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Andrei Makine (review)

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Andrei Makine. Edited by MURIELLE LUCIE CLÉMENT. (CRIN, 53). Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. 187 pp. Pb €37.00; \$48.00.

The unprecedented success of *Le Testament français* triggered an avalanche of critical responses to Andreï Makine's œuvre. Yet, while the initial enthusiasm may be partially attributed to what was seen as the writer's efforts to rekindle national pride in his French readers, the continuously positive reception of the Russian-born writer's work is somewhat puzzling given its repetitive, didactic, and frequently formulaic qualities. The present collection of thirteen essays, despite its overall uncritical tone, manages to propose several engaging and original readings, largely thanks to the contributors' creative use of analytical tools such as semiotics, Bakhtinian theory of the novel, or Kristevan psychoanalysis, the application of comparatist and sociocultural approaches, and the exploration of important themes such as incest. Of particular interest is Marco Caratozzolo's opening essay investigating the cultural contingency of the semiotics of an island, a symbolically charged leitmotiv of Makine's œuvre. Similarly, in his analysis of *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu* Arnaud Vareille places in the Russian cultural context other recurrent details such as the communal courtyard. The focus of his essay is, however, the narrator's choice of French as his language of creative expression, which Vareille links to Arkady's revolt against the propaganda-contaminated native tongue and believes to be metaphorized by his cacophonous performance on a drum, an instrument with military band connotations. Two other essays address the polyvalent musicality of Makine's writings: whilst Murielle Lucie Clément brings her experience in opera singing into her discussion of Makine's use of popular songs, Ewa Małgorzata Wierzbowska examines the staccato rhythm of *La Terre et le ciel de Jacques Dormes*. Makine's narrative technique is also central to Stéphanie Bellemare-Page's pertinent study of the growing metatextuality of the writer's prose, which for this critic articulates the clash between Makine's typically Russian conception of the writer's role as 'une quête quasi mystique [...] cherchant à traduire le mystère inhérent du monde réel' (p. 108) and the alleged banality of contemporary French prose. And yet, although it is clear that by blurring the author/narrator distinction Makine can safely adopt a morally superior position in order to both castigate the West and idealize the Soviet Union, Thierry Laurent concludes his review of the novelist's representation of Russia by stating that '[n]on seulement [le] dessein [de l'auteur] n'est pas idéologique, mais c'est aussi quelqu'un de peu manichéen' (p. 92). The collection ends with three rigorous readings of *Le Crime d'Olga Arbélina*, which, as Ali Chibani rightly observes, is Makine's most complex novel. Whilst Chibani proposes a dangerously relativist political interpretation of incest as 'le grand symptôme de la perversion historique qui marque la Russie et l'Humanité' (p. 172), Tomasz Swoboda and Olga Wrońska compare the novel with Bataille's *Ma Mère* and Jelinek's *The Pianist*. Thus, while containing some valuable contributions, the volume is plagued by a lack of cohesion provoked by the absence of a guiding theme, the use of a wide variety of approaches, and, what seems almost unavoidable in this type of publication, the essays' uneven quality.

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'*Fin de millénaire*' *French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis*. By RUTH CRUICKSHANK. (Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xii + 290. Hb £55.00; \$99.00.

'Crisis' is arguably the most overused word in French intellectual parlance. Cruickshank recognizes this as she argues in '*Fin de millénaire*' *French Fiction* that, while the postmodern assertion of perpetual crises is simplistic, it remains true that at the