



## Research Article

Marta-Laura Cenedese\*

# Home and Exile in Irène Némirovsky's Novella *Les Mouches d'automne* (1931)

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**Abstract:** Irène Némirovsky's novella *Les Mouches d'automne* (1931. *Snow in Autumn*, 2007) paints an effective portrait of exile, of the longing for the lost home, and the disorientation that one feels when faced with a reality that is neither recognizable nor understandable. In this article, I analyse Némirovsky's narrative strategies in relation to spatio-temporal phenomena. My analysis is based on the work of philosophers Mikhail Bakhtin and Gilles Deleuze: Bakhtin's *chronotope* and Deleuze's *crystal-image* illuminate how the novella's dominant themes, exile and nostalgia for the home, are irreducible to the clichés of a linear narration and to the simplistic dichotomy home/exile, past/present, and here/there. Instead, Némirovsky creates a productive tension of overlapping and coalescing space- and time-frames. The philosophical framework provided by Bakhtin and Deleuze is useful to unlock and make visible how this thematic complexity is reflected in the novella's narrative structure. Indeed, my analysis of *Les Mouches*'s chronotopes and crystal images illuminates Némirovsky's innovative experimentation in the creation of time–space crossings and a/synchronies, and also contributes to extend further our understanding of Némirovsky's place within the contemporaneous literary panorama.

**Keywords:** Irène Némirovsky, Russian emigration, nostalgia, chronotope, crystal-image

In the novella *Les Mouches d'automne, ou la femme d'autrefois* (1931. *Snow in Autumn*, 2007),<sup>1</sup> Irène Némirovsky narrates the Parisian exile of the Karine, an aristocratic family that has fled the former Russian Empire after the Revolution. Initially published with the editor Kra in May 1931 and with Grasset in December of the same year, the novella is an expanded version of the short story “La Niania,” which appeared in *Le Matin* in 1924. In both versions Némirovsky's attention goes, as the former title indicates, to Tatiana Ivanovna – the eponymous “niania” or “nianouchka” (nanny). As the first of Némirovsky's “emigration stories,”<sup>2</sup> *Les Mouches d'automne* paints an effective portrait of exile, of the longing for the lost home, and the disorientation that one feels when faced with a reality that is neither recognizable nor understandable. Emigration stories are a common literary topos, and particularly in the interwar years many Russian émigrés contributed to its development (e.g. Aldanov, Berberova, Felsen, Nabokov, Sarraute, Teffi, Triolet).<sup>3</sup> Post-World War I Paris became a magnet for foreign migrants, including many writers,

1 Throughout the article I will refer to the novella by its French title, although citations will be only from the English translation.

2 *Les Mouches d'automne* was followed in 1934 by *Le Vin de solitude*, another “emigration novel” which tells the story of the Karol, a Russian family who, just like the Karine, also emigrates to France after the Bolshevik Revolution.

3 See for instance the anthology *Russian Emigré Stories from Bunin to Yanofsky*, edited by Karetnyk (2017).

\* **Corresponding author: Marta-Laura Cenedese**, Department of Comparative Literature and Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland, e-mail: [marta.cenedese@utu.fi](mailto:marta.cenedese@utu.fi)

musicians, and artists; after 1925, the Russian emigration outnumbered American exiles, its writers rivalling the likes of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Miller, or Gertrude Stein.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I propose to read how the tension between home – the longing and desire for it – and exile is articulated in Némirovsky's novella. I do so by analysing Némirovsky's narrative strategies in relation to spatio-temporal phenomena, for which I hinge on the work of two philosophers, Mikhail Bakhtin and Gilles Deleuze. I suggest that, by engaging with time and space to create a poetics of nostalgia, Némirovsky highlights the complexity of the experience of emigration, trapped in-between the memory of the motherland and the actuality of the adoptive land. Scholars generally agree that Némirovsky is not a modernist author, and that her style is closer to nineteenth-century French and Russian realism than to the formal experimentation that characterizes twentieth-century modernism.<sup>5</sup> However, it is misguided to say that Némirovsky was not concerned with formal experimentation, and indeed many of her "cinematic" short stories (e.g. "Film parlé," 1931, or "Ida," 1934) show proof of such experimentation. Moreover, one of the techniques that Némirovsky consistently used throughout her career, free indirect discourse, is the trademark of British modernists such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence among many. Finally, Némirovsky's manuscripts show her attentive engagement with theoretical works by E. M. Forster and Percy Lubbock, contemporary critics of and contributors to English modernism.<sup>6</sup> This article aims to extend our understanding of Némirovsky as a writer who engaged with formal innovation: to this aim I provide a reading of this early novella that expands on the previous scholarly focus on its content by turning our attention to the subtleties of its formalist experimentation.

