger, that allows the reactivation of memory, Nurit Levy's article questions Georges Perec's *W ou le Souvenir d'enfance* and Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*. She analyzes the representation of cities in these works showing how these two authors reconstitute memory through the places they inhabited.

Sometimes, spatial, temporal or subjective elements essential to the center can be related to numerous peripheral elements as shown by writers' attempts to subvert Eurocentric hierarchies. Boundaries are blurred and the characters fluctuate between center and periphery. In part four—**When Periphery Becomes Center**—Christina Horvath investigates the complex geography of contemporary “banlieue novels,” showing deprived suburbs separated from the city core. However, instead of depicting these banlieues in isolation, authors like Faïza Guène and Rachid Djaïdani tend to represent them embedded in a complex network, which links them to the inner city and remote locations in Africa or America. In the second chapter, Nelly Wolf explores François Bégaudeau's novel *The Class*, revealing that the paradox of the Parisian intramural junior high school depicted in the book is in fact, extramural. This paradox leads to a confusion of limits, which is extended to space, hierarchy, language, and politics. Françoise Saquer-Sabin examines the notions of space-territory-passage applied to the fictional space, based on some contemporary Hebrew novellas. Focusing on Sami Berdugo's and Dudu Busi's work, set up around the problematic of territory, Saquer-Sabin studies the semiological diegetic of the place and questions the character in its connection to the reference area, dealing with the question of passage. Michèle Tauber shows throughout the study of Ya'aqov Shabtay's Hebrew novel *Past Continuous*, and Maylis de Kerangal's French novel *Naissance d'un pont*, how spatial, temporal or personal elements concentrated in the unity of the center can be related with numerous peripheral elements in such a way that it becomes sometimes impossible to disentangle them one from the other. Boundaries are blurred and the characters fluctuate between center and periphery in an uncertain in-between.

Identification and classification of spaces were considered in order to try to understand their function in relation to the thematic strategy of the novel. It undoubtedly was useful, for example, to define the function of

dependency theories developed in the 1960s and 1970s in order to explain development and underdevelopment in specific places. A common idea of these theories was the attitude that capitalist development in Western Europe put countries in this continent into the *center* of the world while other countries in Asia and Africa became part of the poorer *periphery*. The center and periphery model is useful not only on a global level but also from a more local standpoint, especially in understanding interdependency between the rich city and the poorer towns. Taking these aspects into account, the fifth part of the book deals with **Modality of Confrontation and Construction of Identity** manifested in the novel. Rachel Quastel shows that the tension between the social and cultural loci of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and the peripheries known as poverty-stricken “development towns” are manifested in the Israeli novels. Offering a comparative analysis between Shimon Adaf’s *A Mere Mortal* and Eli Bar-Chen’s *Sinai’s Scar*, Quastel maintains that by recreating a fantastic historical and lingual infrastructure bridging the present and the ancient Biblical past, the two authors root their identity in a purer, untainted form of Judaism. N’Sondé’s novel *Berlinoise*, in which a sentimental and political education takes place against the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, is Gary D. Mole’s subject of analysis. He sustains that *Berlinoise* is a novel about social hybridity, interweaving its story of a passionate relationship between the French narrator-musician Stan and the half-Cuban East-German Maya, with the political disillusionment of German reunification. Disillusionment is also Anthony Zielonka’s theme in the final essay. He analyzes the textual tensions between center and periphery in Michel Houellebecq’s *La Carte et le territoire* and Marie NDiaye’s *Trois femmes puissantes*, arguing that Houellebecq invents a fictional alter ego living in Ireland, where he explores social developments in France, while NDiaye explores female characters in Africa who, rejecting their marginalization, assert their rights to a life free from exclusion and humiliation.

Taken together, this collection of essays plainly clarifies the complexity of the relationship between center and periphery. Our main objective was to identify the textual representation of the challenge of Center and Periphery as well as their role and significance in the diegesis. Thus, we hope a new light on the contemporary novel will be offered to literary specialists. The contemporary research deals mainly with notions of migration, exile, marginalities, territories, boundaries, applied to humanities. This collection more than confirms the need to deal with the themes of center and periphery and we hope that this volume will provide a meeting

space for new projects in order to explore these notions through various perspectives in a pluri-disciplinary approach.

