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French as a Foreign Language: The Literary Enterprise of Antoine Volodine

Abstract

Volodine's fictions all resemble each other save for names and settings. They expose a world where the Revolution has failed and its protagonists are either dead, incarcerated, or holed up in the putrefying carcass of an abandoned building. Protagonists keep the memory of their political dreams alive by telling the stories of lost comrades, in works tapped out in code on the drainage pipes of a high-security prison or the asylum where they are held without charge, or else circulated, samizdat-style, among sympathizers. The authors of these narratives are themselves the subjects of others. So the characters created by Volodine become the authors of his work, such that Antoine Volodine is just one name among the many contributors to the literature of the post-exotic world. With formal roots in science fiction and thematic sources in France's continuing nostalgia for the revolutionary road, Volodine's dreamworld seems quite unrelated to the main trends of contemporary writing, yet it forms one of the most ambitious literary projects of our times. Couched in language of exquisite precision and grace, Volodine's not entirely imaginary construction of a ruined world simultaneously denies individual authorship and reasserts human individuality through the memorializing function of storytelling.

Keywords

Volodine, French Revolution, Revolution, storytelling, narratives, French nostalgia, nostalgia, revolutionary road

French as a Foreign Language:
The Literary Enterprise of Antoine Volodine

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The fifteen novels published under the name of Antoine Volodine since the 1980s together with a half dozen stories appearing under the names of Elli Kronauer and Manuela Draeger, probably one published as the work of Marina Soudaïeva and perhaps other works purportedly translated from Russian make up one of the strangest and most compelling literary projects of modern times.¹ All these prose works are of the same broad kind: narrative fragments of an imaginary universe that is at once a re-enactment and a complete reversal of the project first brought into fiction by Balzac when he said “la Société française allait être l’historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire” (“Avant-propos” 11). ‘French society would be the historian, I would be only its secretary.’²

Like Balzac, Volodine purports to be the transcriber of a myriad stories about other people, but in his work the stories are actually told by others, and the transcriber called Volodine performs his secretarial role with utter self-abnegation. Each of his hundreds of named narrators are his friends and masters: “La première personne du singulier sert à accompagner la voix des autres, elle ne signifie rien de plus” (*Le post-exotisme* 19) ‘The first person singular serves to accompany the voices of others, it means nothing more than that.’ It is for them, on their behalf and in their service that he writes or speaks—the two words marking a distinction, not an equivalence. As in *La Comédie humaine*, several narrator-characters recur in different roles in various texts; similarly reminiscent of the Balzacian project is the consequent fact that it does not really matter whether you read Volodine in the order of publication of the separate titles,

or in any other order. It is also true that any one segment or instance of the Volodinian universe is unmistakably like any other; as with Proust, you do not have to read everything to know what kind of a universe it is. But however much of Volodine's work you do read, you still do not quite know what you have got into.

Volodine is the pen-name of a French writer, a long-time resident of Orléans, who was for a time a teacher of Russian in the French secondary school system. (He is also a translator from Russian, and, under another pseudonym, the writer of adapted Russian folk tales or *bylini* for French children.) His knowledge of Soviet and contemporary Russian literature and history is substantial, but for many years he has been increasingly fascinated by the cultures and traditions of the Far East, notably Siberia, Tibet and southern China, where he has spent a good deal of his time. He does not belong to the literary milieu of contemporary Paris and he takes no account of it. "Cette masse romanesque a été écrite, a été construite sans tenir compte des goûts, des tendances, des traditions du monde éditorial dans lequel elle a pris place" (Volodine, "Écrire en français" 2) 'This collection of fictions has been written and constructed without taking into account any of the tastes, tendencies and traditions of the editorial world in which it occurred.' His published works have appeared, in sequence, with Denoël, Minuit, Gallimard and Seuil—an unusual trajectory that signals Volodine's unclassifiable position in contemporary French literature. Like any radically new project, his work cannot usefully be situated in the cartography of the contemporary field, only—and very tentatively—on the much grander landscape of literature itself.

Volodine has frequently formulated his writerly project as the composition of a foreign literature written in French, most notably in a self-presentation given to a round table of French and Chinese writers in 2001, when he said: "dès l'origine mes romans ont été étrangers à la réalité littéraire française. Ils forment un objet littéraire publié en langue française, mais pensé en une langue extérieure au français..." ("Écrire en français" 3) 'From the start my novels were foreign to the literary reality of France. They constitute a literary object published in the French language, but conceived in a language external to French.' Remarkably, he would like his works to be thought of as translations, not originals. He is by no means the

first writer to try to make literary use of the phenomenon of translation, but his bizarre, disturbing and powerful use of the conceit of pseudo-translation is (as far as I know) completely original.