Angela Kershaw has already pointed out that *Les Mouches d'automne* is "an atmospheric investigation of the related themes of place and time; it is a concise and effective study of the relationship between memory and identity which shows how the relationship between nostalgia and the construction of the self varies according to age or generation."<sup>7</sup> Kershaw's argument draws a connection with Svetlana Boym's exploration of nostalgia as "a form of memory that temporalizes space"<sup>8</sup> and her definition of exile as "a double conscience, a double exposure of different times and spaces, a constant bifurcation."<sup>9</sup> Building on Kershaw and Boym, I revisit Némirovsky's novella by looking more closely at how it represents time and space. I build my analysis on a philosophical framework based on two specific notions: that of the *chronotope* (Bakhtin) and of the *crystal-image* (Deleuze).<sup>10</sup> I find that these two concepts are particularly useful to illuminate the novella's continuous overlaps of the different planes of temporal and spatial consciousness, and especially point out how the dominant themes, exile and nostalgia for the home, are the object of a formal operation. Thus, these two concepts also enable to grasp more profoundly Némirovsky's innovative experimentation in the creation of time–space crossings and a/synchronies, and therefore contribute to extend our understanding of Némirovsky's place within the contemporaneous literary panorama.

## 1 Exile and nostalgia: Time and space

*Les Mouches d'automne* starts in 1916, on the eve of the departure for the Eastern front of the eldest sons of the Karine, Youri and Cyrille. The two boys, as well as their younger siblings and their father before them, have been taken care and raised by their devout *niania* Tatiana Ivanovna, whose whole life has been spent at the family's service. Némirovsky describes her as a 70-year-old woman, "very small and fragile-looking, with a smiling, lively face," holding a gaze that is "still piercing at times, and at others, calm and weary."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Kershaw, "Influence Revisited," 349.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kershaw, "Influence Revisited," 346–51; and Cenedese, *Irène Némirovsky's Russian Influences*, 29–54.

<sup>7</sup> Kershaw, *Before Auschwitz*, 97.

<sup>8</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*; Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*.

<sup>11</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter I.

Tatiana Ivanovna embodies the literary stereotype of the faithful housekeeper, the one who has been at the service of the family for much longer than anyone can remember. Her identity is thus entirely defined by nostalgia and by that fatalistic resignation that are the quintessential characteristics of the *Russian soul*, “a major concept and stereotype of the *mode russe* that influenced the literary field in the 1930s”<sup>12</sup> and that Némirovsky here astutely (yet tenderly) capitalizes on as a receptive cultural context in which she can make use of her knowledge and memories of Russian culture.<sup>13</sup> On the evening preceding Youri and Cyrille’s announced departure, old and ageless Tatiana recalls the many years spent with the family and the inescapable concatenation of generations that she has seen growing up since her first day:

She had been with the Karine family for fifty-one years. She was the nanny to Nicolas Alexandrovitch, Youri’s father; after him, she had brought up his brothers and sisters, his children. She still remembered Alexandre Kirilovitch, killed in 1877 at thirty-nine in the war with Turkey. And now it was the children’s turn: Cyrille, Youri, it was their turn to go off to war [...]<sup>14</sup>

The contiguity that Tatiana establishes between the present-day war and those fought in the past by the fathers and grandfathers of the departing youths is a first indication of her natural propensity to superimpose past and present. As highlighted by Boym,<sup>15</sup> this is a typical characteristic of nostalgia. And in fact, both Kershaw’s and Maria Rubins’ short analyses of *Les Mouches d’automne* concur to underline the emergence, from the very first lines, of a pervasive nostalgic tone, which prompts them both to conclude that nostalgia is a significant theme of the whole novella.<sup>16</sup>

As the story quickly unfolds, the Revolution breaks out a few years after the young boys have departed for the front. Shortly afterwards, in January 1918, fearing for their safety, the Karine flee for the south while Tatiana stays behind to guard the house and wait for Youri and Cyrille to return home. After a few months, in May 1918, an exhausted and ill Youri comes back home after a long journey that has included a stay in prison, but he is killed on the same night of his arrival by the young coachmen. A month after his death Tatiana leaves the home and, three months later, she finally rejoins the family in Odessa; from there, along the southern route via Constantinople, on 28 May 1920 they reach the port of Marseille and eventually arrive in Paris.

In the French capital, the Karine’s journey slowly stabilizes, despite each character having to deal with “enough of their own memories, their own fears and sadness.”<sup>17</sup> Their life takes on the popular shape of the destitute Russian aristocratic émigré’s lifestyle: a tiny and dark apartment, odd jobs, sleepless nights. As the *pater familias*, Nicolas Alexandrovitch, declares one day: “if only there weren’t all these memories in the heart, life would be bearable.”<sup>18</sup> As this sentence exemplifies, the whole family is prey of nostalgic memories of the past. However, while the parents and children are able either to partially assimilate or to enthusiastically embrace their new life and what the future holds, Tatiana is unable to do so and, instead of moving beyond the memories, she remains stubbornly attached to them. Indeed, while exile marks the possibility of a new beginning, nonetheless, it also creates a breach between the “before” and the “after.” Boym argues that “exile is both about suffering in banishment and springing into a new life. The leap is also a gap, often an unbridgeable one; it reveals an incommensurability of what is lost and what is found.”<sup>19</sup> Within this gap, and as a consequence of the pain of the exilic experience, there is the need to develop a new identity which, rather than suppressing the former, runs alongside it as if moving along parallel, yet separate, routes.

A similar understanding of the bifurcating effects of emigration on the self has been noticed in research by narrative psychologist Amia Lieblich, who argues that “the experience of emigration concerns the loss of one’s old home and country on the one hand, and the necessary accommodation to a new society,

<sup>12</sup> Cenedese, *Irène Némirovsky’s Russian Influences*, 160.

<sup>13</sup> See Kershaw, *Before Auschwitz*, 68, 76–7, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter I.