INTRODUCTION

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL NOTIONS ON CENTER AND PERIPHERY AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE FRENCH CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

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Abstract

This paper focuses on some French contemporary novels in order to examine the representation of the relationship between center and periphery while considering the philosophical doctrines that convoy this relationship. It seems that in the French contemporary novel the center and periphery are represented in two manners: in a geographic, physical, literal manner and in an emblematic, metaphorical manner: in the first part of this article, I will focus on the central notion of *marginality*, in relation to center and periphery and try to see how it may have influenced some of the twentieth and twenty-first century French novels. In the second part, I will concentrate on Derrida's *logocentrism* and on the notion of *otherness*, trying to examine if they modified the very quintessence of the French novel.

Keywords: French novel, philosophy, center, periphery, contemporary, marginality, logocentrism, otherness, autofiction.

In a period where we live in a *clash of civilizations*, a clash between the world globalization and national religious, ethical and cultural movements, the problem of center and periphery has become a crucial issue. This issue is at the heart of all literature in general and specifically in the French novel. I would like to try, if not to analyze exhaustively all the novels concerned with such a notion, at the very least to propose some possibilities of reflection concerning the writing of this issue today.

This article will argue that in the French contemporary novel the center and periphery are represented in two ways: in a geographic, physical, literal manner and in an emblematic, metaphorical manner. In the first part

of this paper I will focus on the central notion of *marginality* in relation to center and periphery and will try to see how it may have influenced or how it is expressed in some twentieth and twenty-first century French novels. Marginality is directly linked to periphery as it describes what or who is at a distance in reference to a center or a principal location. In the second part I will concentrate on Derrida's *logocentrism* and on the notion of *otherness*, two essential philosophical terms of the twentieth century, in order to examine whether these concepts have had any impact on some French novels and how they may have modified the very quintessence of the novel.

A. Specific places and marginality

The introduction of marginality in the contemporary novel reveals a literary crisis at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The *marginal* as a concept has become an integral part of the novel from the mid-1970s to the turn of the century and beyond, and there has been an increasing emphasis on the marginal subject. If marginality is voluntary or not, and whatever the reasons for it, it always assumes a reference to a forbidden centrality. The passageway from a peripheral area leads to a change, evidenced by the concepts of emptiness, forgetfulness, excess, which are the consequences of a refusal to face reality. The literature of marginality deals with the marginalized classes of the world who lack fundamental rights to participate in cultural, educational and economic spheres and are physically or emotionally kept separated from the center. In some of the novels it seems that marginality is often expressed by extreme violence which seems to reflect a radical disappointment, while the use of acid language is meant to reject the condition of separation. Some prevailing characteristics of these novels are conceptual categories representing the marginal subject in the contemporary novel: the character of the misfit or outsider hero; in fact, the contemporary novel of marginality conveys a belief in the socially transformative powers of narratives, and plays a central role in bringing marginal issues to the fore.

To highlight marginality, the novels may present the protagonists in specific places, far from a homogeneous space-time structure according to a system of fixed and consistent standards. The spaces of the contemporary novel are haunted by aviation, Odyssean figures, movements of embarking and navigation, stranding and wreckage. Thus,

the novels often express an escape from the center to far away exotic *peripheral* places.

The kinds of environment considered are what Marc Augé calls *non-places*,¹ a term that reflects the lack of trace and blurs the commitment involved in the normal term *lieux*. The notion of *place* is one endowed with significance by its residents, who derive an identity and a community from it while non-places are therefore devoid of meaning, identity or communication; they are reflections of a world of short-term habitations rather than permanent homes, of silent commercial exchanges with cashpoints:

... a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object, whose unprecedented dimensions might usefully be measured before we start wondering to what sort of gaze it may be amenable.²

Non-places are a product of *hypermodernity*, a phase that came right after postmodernity. Postmodernism gave rise to the full expression of individualism and the quest for self-fulfillment. However this process led to a new stage—that of *hypermodernity*, characterized by hyperconsumption—as defined by Gilles Lipovetsky.³ Hyperconsumption is a consumption which assimilates more and more spheres of social life while boosting individuals to consume for their own pleasure rather than for improvement of their social status. In view of the fact that the hypermodern individual, while oriented towards hedonism, is generally anxious; he lives consequently in an empty world with no tradition and an unreliable future. Hypermodernity is also an era characterized by accessibility to all parts of the universe and as a result, has massive urbanization and migration. Non-places include: airports, train stations, big hotel chains such as Formule1, cellular nets that allow virtual communication:

...non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified—with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance—by totaling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself.⁴

I agree with Emer O'Beirne that three good examples of writers that best describe the *Non-lieux* are Houellebecq, Echenoz, and Darrieussecq's novels.⁵ According to O'Beirne: "All three emphasize their protagonists'

estrangement from the contemporary world by having them repeatedly encounter urban and interurban environments designed to be passed through rather than appropriated or domesticated.”⁶ In these novels evidence is gathered that close attention is paid to the way that technological environment setups the individual in multifaceted systems of mobility. Images of airports, spaces of journey and escape appear repetitively.

In Houellebecq’s novels, this kind of places represent life in Western countries and are opposed to exotic paradises. For instance, *Plateforme*⁷ as well as *La Possibilité d’une île*⁸ portray a narrator and main characters who only want to enjoy a life that goes little beyond hedonism and inclination for sex and pleasure. Moreover, Houellebecq’s characters generally live in a temporary mode, even at home. Or they choose to live in hotels like Michel Djerzinski, the hero of *Les Particules élémentaires*⁹ who prefers a holiday home. Another space emphasizing mobility and isolation is Paris’ airport Roissy which highlights the contemporary human condition as one of isolation, where identical individuals adopt herd behavior, all searching for faraway places, always expecting to discover the next pleasure:

Et maintenant j’étais là, seul comme un connard, à quelques mètres du guichet Nouvelles Frontières. C’était un samedi matin pendant la période des fêtes, Roissy était bondé, comme d’habitude. Dès qu’ils ont quelques bouts de liberté les habitants d’Europe occidentale se précipitent à l’autre bout du monde, puis traversent la moitié du monde en avion, ils se comportent littéralement comme des évadés de prison. Je ne les en blâme pas; je me prépare à agir de la même manière.¹⁰

Like Houellebecq’s novels, Darrieussecq’s novels also catch the irreducible solitude of the characters. The texts demonstrate that the city space upholds the characters distant from one another as well as in a hopeless technological world. The characters described in *Naissance des fantômes*¹¹ and in *Le Mal de mer*¹² suddenly leave their companions without warning. By insisting on the new mode of existence, *Naissance des fantômes* describes the narrator’s husband who goes out to buy a baguette and never comes back, while the wife waits, wondering where her husband has vanished to, thinking of her own absurd condition. Thus, finally she loses her identity as well as her sense of self. As in Houellebecq’s novel, the airport space in Darrieussecq’s *Le Mal de mer* is described at night, as a gloomy site of emptiness and desolation, where the only activity is the laconic voice announcing departures.

In Echenoz's novels, an enforced ephemerality gives rise to an improvised approach to life, stimulating and celebrating bachelorism, escaping commitment and rewarding openness to the unpredicted and fatalism. Victoire in *Un an*¹³ lives in a Formule1 hotel in order to avoid human contact, reaching perfect dehumanized anonymity imposed by staff-free motorway chain hotels. In the novels, there gradually appears what Michèle Gazier calls "an art of the fugue."¹⁴ This escape is reflected in the work by a perpetual movement of the protagonists, an incessant search for another residence or another room, the ideal partner and lost love, one wishes to find and which by chance would lead to utopian happiness. However, it seems that the protagonists while trying to get closer to the goal are only moving away from it. The North Pole, an earthquake, the tidal wave, another galaxy and even the other world: everything is allowed to reach the unattainable.

For instance, *Je m'en vais*¹⁵ begins and ends with the laconic sentence: "I'm off." The hero Félix Ferrer tells his wife he is leaving her and walks out forever. The frame of the story is based on his trip to the North Pole in an icebreaker to search for and rescue a collection of Inuit artifacts (Ferrer is an art dealer) abandoned in a ship wedged in the floes for about forty years. In some of the novels, the characters' wandering and marginalization leads to a much more radical deterritorialization, as it does in *The Piano*¹⁶ through the character of Max, who is condemned to drift in the after-life world, in another identity.