The pseudo-translation of Gaelic poetry in James MacPherson's *Ossian* was an intentional deception; Volodine, though not devoid of occasional flashes of irony and wit at the expense of his readers, is absolutely not a pseudo-translator of that kind. Another counter-example can be found in the first few dozen works in the *Série noire*, launched in 1945 by Marcel Duhamel on behalf of Gallimard so as to exploit French fascination with American hard-boiled detective fiction. At Duhamel's behest a team of now mostly forgotten writers produced foreign literature under American-sounding pseudonyms for the French market. Volodine's project is not of that kind. The "langue extérieure au français" 'the language external to French' in which he claims his work is thought is not to be identified with any particular language, such as English or Chinese.

In the late 1820s, Balzac boasted that he would do for France what Walter Scott had done for Scotland, and with *Les Chouans ou la Bretagne en 1799*, *The Chouans: Brittany in 1799*, he proceeded to write a walterscottish version of a small French civil war. Again, Volodine's project is not of that order. He does not import any generic model into the French novel from an identifiable foreign source. He has no mission to improve or renovate French literature by hewing to more powerful or more interesting forms of writing from abroad.

Closer to but by no means to be confused with a Volodinian construction of foreign literature is Romain Gary's invention of a new authorial identity in Émile Ajar, together with a new language—French mangled as if by a foreign speaker.³ Volodine's idea of a foreign literature written in French is not an aggression on the French language, as was Gary's, but it is far more radical than anything the Ajar experiment achieved. The stories told by his narrators come from an elsewhere that does not exist. "Je cherche à explorer et à représenter une culture non pas relativement, mais ABSOLUMENT étrangère" ("Écrire en français" 6) 'I am trying to explore and to represent a culture that is not relatively but ABSOLUTELY foreign.' It is nonetheless shot through with reminiscences, fragments and echoes of real historical and geographical locations, confused and

intermingled to constitute times and places that are completely imaginary, and imaginatively gripping.

The foreignness of Volodine's fictional universe is only superficially connected to the exotic settings of his stories or reports—a generic Amazonia in *Le Nom des singes, Naming the Jungle*, a Macao-ish slum city in *Dondog*, a kind of reduplicated Lisbon in *Lisbonne, dernière marge* 'Lisbon Last Fringe' or else the generalized Soviet Central Asia of "Balkhyria" (*Nuits blanches en Balkhyrie, 'White Nights in Balkhyria'*). His characters, too, bear names from elsewhere—but nearly always, their first and second names come from different traditions: Catalan and Hungarian (Giovan Bartok), Turkish and Russian (Yasar Tarchalski), German and Korean (Petra Kim), Serbo-Croat and Italian (Ivo Marconi), Russian and Japanese (Irina Kobayashi), Spanish and German (Julio Sternhagen), German and Argentinian (Wolfgang Gardel), and many others more obscure but equally bicultural—Zé'ev Retzmayer, Iakoub Khadjbakiro, Yann Zhang.... On this point, at least, Volodine has explained his authorial intention quite unambiguously: "to displace the names of my characters into an internationalist world where national, ethnic and obviously chauvinistic references have long been erased.... The association of a given name and a name belonging to different cultural or geographic regions is thus a small act of internationalist militantism" (Volodine, Interview 32).

Volodine's doubly-named and thus deterritorialized characters are all, always, narrators—voices telling the stories of themselves, or, more often, of another now dead, lost or vanished comrade. Their modes of expressing or recording their stories are varied but always at the limit of possibility. Under interrogation, they tell their captors enough to deceive them while also protecting the true identity of the comrades they are forced to denounce. In detention camps, they compose their memorial narratives on scraps of newsprint or on bits of tree-bark, or else speak them aloud, in whispers, to other detainees. In high-security prisons, they tap them out in code on the drainage pipes, or pass them along to each other in muttered fragments in the exercise yard. But these humiliated, suffering and often raving social rejects compose their garbage writings within the forms, genres and overarching rules of a literature that, thanks to Volodine's sympathetic recording and transcription of it, really

exists. He calls it post-exotic literature. Each of his works is therefore both an assertion of the existence of this literature and of its creators, and the creation of precisely that which it seeks to preserve and communicate—the living trace of a planetary community of the oppressed and defeated, whose only form of resistance and continued existence is through the words they speak or, when circumstances permit, scribble down. This is more than *mise-en-abyme*. Literature is the only form of existence of the post-exotic world; post-exotic literature is the world it represents; literature, in Volodine's deeply thoughtful enactment of it, is the demiurge creating its own subject, which is itself. It is as if Romain Gary's project in the Ajar mystification—to indulge in “la plus vieille tentation protéenne de l'homme: celle de la multiplicité” (Gary 19) ‘the oldest of man's protean temptations —multiplicity’ has been transferred from the narcissism of an individual ego onto a collective, cultural and transcendent plane.