<sup>15</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Kershaw, *Before Auschwitz*, 81; Rubins, “Figures de l’émigré,” 383.

<sup>17</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter VII.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VI. Translation modified.

<sup>19</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 256.

language, and culture on the other.”<sup>20</sup> And, she continues, emigration engenders “a search for identity and values” coupled with, in the case of children and young adults, “separation-individuation *vis-à-vis* [one’s] parents.”<sup>21</sup> Lieblich’s findings in relation to young adults may help to explain why, in Némirovsky’s novella as well as in other narratives of exile and emigration, generations are portrayed to respond differently to an experience that, in fact, is oftentimes the cause of generational incomprehension and full-blown, insoluble conflict. For example, in *Les Mouches d’automne* on several occasions Némirovsky juxtaposes the behaviours of the young Karines to those of their parents or to Tatiana’s judgment, in order to show the disconnect between generations as well as the different response to the migratory experience. For instance, when Tatiana finds Loulou sleeping in the living room with a boy, they have a heated argument:

“What’s the matter with you, Nianiouchka? We do the same thing every night,” she finally said, her voice calm, hoarse from the wine and smoke. “And in Odessa, my God? On the boat? You never noticed?”

“You should be ashamed,” murmured the old woman, sounding pained and disgusted. “You should be ashamed! And with your parents asleep right next door [...]”

“So what? Oh, so that’s it, are you crazy, Niania? We weren’t doing anything wrong. We have a few drinks, a few kisses, why is that so wrong? Do you think my parents didn’t do the same thing when they were young?”

“No, my girl.”

“Ah, so that’s what you think, do you?”<sup>22</sup>

During that same summer, with André “sent to boarding school near the coast, in Brittany” and Cyrille in “Dauville with his mistress,” in Paris Tatiana does not leave the apartment while “the Karines would go out to the Bois de Boulogne, to the Pavillon Dauphine. The adults would sit there, sadly listening to the orchestra playing, remembering the little islands and gardens in Moscow; Loulou, and the other young boys and girls, would walk along the shaded paths, reciting poetry, playing at being in love.”<sup>23</sup>

The shift that happens with emigration, which is first and foremost a “spatial” one, exposes the individual to new norms, values, experiences, and behaviours that, although they do not efface the former self, produce the conditions for a transition towards a “new” sense of self and belonging. This new self is not only spatially but also “temporally” removed from the former self. The “gap” is where time and space collide, where the shift takes place and forms that double conscience mentioned by Boym, whereby past and present (i.e. times and spaces of the past and the present) unfold. Thus, Némirovsky’s characters live in a present/future-moving temporality that is enveloped in nostalgia.

Here nostalgia is not only the “longing for a place” but also “a yearning for a different time.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the word nostalgia is composed of *nostos*, the return home, and *algia*, the desire, longing, or need. Originally coined to define the sadness caused by the wish to return home, it now indicates both a state of mind and a feeling that arises when one desires something that is not anymore. *Nostalgia* describes “a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed,” “a sentiment of loss and displacement,” as well as “a romance with one’s own fantasy.”<sup>25</sup> At its first degree, it designates the place of origin, the lost home – that *chez nous* insistently evoked in *Les Mouches d’automne* by young Loulou, when she exclaims: “Nianiouchka [...] I want to go home! Home, home!” she kept saying, twisting her fingers in a strange and nervous way that the old woman had never seen before.”<sup>26</sup> In the novella, the home which is both the cause and crux of nostalgia is called Karinovka:

<sup>20</sup> Lieblich, “Looking at Change,” 93.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter V.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xv.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter V. The original French reads “Je voudrais être chez nous! Chez nous, chez nous!” (my emphasis).

It was beautiful, with fine architecture and a large Greek pediment decorated with columns; the grounds stretched all the way to the next village, Soukharevo. Tatiana Ivanovna hadn't lived anywhere else in fifty-one years. She alone knew every cupboard, all the cellars, and the dark, deserted rooms on the ground floor that, in the past, had been the grand reception rooms, home to many generations.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the young Karine and their parents seem to be seized by occasional bouts of nostalgia only in the aftermath of the French exile, for Tatiana Ivanovna this sentiment manifests earlier, while she is still living peacefully in the family house in the south of Moscow.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the sense of persistent nostalgia for the past in which Tatiana is enmeshed comes across immediately through Némirovsky's ample use of focalization and free indirect discourse, such as in the following example:

Thirty-nine years before, when Alexandre Kirilovitch had gone, she had packed his uniforms the very same way. Dear Lord, she remembered it well. The old chambermaid, Agafia, was still alive then [...] She herself was young [...] She closed her eyes, let out a deep sigh, clumsily got up.<sup>29</sup>

The citation hints, first of all, at Tatiana's tendency to merge past and present in her mind and, second, it provides a non-linear presentation of time. That is, in Tatiana's world it seems that time is not that progression-towards-the-future that follows the chronological succession past-present-future, but instead it is a non-linear entanglement of past and present, the two overlapping in an indefinite space, with memories surfacing in the present and, as it will become apparent later, overturning time. Boym argues that, "In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress,"<sup>30</sup> and indeed, for Tatiana time is neither linear nor circular, but rather disjointed, faltering, and stumbling in unpredictable and disordered ways. For instance, on the story's first night, in which Youri and Cyrille are set to depart, while thinking about all the Karine's children she has taken care of throughout her life, even if only for a short moment Tatiana confuses the ones with the others: "Which children? Cyrille and Youri, or Nicolas Alexandrovitch and his brothers? Sometimes, when she felt very weary, like tonight, they became confused in her mind. A long, confusing dream."<sup>31</sup> Tatiana's seemingly clear memories of her years spent at the service of the Karine clash from the first pages with that confused hesitancy – the confused dream-state – that will dominate the last chapters of the novella.