What our analysis of these three writers has insisted on is the irremediable fact that the act of narrative enunciation highlights the spaces of marginality and wandering. This can be extended to other contemporary writers, for instance, the famous writer of marginality in the French novel scene, the Nobel Prize winner (2008), J. M. G. Le Clézio. Even if he was born and raised in France, he claims he is a Mauritian. His novels generally describe the escape from the center to faraway places. The novels express the marginality of the nomadic, rootless characters. Wandering is repeatedly used in the novels to emphasize the fact that the characters prefer to live their marginality as it constitutes the guarantee of their freedom and independence.

We encounter the marginal, violent and solitary male in the first novel: *Procès-verbal*¹⁷ and *Le Déluge*.¹⁸ This kind of protagonist is introduced to portray the violent and insane anti-hero Adam Pollo: "...C'est évidemment fatigant de vivre ainsi tout seul, dans une maison abandonnée..."¹⁹ This sentence sums up this disquieting character described as a "Monstre de

solitude.”²⁰ His loneliness and his constant inactivity allow him a state of profound attention. Putting himself apart, he experiences life in another manner: he unites with the sand, he becomes a dog, a fawn, a rat... His way of living without possession, of stealing what he needs (raping), reinforces the idea of his lack of adaptation to social life. Having no consciousness, he falls prey to continual anguish and misunderstands the social values. His relations with society being those of a hunted man, he moves away from it, distrusting men and their intentions. He is “Fier de ne plus avoir grand chose d’humain”²¹—his aggressiveness is a barrier to normal relationships.

The same kind of character is repeated a few years later in *Le Déluge*, where Le Clézio presents an anti-hero, Besson, who leaves his parents, sleeps under the stars and flees his mistress because he begins to like her. He finally kills a man and becomes blind.

Confronted with such an accumulation of marginal heroes, one has inevitably to recognize Le Clézio’s attempt to show that the characters, by their refusal to obey, to yield to what seems to them unjust, violate order and the system, and are driven by crude instinct. Le Clézio undertakes, through his characters, the experiment of moving away from the rigid model of man in order to join another model: that of a protagonist close to nature and the animal. The experiment, however, is not simply performed at a thematic level and does not leave unchanged the accepted boundary between man and nature. In *Le Procès-verbal*, Adam Pollo wishes to dissolve his human unity and to reintegrate it in sand particles: “Les atomes d’Adam auraient pu se mêler aux atomes de la pierre, et lui, s’engloutir très doucement à travers terre et sable, eau et limon.”²² Besson experiences the same process in *Le Déluge* and would simply like to plant himself in a flowerpot. He feels “l’envie de s’enfouir au fond des tapis de feuilles pour hiverner. Il ressentit un peu ce que sentent les arbres [...] sa vie déclinait imperceptiblement.”²³ Thus Le Clézio may well be demonstrating his own awareness of the relationship between nature and man.

Lalla’s only partner in *Desert*²⁴ is another character close to an animal state, the Hartani, who does not have a real name, but rather a nominalized epithet, meaning “the black metis.” We are immediately informed that he is “celui qui est venu de nulle part [...] celui qui n’a pas de nom.”²⁵ because a stranger has left him near the well, wrapped in a piece of blue cloth. He appears quite by chance, never responding to Lalla’s calls: “Tout d’un coup [...] il bondit et disparaît en un clin d’œil...”²⁶ Lalla is never sure

of their encounters nor of the duration of these encounters “Le Hartani a disparu soudain, avalé par un de ces creux sombres dans la roche calcaire.”²⁷ Thus the Hartani seems to be integrated in the desert in the same manner as the dunes, the rocks, and the birds.

This example of male protagonist is not the only one in the novels. There are a few more and one of them, certainly among the most remarkable found in *Desert*, is Es Ser—together with the ultimate *dépassement* from male characteristics, it is conversely significant that there is an almost complete absence of human characteristics. What emerges from this novel is the phenomenon of the characters’ assimilation to the animal or the fact that they dissolve in the earth as we have just seen, leading to another phase. The male protagonist is engulfed in the landscape (which will have more and more power in the evolution of the work) so that finally he fades away or *evaporates*. Although the narrative development is mainly composed around Lalla, Es Ser is a particularly interesting character, giving a significant spiritual dimension of sanctity to the whole narrative. His manifestation is simply announced here and there by the presence of a glance. This autonomous gaze which arises many times in the text exists independently, beyond the usual meaning of the visual sense attached to man.²⁸ It is as if the patient, convulsive forces of nature elevated so royally were offering themselves, in their diversity, as a challenge to the power of that of modern city which Le Clézio disgraces.

