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    Remise de peine by Patrick Modiano

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sensible au pouvoir du Verbe, se distingue dans le paysage romanesque contemporain où, trop souvent, le best-seller éclipse l'œuvre authentique.

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MODIANO, PATRICK. *Remise de peine*. Paris: Seuil, 1988. Pp. 166. 69 F.

A simple style, short enigmatic scenes, and a *louche* atmosphere promising shocking discoveries which never come—all these traits help create the charm of Modiano's slight fictions and explain why they can leave one unsatisfied. As he says himself, all his novels, beginning with *La Place de l'Étoile* (Prix Fénon and Roger Nimier 1968), set before Modiano was born, are fictionalized autobiography, but some are based literally on his own life, especially *Livret de famille* (1977), *De si braves garçons* (1982), and now *Remise de peine*.

The autobiography in this novel begins with its narrator, who like his author is a writer in his early forties named Patrick. The fictional Patrick, nicknamed Patoche like Modiano, had an actress mother and an often-absent father engaged in mysterious business deals, but, for once in Modiano's fiction, a brother is more important than an elusive father, and the phrase "mon frère et moi," which returns obsessively, becomes especially poignant when the adult Patoche says simply, "J'avais perdu mon frère" (102). Since Modiano dedicated the first eight of his eleven novels to his brother Rudy, Patoche's nostalgic love for his brother presumably reflects Modiano's own feelings.

Patoche is still puzzled by unexplained events of thirty years earlier, when he and his brother were being cared for by three mysterious women, Annie and Hélène, who seem to be lovers, and Hélène's mother. He now knows that the strange comings and goings in his temporary guardians' house had to do with some illegal activity, but he never learned what was the "Quelque chose de très grave" (163) that the police say happened to them, though he thinks it is related to a burglary. The *remise de peine* of the title is a pun; it refers not primarily to the presumed sentencing of Patoche's guardians—one never learns just what has happened to them—but to the *peine* they have given Patoche by upsetting his life and then vanishing without a trace.

As he often has before, Modiano reuses places and people from previous books, particularly from his most autobiographical ones, although he is inconsistent: Patoche is not quite the fictional Patrick Modiano who narrates *Livret de famille*, for though both are writers, have lived in the Square Grasivaudan, and were baptized in Biarritz at St. Martin's, Patrick's godmother is Madeleine Ferragus, and Patoche's is Annie. Despite such re-workings of material and other resemblances to his previous fiction, Modiano's usual *roman policier* atmosphere is tempered by ten-year-old Patoche's naïveté, which supplies light humor: he imagines the night-club run by the lesbian Frede as a circus with a "chapiteau blanc et rouge et les animaux de la ménagerie, dont Frede . . . était la dompteuse" (21), and though the boys never see mysterious Eliot Salter, "le roi de l'armagnac" (46), their romantic imaginations picture him returning to his abandoned château at midnight, where his faithful servant, Grosclaude, has set a table with silver candelabra, lace, and crystal (52).

Modiano's skillful creation of mood helps explain why *Remise de peine* was a best-seller in France for the first three months of 1988, but unfortunately there is little

besides atmosphere in this very short and nearly plotless book. Missing are the optimism of *Livret de famille* and the adult moral issues of *Les Boulevards de ceinture* (*Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française* 1972) and *Rue des boutiques obscures* (*Prix Goncourt* 1982). Modiano's distinctive style lends itself to parody, as shown by a piece signed "Patrick O'Modian" (and apparently written by Colin Nettelbeck and Penny Hueston) which appeared in the 1984 *Australian Journal of French Studies*. Only the slight humor caused by ten-year-old Patoche's misunderstandings keeps Modiano from self-parody in *Remise de peine*.

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MUNO, JEAN. *Jeu de rôles*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1988. Pp. 150. 62 F.

*Jeu de Rôles* pourrait s'intituler 'Roman d'un paumé' car le héros Fabre Déglaantine n'a de poétique que le nom. Par dérision, Munò fait-il allusion à l'auteur de pièces révolutionnaires, Philippe François Nazaire dit Fabre d'Eglantine qui fut l'ami de Danton et de Marat et un des principaux incitateurs des massacres de septembre? Le héros de *Jeu de Rôles*, certes, n'a rien d'un révolutionnaire. C'est un personnage ordinaire, médiocre, vétillard, craintif et confus. C'est un inadapté que son travail au Ministère ennuie à mourir, mais rien dans la vie ne l'intéresse. Le jour, c'est un endormi qui pique même un somme quand il fait l'amour à sa femme, mais la nuit, il souffre d'insomnie. La doctoresse qui le soigne lui conseille d'écrire, mais ce projet présente un problème pour Fabre car il ne sait quoi écrire. Il décide finalement du titre 'L'Affaire Grozetti' et les personnages seront ses collègues de bureau. Lemoine, collègue de Fabre devient l'enquêteur de l'Affaire Grozetti qui soupçonne Fabre à cause de sa conduite étrange. En effet, Fabre doit exécuter les dernières volontés de sa mère, Isabelle Dujardin, ancienne directrice d'école, qui demande de disperser ses cendres dans la Mer du Nord.

On glisse doucement vers le fantastique et on ne sait toujours où s'arrête la réalité et où commence le rêve. Le ton humorsistique et sarcastique rappelle une pièce de Ghelderode. Ce roman fait penser à une farce tragi-comique, non seulement par le titre, mais par la construction des chapitres qui sont présentés comme des scènes, par les quiproquos des dialogues et par la bouffonnerie des personnages qui font un va et vient constant entre la réalité et l'imaginaire.

C'est surtout leurs fantasmes qui nous font sourire comme ceux de Lemoine qui est obsédé par les beaux seins, en particulier ceux de Rachel Marron, sa secrétaire. Sous la légèreté de l'intrigue, la cocasserie des situations, l'aspect comique des personnages, se dégage une certaine gravité. Il y a quelquechose de touchant et pathétique dans ce pauvre Fabre qui est hanté par une scène pénible de son enfance. On comprend mieux ses difficultés à s'adapter au monde adulte. Son inadaptation semble avoir son origine dans son enfance et dans l'éducation qu'il a reçue. Fabre est un être qui ne peut se séparer de son enfance et qui n'a guère envie de la quitter. Il est à la fois acteur et spectateur de son existence. Les aventures de Fabre se multiplient tandis que la réalité et le rêve s'enchevêtrent étroitement.

L'ironie du style déguise à peine l'angoisse et la solitude des personnages. L'art de conter domine l'intrigue et on est pris par le mélange subtil du réel et du surnaturel. Jean Munò est un auteur belge qui gagne à être mieux connu. Il a écrit des romans (*L'Hipparion*, *L'Ile des pas perdus*, *Ripple Marks*, *Histoire exécable d'un héros brabançon*) des contes, (*Histoires singulières* qui ont reçu le Prix Rossel) et des