Once settled in their Parisian apartment in the immigrant neighbourhood of Passy, the whole family feels unsettled by the unbearable summer heat, the noise of the city, and the sickening smells of the next-door kitchens. Némirovsky compares them to "autumn flies," the *mouches d'automne* of the eponymous title, which, Rubins reminds us, "alludes to 'white flies,' a poetic metaphor for a snowflake."<sup>32</sup> Compounded with the insistent reference to archetypal Russian images, the metaphor of snowflakes also evokes the Russian classics and in particular a "Pushkinian intertext."<sup>33</sup> Yet, even among the "autumn flies," Tatiana is an alienated presence that disturbs the family's easing into a new beginning: "Ever so gradually, life took shape. They got home late, tired, returning home with a kind of excitement from the streets, from their work. It spilled over into discussions, laughter, for a while, but the solemn attitude of the silent old woman gradually wore them down."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Chapter I.

<sup>28</sup> The approximate localization of Karinovka in the South of Moscow can be inferred from the following passage: "One month after Youri's death, a cousin of the Karines came and spent a night with Tatiana Ivanovna. He was an old man, half dead from starvation and exhaustion, on his way from Odessa to Moscow to look for his wife, who had disappeared during the bombings in April," *ibid.*, Chapter IV.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Chapter I.

<sup>30</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xv.

<sup>31</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter II.

<sup>32</sup> Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse*, 88.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter VII.

Having lost her former roots, Tatiana has become a marginalized figure in what, in appearance, continues to remain a familiar cultural environment.<sup>35</sup> The familiar here is, literally, the family members around her and living *with* her, but clearly even their familiarity is an appearance, a projection of Tatiana's anchoring onto past images of them. In addition, Tatiana does not leave the house and therefore evades the possibility of integrating not only in the local culture (even émigré culture) but also in the local geography (i.e. Paris and, more closely, the neighbourhood). Némirovsky describes her as sitting all day long, absent-minded, unresponsive to any bouts of irritability and assuming, in the family's eyes, the shape of a fatal omen:

She would go without saying a word. Actually, she didn't seem even to hear them. She sat for hours on end, motionless, her hands on her knees, silently staring into space. She was hunched over, nearly doubled up; her skin was white, like a corpse, with swollen blue veins at the corners of her eyes. Often when she was called, she didn't reply, content with shutting her hollow little mouth even more tightly.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, whenever the name of the home is whispered, Tatiana brightens up with a quiver, and starts talking and reminiscing about every detail of the time of *chez nous*: “Yes [...] on Easter Sunday, when the clock tower in Temnaya burnt down, I remember that [...] The pavilion [...] after you'd gone, the wind had already blown out the windows [...] I wonder what's happened to it all [...]”<sup>37</sup> Or as in another example, which begins to make apparent through comparison the overlapping of different places and times: “‘At home’ she thought, ‘at home, at this time of year [...]’ The forest would be frozen. She closed her eyes, pictured in extraordinary detail the deep snow, the fires in the village, shimmering in the distance; and the river and the grounds, sparkling and hard, like steel.”<sup>38</sup>

The passage above appears in the penultimate chapter of the novella, Chapter VIII, which is set on the night of 24 December. Then Chapter IX concludes the night (and the novella) in the early morning of Christmas day. The approximate twelve hours that the two final chapters cover are the apex of the story, which ends, somewhat abruptly, with Tatiana's death. In these pages, Némirovsky complicates the network of time-space relations that she has been increasingly building up throughout the novel by ever so slightly stressing Tatiana's nostalgic personality and creating, through nostalgia, a widening gap between her and her surroundings. Indeed, on Christmas Eve,<sup>39</sup> Tatiana is pleased to help the Karine get ready to join some friends for celebrations, something she used to do back in the day: “Tatiana Ivanovna helped them dress. When they said good-bye to her, she felt a spark of joy seeing them all dressed up, as in the past, Nicolas Alexandrovitch in a tuxedo. She smiled as she looked at Loulou in her white dress, her long hair in curls over her neck.”<sup>40</sup> At this moment, while performing one of her former duties as *niania*, Tatiana Ivanovna is brought back to experiencing a sense of personal belonging (through her labour) and to the pre-revolutionary pride for the elite group she is attached to and which, by immigrating, has socially and economically moved downwards to a marginal status that does not provide her with the tasks she was accustomed to. The Karine keep Tatiana with them more out of love and habit than necessity, and perhaps out of their inability to perform domestic tasks, for not only their economic situation is difficult but also their living conditions do not provide proper dwellings for Tatiana. That said, never in the novella it is spoken of Tatiana as a burden, economic or otherwise, and in fact when they discuss relocating to another apartment they specifically worry for Tatiana's comfort: “They thought about moving. They were offered an apartment near the Porte de Versailles that was brighter and less expensive, but it had only three rooms and a kitchen as narrow as a cupboard. Where would they put poor old Tatiana? It was out of the question to make her climb up six flights of stairs, with her bad legs.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Lieblich, “Looking at Change,” 111.