The way the novel presents the marginal characters in the contours of the diverse literary landscapes figured in the different spaces requires some further exploration. The novels deserving particular attention in this regard are precisely those viewed as having limitations, not being so much considered as novels in the true sense of the word. However, these limitations are an obvious call to the attention of the readers by the authors to the reflexivity of these narratives and to their generic limits. Facing the wandering protagonist, a significant clue to understanding marginality emerges from an opposite kind of hero: the confined hero. *Prison* (1998) is a text by François Bon, based on a weekly writing workshop organized in 1996, during five months at the Youth Center of Gradignan, held in Bordeaux. From this experience he writes *Prison*,²⁹ released in January 1998, dealing with the problem of suburbs, where living in a *cité* is actually a form of exclusion from Paris, the center.

In this book, where detainees’ texts are cited, we enter the prison system, which is one of the few opportunities given by literature. Indeed, *Prison* reveals a closed, unknown world. Nevertheless, the universe of the

prison also functions as a mirror of the city where all inequalities breed. The novel is therefore about our responsibility for the operation of our creative society of exclusion, where some men are incarcerated. However, detainees are a priori, *the others*, individuals who did not respect the laws of society. *Prison* also questions liability. Therefore, it confronts individual responsibility and collective responsibility. Besides, François Bon not only gives voice to young people incarcerated in Gradignan, but he also mixes his voice with those of the detainees. The idea put forward by the narrator is that our society has failed. In operating on the boundary between the strict novel and his own true report of the workshop, and therefore between different modes of discourse, since genre is semiotic as much as anything, Bon makes choices which deliberately uphold or subvert accepted literary models.

In 2002, another text is published where the relationship between hegemony and marginalization are emphasized. Philippe Claudel's *Le Bruit des trousseaux*, reveals scenes that let us have a glance of what life in prison can be. A false testimony in a way, but it has the merit of saying the violence and, many times, the truth contained in the words of the prisoners, the ones who have been separated and distanced from the center. *The noise of the keyrings* is an accumulation of isolated scenes showing ordinary daily (but terrifying) life in prison. Gradually, the author discloses the prison as a place of countless unwritten laws, never discussed but always enforced. The life of the prison inmates that is nothing like a community is displayed:

On ne devrait pas dire « gardien de prison » : les prisons ne sont pas à garder, ce ne sont pas elles que l'on garde. On devrait plutôt dire « gardien d'hommes », ce qui serait plus proche de la réalité. Gardien d'hommes, un drôle de métier.

Mon temps terminé, je sortais de la prison. Je ne sortais pas de prison. Jamais je n'ai senti aussi intensément dans la langue l'immense perspective ouverte ou fermée selon la présence ou l'absence d'un simple adjectif défini.³⁰

In putting forward *Prison* or *Le Bruit des trousseaux* as a title for their texts, both Bon and Claudel already present the reader with a dialogical challenge and one which sets different modes of discourse which the reader might consider antagonistic. However, this appropriation becomes even more convincing with the fact that the choice of a new mode of writing has been adapted and inserted into fiction to make a rhetorical statement.

Marginality expressed in the French novel shows, on the one hand, that there is a need for a change. The globalization, the fact that man can move faster has made it easier to live another life. Man seems to be searching for new ways and new patterns of life, though generally it does not lead him to happiness, but only to more searching and wandering. On the other hand, the texts dealing with incarceration show that the world of prison is essentially paradoxical for it has the ambition to achieve the social reintegration of those under its care by subjecting them to a *desocialization* which can only get worse in relation to its duration.

B. Center and periphery in a metaphorical manner—the writing of the novel

The relationship between center and periphery expressed literally by the description of marginal protagonists is revealed at a metaphorical level and reflected in the writing of the novel itself. Deconstructing the definition of the novel and rebuilding it in a new manner by decentralization of the subject appears to be one of the objectives (intentionally or unconsciously) of the authors of the last decade. In the eighties, this category of the French novel has indubitably been influenced by the notion of logocentrism and deconstruction, and by the idea of *otherness*.

The logocentrism of the twenties, as defined by the German philosopher Ludwig Klages in his book *The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul* (1929), refers to the tendency of European thought to place the center of a text or of discourse within the limits of the logos. Derrida takes up this term³¹ to focus on the question of the center and develops the thesis that European thought is based on a center, an origin, an essence, a presence, that guarantees meaning, whereas what is in the margins is generally ignored.