<sup>36</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter VII.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VIII.

<sup>39</sup> As mentioned, the last part of the novel takes place on Christmas Eve, between 24 and 25 December.

<sup>40</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter VIII.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VII.

Returning to the Christmas night, the image of former times mentioned above acts as the catalyst of the spatio-temporal disorientation that, in the following pages, afflicts Tatiana. Indeed, once left alone she starts to “automatically” pick up things scattered around and to wander the dark and narrow rooms, muttering to herself “with a painful, surprised look on her face.”<sup>42</sup> As she moves aimlessly around, the return to the *autrefois*, to that *chez nous* called Karinovka takes hold of Tatiana’s conscience. When bedtime comes, she struggles to fall asleep and in-between wake and dream she hears the clock striking eleven, then midnight. Likely, Némirovsky uses the fairy-tale topos of a folkloric time – the enchanted touch of the midnight hour – to emphasize Tatiana’s entrance into an oneiric-magical world in which the rules of reality do not apply. In turn, this anarchic dimension underscores the complex fabric of the story’s narrative structure, thus posited at the cusp of realism and fairy tale. Indeed, “Every time [Tatiana] dozed off, she dreamed of the house in Karinovka, but the image kept fading, so she hurried to close her eyes again to try to recapture it. Each time it happened, some detail disappeared.”<sup>43</sup> When she finally awakens from such agitated sleep, it is dawn and “A thick, white fog filled the courtyard; to her tired eyes, it looked like snow, like the first snows of autumn, thick and blinding, covering everything in a kind of mournful light, a harsh white glare. She clasped her hands together. ‘The first snow [...]’ she whispered.”<sup>44</sup> From this moment onwards, the clear division between different spatial and temporal planes ceases and instead they merge and embroil into a continuum where present and past, Russia and France, are indivisible and interchangeable. I find that Némirovsky’s experimental elaboration of the fusion of time–space coordinates in *Les Mouches d’automne* becomes tangible through the examination of the novella’s chronotopic elements<sup>45</sup> on the one hand, and on the other, by thinking with Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the “crystal-image.”<sup>46</sup>

## 2 Chronotopes and crystals of time

As mentioned before, in the last chapter of *Les Mouches d’automne* the narrative offered by Némirovsky reaches the apex of the fusion of time and space. This intersection of the space–time axes is both reminiscent of what Soviet philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin called *chronotopes* and also of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the *crystal image*. As I suggest here, the analysis of chronotopes associated with the themes of home and exile and their crystallization concur to provide insights into the novella’s meaning and complexity, while laying bare the modernism of Némirovsky’s sophisticated weaving of time and space.

Many scholars have remarked that Bakhtin never explicitly provided a precise or conclusive definition of the chronotope,<sup>47</sup> however, he did offer an exhaustive taxonomy. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope, literally “timespace,” indicates “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”<sup>48</sup> It is, therefore, a “literary category” that expresses “the inseparability of space and time,” where

spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersections of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, chronotopes are, for Bakhtin, the organizing nodes of the narrative events of a novel and hence provide the narrative with its shape. Thus, the chronotope is an essential representational and structural

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Chapter VIII.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Chapter IX.

<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*.

<sup>47</sup> Bemong and Borghart, “Bakhtin’s Theory of the Literary Chronotope,” 5–8.

<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

element of the novel, one that, by making time visible in space and *vice versa*, makes the novel. To cite Bakhtin again:

The chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work.<sup>50</sup>

For instance, the Rabelaisian chronotope is characterized by “extraordinary spatial and temporal expanses,”<sup>51</sup> which may also pertain to modernist writers and their attempts to exceed chronological time and to represent the tension between time and consciousness (e.g. Woolf and Proust). Indeed, it was E. M. Forster who, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), singled out “expansion” as the ideal technique for “opening out,”<sup>52</sup> an idea which Némirovsky often makes reference to and that was a guiding principle in her own writing.<sup>53</sup> However, among the different types of chronotope that Bakhtin describes in order to express the inseparability of space and time, the “idyllic chronotope” is a striking one in this instance, for Bakhtin himself makes it clear that it is a formal novelistic element and one that he identifies with nostalgia. Upon a close reading of *Les Mouches d'automne*, one can also find other, more punctual connections with various chronotopic elements, which are not present in the novella in their purest form. Eventually, then, the chronotope takes us back, almost meta-cyclically, to considerations about home and exile, which are the foci of this analysis.

Bakhtin declines the chronotope of the idyll into several variants linked to one another by their mutual connection to the unity of “folkloric time,” which is also associated with the chronotope he calls “Rabelaisian.” As a “productive and generative time,”<sup>54</sup> the measure of “folkloric time” rests on the collectivity of life, on labour and productive growth. Folkloric time is *collective, unified* (i.e. there is no distinction between personal life and history), and *cyclic*. In Bakhtin's view, the idyll is a model of folkloric time and, in fact, in the idyll the afore-mentioned unity of folkloric time is expressed “in the special relationship that time has to space.”<sup>55</sup> In the idyllic chronotope, time is connected to a specific place that is familiar, safe, homely, and ancestral. It is

A grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one's children and their children will live. This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. But in this little spatially limited world a sequence of generations is localized that is potentially without limit. The unity of the life of generations (in general, the life of men) in an idyll is in most instances primarily defined by the *unity of place*, by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable.<sup>56</sup>

If we now turn to look closely at Némirovsky's novella we see that, there, the spatial unity described by Bakhtin is represented by Karinovka, the home in the countryside that has been the dwelling of the Karine for what seems like a non-defined forever. The name of the house itself, Karinovka, is obviously derived from the family surname, an ultimate symbol of their quasi-mythological belonging to that land. The inseparable union of the place of origin to its inhabitants throughout generations is made visible by Némirovsky in several of the passages cited above and in which the point of view focalizes on Tatiana to highlight how regularly she blurs the generations past and present. In a passage already cited,<sup>57</sup> the

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>52</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 149.

<sup>53</sup> On Némirovsky's use of T. S. Eliot concept of “expansion” see Cenedese, *Irène Némirovsky's Russian Influences*, 32–44.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “She had been with the Karine family for fifty-one years [...] And now it was the children's turn: Cyrille, Youri, it was their turn to go off to war [...]” Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter I.

departure for the front of the young Karine is perceived by the *niania* as a repetition of history, a replication of the wars that were fought by their fathers and forefathers, whose steps the young generations are now retracing. On that same night, during the waking hours spent next to little André, Tatiana's thoughts go more prominently to the future generations, wishfully thinking that she will be able to see more of them: "I'll live to see other children, God willing," she whispered.<sup>58</sup> Later, in Chapter V, while in conversation with young Loulou, Tatiana recalls to her the magnificent spring balls that used to take place in Karinovka, the happy days of *fiançailles* and weddings, the young women confiding to her ears the name of their crushes, until

they got engaged one day, got married, lived their lives honestly, with their fair share of happiness and sorrow, until the day when God took them [...] Oh, yes, I can remember [...] We had the most beautiful horses of all, and sometimes they would all ride out together, in a long line. Your father was a young man then; he and his friends, and your aunts, and some other young people, would ride into the forest, and the servants would carry the torches to light the way ahead [...]<sup>59</sup>

Going back and forth in the past tense, the timeline of Tatiana's memory becomes almost malleable, yet it is fixed in the unity of place represented by Karinovka, a site of memory where time has expanded and its borders have become porous and wayward. Indeed, this loss of chronological continuity is characteristic of the chronotope of the idyll where, according to Bakhtin,

This unity of place in the life of generations weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life. The unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave (the same little corner, the same earth), and brings together as well childhood and old age (the same grove, stream, the same lime trees, the same house), the life of the various generations who had also lived in that same place, under the same conditions, and who had seen the same things.<sup>60</sup>

The absence of boundaries and the overlapping of temporal planes that originate in the unity of place also contribute to the production of a cyclical rhythm, "the cyclical rhythmicalness of time"<sup>61</sup> typical of this chronotope. In *Les Mouches d'automne*, this cyclical rhythm comes across in the turning wheel of the émigrés' desire to return to a world from which one is irrevocably distanced.<sup>62</sup> Such ever-present feeling of nostalgia represents "a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values."<sup>63</sup> Yet, in the novella the experience of exile renders such cyclical rhythm even more tenacious. Tatiana yearns to return home as soon as she sets foot in France, in the hotel room by the port of Marseille: "She shook her head, then suddenly got up, nervously twisting the fringes of her shawl. 'Should I unpack the children's things? When will we be leaving?'"<sup>64</sup> The memory of the home and its inhabitants returns regularly, with a tempo that becomes more and more persistent as the storyline unfolds. Every object is exhumed from her memory and made to populate an enchanted world carefully fashioned by her imagination. Thus, in exile Karinovka becomes an idyllic place:

"You remember what it was like at home, don't you?"

The old woman blushed suddenly, raising her trembling hands to heaven. "Do I remember! My God! I could tell you where each and every thing was placed! I could walk through that house with my eyes shut! I remember every dress you ever wore, and the children's outfits, and the furniture, and the grounds, my God!"<sup>65</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Chapter II.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Chapter V.

<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 225.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Starobinski, "The Idea of Nostalgia," 101.

<sup>63</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter IV.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Chapter VI.

The repetitive re-enactment of the house serves in the novella as a substitute for the cyclical rhythmicity of the return home, typical of the idyllic chronotope. This is a rhythm with permeable boundaries in which the past is brought forward to meet and overlap with the present: “When she was alone, she went and sat down in front of Youri’s picture. She stared at it, but other images arose from her memory, from long ago, forgotten by everyone else. The faces of the dead, dresses from fifty years before, empty rooms [...]”<sup>66</sup> Thus, Tatiana’s nostalgic memory of the idyllic home and the collectivity it stands for can be read as a manifestation of the “cyclical repetitiveness” of folkloric time. Indeed, repetition keeps memories and thus turns Tatiana into a physical repository of the past and its memories. Némirovsky seems here to be engaging in a literary representation of what Bergson described as the storing of the past through repeated habitual actions.<sup>67</sup> However, these repetitive habits stall any possibility of progression and moving (forward). For Bakhtin, cyclicity hinders folkloric time’s “striving ahead” and “tension towards the future” because, he says, “time’s forward impulse is limited by the cycle” and “does not achieve an authentic ‘becoming’.”<sup>68</sup>