Through the method of deconstruction Derrida performs a method of decentering, a way of reading the text which considers the structurality of the structure. Therefore, this method first unmasks the marginalization grounded within language. Then it moves further to reveal the contradictions that lie within the same language. Then trying to subvert the central term, it replaces it with the term that was marginalized so far. Thus, the marginalized term becomes the center, and the hierarchy is temporarily overthrown. Finally, both the center and the margins are dispersed. Derrida claims that neither the center nor the margins are superior to each other, as it is the participation of both the members that makes the

relationship possible. Needless to say, this phenomenon has since left deep imprints in the novel. We should also keep in mind that Derrida has expressed many times his interest in literature: “my most constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest I should say, if this is possible, has been directed towards literature, towards that writing which is literary.”³²

Since the eighties, the postmodern narrative has been experimenting with different textual methods such as hybridization, which echoes the heterogeneity of postmodernity. This development led to an art of decentering, of attraction for disparity, for margins, disturbance of narrative references, permeability of the boundaries between prose and poetry, transgressions both in terms of content and language, in which traditional modes of thought and reading are broken. There is a major tendency toward decentering the diegesis and form of a text, to assert autonomy over traditional writing.

Derrida’s deconstructive strategy of reading texts can be understood as a way of highlighting the complex plurality of discursive meaning that undermines the traditional Western “logocentric” desire for a cardinal point of reference. This reading strategy, open though it might appear, is nevertheless imposed by narrative manipulation and betrays an awareness of conventional writing. This can be extended to embrace the novel genre, since the reading strategy is very similar to the hermeneutic circle arguments advanced by some novel theorists.³³

The contemporary novel shows much attention to logocentrism, doing battle with it, representing new ways of writing. The novels have developed in a manner that they do not have any central narrative. They describe marginal heroes or anti-heroes, periphery, a protestation of the weak lonely characters, etc. The novel is inescapably the product of this development whose traces attest that new ways of writing have been adopted that reject the hegemony of the classic novel, reaching a state of hybrid writing and polyphonic texts. In what follows, I argue that the French novel finally suffers from a lack of narrative appetite that derives from the ideological posture of the times, namely, the pre-millennial or fin de siècle of the mid-1990s and the development linked to the process of social changes especially those of the globalization and migration. I will recall a few of these new characteristics.

Linked to the influence of logocentrism, the notion of *otherness* is expressed in the contemporary French novel. In recent philosophy, the

majority of postcolonial philosophers certify that colonizing rulers define the *other* as a group of people from a different country who the colonizer believes requests to be civilized, saved, dominated, controlled, and whose resources should be extracted through colonization. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*³⁴ explains that political powers and philosophers have othered *the Orient* region. Said essentially focuses on displaying how the Western countries have persistently used media, politics and cultural methods to portray the East as a weak, underdeveloped and archaic society.

Additionally, the term the *other* identifies and refers to the unconscious mind, silence, insanity, and language (to what is referred and to what is unsaid). The contemporary idea of the *other* inscribes itself in theories of race, class, gender, postcolonial theories of national identities.³⁵

The complex narrative strategies used to serve as a basis to the *other* also imply rhetoric, especially the practice of figures of speech and other compositional techniques. Therefore, the reader approaches the novel with a certain amount of uncertainty as to what form the hybrid will take as well as how the receiver will respond to the text. Uncertainty about the generic identity of the novel means that a reader cannot be programmed by any past conception of genre, but rather proceeds to conceptualize the form based on individual experience of the texts. Indeed, it could be argued that the author's most important act is his choice of type or genre which determines the text's meaning. There is no doubt that the choice of genre is subversive, strictly formally, and transgresses an established boundary by permitting all kinds of writing into the world of the novel. Since those novels are often short narratives, and narratives for the most part themselves transgress boundaries, the label *novel* seems deliberately misleading. By playing upon the conventions of form, limits can be both abolished and respected, bringing into question the boundaries of different forms. For instance, one of the greatest changes one can observe is the one in the autobiography, not considered a retrospective narrative anymore. The definition of the ancient memoirist emphasizing the history of the writer's personal life is not appropriate to the new actual writing of the self that plays on a universe half real and half fictional. We are witnessing a new class of autobiographical and metafictional novels—they are named autofictions³⁶—that abandon the logic of writing the center in favor of a new blurred position. Fiction is no longer seen as “false” or “lies” or “make-believe.” Instead it is more like a sort of “accessory for living.” The old patchwork of genres, styles and myths are rejected because the author's life is now the novel's organizing principle. It is not surprising, then, that the last fifty years present a new class of autofictions, having

passed through Joyce's and Proust's monologues, as well as the rebellious relativism and post-structuralism.