It seems inevitable that, at the end of the novel, a delirious Tatiana believes she has finally returned to Karinovka: “She looked up, saw day breaking near the Seine, a patch of white sky at the end of the street. To her eyes, it was a blanket of snow, just like in Soukharevo.<sup>69</sup> She walked faster, dazzled by the fine, burning rain that stung her eyelids. The sound of church bells rang in her ears.”<sup>70</sup> The disarray that makes Tatiana misrecognize the bank of the Seine for the plane of Soukharevo, at the end of which lies Karinovka, completes the circle of imaginary return. This is “a phantom homeland” created by nostalgia: indeed, Boym points out that “the danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one.”<sup>71</sup> Tatiana’s tragic death constructs nostalgia for the home via a chronotope that suggests the fundamental unproductive “cyclical repetitiveness”<sup>72</sup> of her exilic life.

As in the end of the novella, places that are distant in time and space such as 1920 Paris and the Russian pre-revolutionary happy years merge into a single, timeless image located in an ideal, imaginary, mythical space. The sun-lit Seine dazzles and blinds Tatiana: “Water flowed over the last few steps. She didn’t notice. ‘The river is frozen over,’ she thought. ‘It must be frozen over at this time of year.’ She thought that all she had to do was cross the river and on the other side would be Karinovka. She could see the lights from its terraces shimmering through the snow.”<sup>73</sup> In this moment of chronotopic superimposition, nostalgia materializes: space literally becomes the depository of a past time desired in the present. That is, Tatiana yearns not only for a place, Karinovka, but also for the time that it stands for – the “once upon a time” before the beginning of the novella. The blurring of the boundaries between these different spaces and timeframes, and the metaphorical overlapping of the two images, Paris and Karinovka, their signified included, brings me to introduce a key concept that I find useful for further unlocking the construction of time and space in the novella: Deleuze’s “crystal-image.”<sup>74</sup>

Deleuze’s volumes on cinema, *Cinéma I* and *Cinéma II*, provide a complex taxonomy of cinematic signs that is based on the dual logic of movement-images and time-images. Because of their Bergsonian influence, Deleuze’s texts have been influential for understanding how time and memory work in the seventh art.<sup>75</sup> Yet, although concerned with cinema, his philosophy can become a useful tool to analyse other types of literary narratives, such as Némirovsky’s *Les Mouches d’automne*.<sup>76</sup> Deleuze explains the concept of the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 77–131.

<sup>68</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 210.

<sup>69</sup> Soukharevo is the village at the borders of which stands Karinovka.

<sup>70</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter IX.

<sup>71</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

<sup>72</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 210.

<sup>73</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter IX.

<sup>74</sup> See in particular chapter 4, “The Crystal of Time,” 68–97.

<sup>75</sup> There has been ample criticism about the problems and limitations of this work, as well as efforts to overcome these by setting up new models. However, this is beyond the scope of this investigation.

<sup>76</sup> In fact, Jacques Rancière has criticized Deleuze for falling into analyses of narrative (e.g. plot and character development) rather than of the cinematic image itself (see Barotzi, *Contemporary European Cinema*, 85–90). Furthermore, one should note

crystal from the perspective of a bergsonian apprehension of time, the tenets of which he summarizes in the following fashion: “the past coexists with the present that it has been; the past is preserved in itself, as past in general (non-chronological); at each moment time splits itself into present and past, present that passes and past which is preserved.”<sup>77</sup> With every passing present moment various layers of past come into being; therefore, time is constantly splitting into two entities: the unfolding present and the stored past, that is, the *actual* image and the *virtual* image (*l'image actuelle* and *l'image virtuelle*). Crystal images are those that are capable of capturing this splitting in time and the moment in which such splitting occurs, the “point of indiscernibility” when the two images coalesce into an image “with two sides, actual and virtual at the same time.”<sup>78</sup>

I contend that this conceptualization of time as a crystallization of, simultaneously, the actual image and the virtual image is illuminating for *Les Mouches d'automne*, for it allows visualizing Némirovsky's commitment to communicate a dimension of exile that is more than a mere “present vs past” dichotomy and which shows a highly studied structural complexity. To think about this narrative as a crystallization of time enables a better understanding of how, in the context of exile, individual histories are constituted by various layers of the past that grapple, in-between the need to either remember or forget, with the present. In fact, I go as far as suggesting that the final pages of the novella *are* the manifestation, in literary narrative form, of Deleuze's crystal image. Throughout this article I have underlined the ever-present cyclical return of the past in Tatiana's quotidian existence, exemplified by the emblematic image of the home, Karinovka. In each of these returning moments the past comes momentarily alive via its utterance in the present – its memorial re-presentation in the present. However, it is not until the novella's last pages that the encounter of past and present assumes the materiality proper of a coalescence of the two, that is, in which the past preserved and the moving present are momentarily indiscernible.

On the final night of the novella, the Christmas night in which the Karine go out to celebrate with friends, Tatiana is left at home alone. As I mentioned earlier in this article, after a few hours of an agitated sleep, in the early morning Tatiana wakes up to find, out of the window, a thick fog that she mistakes for the first snow. This is what she has been waiting for months, for “Every day, she looked at the calendar that told her it was the beginning of October, then stared at the rooftops for a long time, but still there was no snow.”<sup>79</sup> Now Tatiana cannot take her eyes off what she thinks is snow, and she looks at it with “an expression of delight on her face that was both childlike and frightening, a little deranged;”<sup>80</sup> she “imagined she could feel the snowflakes on her face, could taste their fire and ice [...] She felt as if someone was waiting for her. A strange fever burned in her soul.”<sup>81</sup> After some meandering around the house, the semi-delirious *niania* leaves the apartment and goes out: wandering through the city streets as the “fine drops of rain stung her face, like the tips of snowflakes when they fall amidst a September rain, half-melted,”<sup>82</sup> however, she still does not realize that she is surrounded by fog, rather than snow. Indeed, unaware, Tatiana moves forward and, as the sunrise sets on the Seine, she is convinced she is staring at fresh snow. As she walks, she is surrounded by the city of Paris and its inhabitants: the “dark, deserted street; a gas-lamp [shining] through the rain,” a man passing-by, “a dog [rushing] across the road,” “a taxi splatter[ing] mud on to her face.”<sup>83</sup> However, the images from her past take over the concrete reality that surrounds her: the “blanket of snow, just like in Soukharevo,” the frozen river, “the lights from [Karinovka's] terraces shimmering through the snow.”<sup>84</sup>

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that Némirovsky firmly believed in the productive interchange between cinema and literature (see e.g. Cenedese, *Irène Némirovsky's Russian Influences*, 52, footnote 23).

<sup>77</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 82.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>79</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter VII.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter IX.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* It is worth noting that in her work Némirovsky often uses the topos of “blood,” which is also aptly demonstrated by the title of one of her posthumous novels, *Chaleur du sang* (2007. *Fire in the Blood*).

<sup>82</sup> Némirovsky, *Snow in Autumn*, Chapter IX.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

This entanglement of present-day images and memories corresponds, I argue, to the overlapping of Deleuze's actual images and virtual images. The contours of the French capital turn into the space of Karinovka, that is, Paris crystallizes in Karinovka and *vice versa*: they become a single entity, "the image with two sides, actual and virtual at the same time,"<sup>85</sup> as Deleuze puts it. And he continues, "The crystal-image consist in the indivisible unity of an actual image and 'its' virtual image."<sup>86</sup> The superimposition described by Némirovsky represents the indivisible, indiscernible coalescence of the actual image (i.e. the present) and the virtual image (i.e. the past). For, according to Deleuze, "the image has to be present and past, still present and already past, at once and at the same time."<sup>87</sup> In *Les Mouches*'s last pages Tatiana is physically in the present, walking through rainy and foggy Paris, but she is, at the same time, in the past with her embodied memory which makes her mis/take the past (Karinovka, the snow) mis/reflected in the present. The narrative sequence reproduces the crystallization of time as it delineates Paris (the present, the actual image) and blurs it with Karinovka, the virtual image, or else the actual image's "contemporaneous past," "the image in a mirror."<sup>88</sup> To be precise, the distinction between the two sides of the crystal-image, here Paris and Karinovka, is not suppressed but rather flipped or, as Deleuze writes, "unattributable, each side taking the other's role."<sup>89</sup> Némirovsky's crystalline description illuminates the "associationist magic"<sup>90</sup> by which nostalgic obsession operates and which layers the perception of home in/from exile. If Deleuze finds that, in cinema, "the indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, [but] it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double,"<sup>91</sup> then, Némirovsky's novella is a formal representation of how, within the experience of exile, the home is, in fact, a double image: both real and imaginary, present and past, actual and virtual. To narrate this complexity and to concretize the merging of these dichotomies on the white page, Némirovsky relies on a careful formal experimentation, resulting in the creation of crystalline descriptions.

### 3 Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that in the novella *Les Mouches d'automne* Némirovsky builds a complex representation of exile. On a first reading the novella seems the simple story of a family that fled Russia after the Revolution, and Némirovsky an agile handler of the familiar stereotypes of "emigration stories" that populated 1920s France, at the height of the so-called *mode russe*. However, far from being a simple stereotypical story, in *Les Mouches d'automne* Némirovsky suggests that the complexity of exile cannot be reduced to the clichés of a linear narration: her operation calls for an understanding of the exilic experience that cannot be reduced to the simplistic dichotomy home/exile, past/present, and here/there. Instead, she complicates it by creating tension between space- and time-frames that overlap with one another. Anchored in the work of two twentieth-century philosophers, Mikhail Bakhtin and Gilles Deleuze, I have tried to decode these tensions and overlaps by analysing how Némirovsky represents time and space in the novella. Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope and Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image have been essential to lay bare the foundations of Némirovsky's formalist work in this particular novella. Such an attentive engagement with questions of representation of time, space, and consciousness in narrative may seem at odd with a writer that is not considered *strictu sensu* modernist. Without going as far as stating the opposite, however, this analysis proves that Némirovsky was sensitive to modernism and

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<sup>85</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 69.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>90</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4.

<sup>91</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 69.

its experiments when it came to narrative form. The philosophical framework provided by Bakhtin and Deleuze has proven valuable for unlocking and making visible the complexity of the novella's narrative structure; in turn, this analysis contributes to untangle Némirovsky's perception of the interlacing of nostalgia and memory, time and space, home and exile.

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