It started with the fragmented narrative of Duras' *L'Amant*,³⁷ where blanks separate passages and chronological sequences are broken. The writer tells of her childhood, at times reflecting on photographs or on those which could have been taken or figures dispersed within and beyond the frames, where the "real" and the "artificial" are problematic; Duras' use of both "je" and "elle" reveals a discontinuous and fragmented subject. Moreover, the metaphor of photography can be thought of in relation to writing "différance"; an absence is inscribed in the photograph, as in the writer's work, which cannot merely be conceived as techniques of representation. A deconstructive reading makes it possible to rethink the boundaries of the photograph and the work by bringing into question in particular the idea of a real *presence* captured in a frame.

Scrutiny and subterfuge are prominent too in other authors' texts as well. For instance, Annie Ernaux's novels emphasize the relationship between writing and the reality she is describing, leading her to adopt a self-reflective approach to the narration of her life experience. She claims:

J'écris à partir de moi, mais un moi qui n'est pas moi : j'écris la vie, à partir des expériences qui m'ont traversée, mais pas pour rechercher la cohérence d'une vie, pour moi il n'y a qu'incohérence. Il n'y a pas d'identité stable, pas de mémoire de soi. La mémoire est matérielle, elle est hors de soi.³⁸

Two other good examples are Pierre Michon and Gerard Macé. Both use a narrator who is a kind of *other* of the self: the subject does not express a real autobiography but autobiographic elements through the *other*, while Jacques Roubaux in *L'abominable Tisonnier de John Mc Taggart Ellis Taggart et autres vies plus ou moins brèves*³⁹ uses a double identity—the narrator, probably Roubaux himself—names himself Mr. Goodman, the author of an autobiographic fiction. Fabulation, acting as a kind of fictional power, confronts thought with its own limit in Marcel Benabou's books *Jette ce livre avant qu'il ne soit trop tard*⁴⁰ and *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres*⁴¹ while *Ecrire sur Tamara*⁴² is composed of many chapters that are in fact segments from a novel Manuel, the protagonist, tried to write at the time. Thus it becomes a third-person account of those years and of Tamara who is itself an artifact of the fifties and sixties. The narrative skips back and forth in perspective, but some of them express the present, offering commentary, criticism and additional memories of those years, written now from an entirely different perspective. At certain points, the book looks like a novel, at others a memoir, at still others an

autofiction; however, it is clear that such an opposition is in fact accurately intended by the author, it is a structural method. Finally, as it has been noted by Warren Motte, the reader understands that “the different discursive conventions in the novel vex and ironize each other in systematic ways, calling each other into question, questioning through that very process the way books are written -- and the way they are read.”⁴³

Other novels that embrace a combination of truth and fiction concern access to the hidden layers of intrigue which serve less to resolve than to open a constitutive ambiguity. For instance, J. B. Pontalis’ *L’Enfant des limbes*⁴⁴ emphasizes the presence of the word *limbo* in the mind of the author, of its uncertain definition. It is the place for babies who died before they were baptized and it symbolizes the space halfway between the clear and the dark, amid the unfinished. The book is composed of short chapters often closed by a quotation. Notes on scraps of paper, the portrait of a man conceived from what he likes and dislikes: finally, we get a contrasting picture organized in the mist of limbo.

Conclusions

In the French contemporary novel the relationships between center and periphery are to be measured in term of “resonance,” allowing the discernible transformations created between space and geography and the central notion of marginality. Raised to this level, these relationships become inseparable from the emblematic contemporary changes as expressed in Houellebecq’s Echenoz’s Darrieusecq’s and Le Clézio’s novels on the one hand, and on the other hand, as a dialogical challenge and in an antagonistic mode of discourse in the novels of François Bon and Philippe Claudel. The aesthetic problematization of the contemporary novel is also emphasized by the critique of logocentrism and the notion of otherness, both of them allowing new modes of writing to emerge, revealed in the French novels or autofictions like Marguerite Duras’ *L’Amant*, J. B. Pontalis *L’Enfant des limbes* or Marcel Benabou’s *Ecrire sur Tamara*.

Notes

¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Translated by John Howe, (London. New York: Verso, 1995).

² Augé, *Non-Places*, 78.

³ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Le bonheur paradoxal Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation*, (Paris : Collection Folio essais (n° 512), Gallimard, 2009).

- ⁴ Augé, *Non-Places*, 79.
- ⁵ Emer O'Beirne, "Navigating 'Non-Lieux' Contemporary Fiction: Houellebecq, Darrieussecq, Echenoz, and Augé," *The Modern Language Review* 101, No. 2 (2006): 388–401.
- ⁶ O'Beirne, "Navigating 'Non-Lieux,'" 393.
- ⁷ Michel Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).
- ⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2005).
- ⁹ Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, 34.
- ¹¹ Marie Darrieussecq *Naissance des fantômes*, (Paris: POL, 1998).
- ¹² Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Mal de mer*, (Paris: POL, 1999).
- ¹³ Jean Echenoz, *Un an*, (Paris: Minuit, 1997).
- ¹⁴ Michèle Gazier, on the book cover of *Au Piano*, (Paris: Minuit, 2001).
- ¹⁵ Jean Echenoz, *Je m'en vais*, (Paris: Minuit, 1999).
- ¹⁶ Jean Echenoz, *Au piano*, (Paris: Minuit, 2002).
- ¹⁷ J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Le Procès-verbal*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).
- ¹⁸ J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Le Déluge*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).
- ¹⁹ J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Procès Verbal*, 27.
- ²⁰ Le Clézio, *Procès Verbal*, 21.
- ²¹ Le Clézio, *Procès Verbal*, 22.
- ²² Le Clézio, *Procès Verbal*, 228.
- ²³ Le Clézio, *Le Déluge*, 68–69.
- ²⁴ J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Desert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).
- ²⁵ Le Clézio, *Desert*, 131.
- ²⁶ Le Clézio, *Desert*, 135.
- ²⁷ Le Clézio, *Desert*, 114.
- ²⁸ To understand more about the special function of the gaze see the article: Ruth Amar, « Du regard autre et de la solitude dans l'œuvre de Le Clézio », *Les Lettres Romanes*, Tome LV- N. 3–4, (2001) 309–318.
- ²⁹ François Bon, *Prison*, (Paris: Verdier, 1997).
- ³⁰ Philippe Claudel's *Le Bruit des trousseaux*, (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2003), 34.
- ³¹ Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture*, (Paris : Flammarion, 1978). Derrida claims : « Le logocentrisme structure tout comme un langage - sauf ce qui, arbitraire et violent comme un cri informe, n'a rien à voir avec lui » (199).
- ³² Jacques Derrida, "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations," trans. Kathleen Mclaughlin, in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 37.
- ³³ Ramberg, Bjørn and Kristin Gjesdal, "Hermeneutics: Continuations", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University , 2003, 2005) <https://plato.stanford.edu>.
- ³⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).
- ³⁵ I will not include the unique place of Jacques Lacan in the history of alterity. Lacan insists on a decentering of *Otherness* that parallels his decentering of the Subject.

³⁶ Autofiction is a term used in literary criticism to refer to a form of fictionalized autobiography. Serge Doubrovsky coined the term in 1977 with reference to his novel *Fils*.

³⁷ Marguerite Duras *L'Amant*, (Paris: Minuit, 1984).

³⁸ Annie Ernaux : « Chaque livre est une chambre où je rencontre les autres » Juliette Einhorn (Paris : mensuel 567, 2016).

³⁹ Jacque Roubaux, *L'Abominable Tisonnier de John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart, et autres vies plus ou moins brèves*, (Paris : Seuil, 1997).

⁴⁰ Marcel Benabou, *Jette ce livre avant qu'il ne soit trop tard*, (Paris: Seghers, 1992).

⁴¹ Marcel Benabou, *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres*, (Paris: Hachette, 1986).

⁴² Marcel Benabou, *Ecrire sur Tamara*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

⁴³ Warren Motte, "Marcel Bénabou, Ecrire sur Tamara," *World Literature Today* 76. 3–4 (2002): 109–10.

⁴⁴ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *L'Enfant des limbes*, (Paris: Broché, 1998).