Volodine's first publisher, Denoël, brought out four of these strange and haunting works in its science-fiction collection, *Présence du futur*. As Volodine has frequently insisted, he is not a science fiction writer, and the genre label which allowed him to break into print after many years of writing for himself alone was profoundly misleading. All the same, there is a connection between the generic ambition of science fiction to create self-sufficient, self-enclosed alternate universes capable of infinite extension (serial enterprises like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, with their invented jargons, languages, orders and pseudo-realia, are the most obvious examples) and the Volodinian project. The differences are of course just as important. Volodine does not write allegories or moral fables, he does not claim to be talking about a world organized on principles different from our own, and he does not place his stories in an explicitly future time. His characters may be alive or dead, they may be human or in some cases animal, but they are not alien to this planet. On the contrary: their planet is ours. And it is not a pretty one.

Roughly speaking, all Volodinian literature comes from after the final collapse and defeat of the revolution. What revolution? It is never directly identified with an event catalogued in world history, but the movement to which all narrators have or had belonged prior to their capture, incarceration or expulsion has general features

that are quite clear. The movement was internationalist, egalitarian, anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist. It has no hope of ever making a difference anymore, save that fidelity to its ideas is what keeps all Volodine's friends (his characters) in their cells and psychiatric wards. These features are fairly obviously inherited from the collective dreams of the European far-left movements of the 1970s, from the Parisian Trotskyist *groupuscules* to the Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany and the Brigade Rossi in Italy. In that respect the post-exotic literature of Antoine Volodine is one of the very rare *lieux de mémoire* for a now entirely discredited and abandoned mind-set. In this respect his work can be read as a nostalgic enterprise that is also a critique of nostalgia—a re-investment of the wild and angry dreams of youth, seen retrospectively, from the perspective of their ruination.⁴ However, the nostalgia for lost ideals that Volodine exploits and problematizes is significantly different—I would say, on a different planet—from the self-exculpation of some recent works by former revolutionary activists, like Jean Rolin's *Tigre en papier*. Post-exotic narrators are unrepentant and explicitly unreliable; they are not making up stories so as to re-present themselves as basically respectable people.

Wherever you venture in the Volodinian universe—jungle, steppe, city, slum—things are a mess. The environment is degraded, resources are scarce, buildings are dilapidated, equipment is either non-existent or in an advanced state of decay, and no productive activities appear to be going on at all. Perhaps, outside of the camps, prisons, wards and detention centers whence come the works of post-exotic literature there may still be structures that resemble normal life, but they impinge only briefly and aggressively into the carceral world of Volodine's characters, like the literary critics Niouki and Blotno, in *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons* 'Post-exoticism in Ten Lessons.' Something awful seems to have happened—an apocalyptic war, the collapse of the capitalist system from its own contradictions, who knows. Or maybe ... things are not so different from the way they really have been for many people, in many places, at many times in the twentieth century. Volodine's poor, cruel, hostile and broken-down world is both weird and utterly plausible. At times you wonder where you really are.

The recognition effect that Volodine both seeks and constantly

evades is the result of his recombination of otherwise incompatible historical and political allusions. Just as Balzac created typical characters by combining (“telescoping”) details from a range of different historical sources, so Volodine creates a typical gulag (in *Nuits blanches en Balkhyrie*) by blending reminiscences of scenes from Solzhenitsyn’s *Ivan Denisovich* with various accounts of Soviet psychiatric hospitals and Nazi concentration camps. The apartment building through which Dondog slithers in the novel of that name is both reminiscent of tropical slums seen on television documentaries and the degraded horror of a housing project in one of Paris’s run-down sectors. The interrogation room at the police station in *Le Nom des singes* is vaguely reminiscent of Graham Greene’s depictions of Haiti and Havana, and also echoes with memories of spy-movie thrillers as well as with accounts of the Moscow trials of the 1930s. Of course, no Volodinian location is precisely this or that. There is no key or code that can reduce the post-exotic to an allegory of lived history—yet every location is suggestive of the real existing world in which we (still, or will) live.

The least evasive scenario is the one we find in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, the story (stories) of Ingrid Vogel, whose for once uninational name matches her background as a former member of something like the Bader-Meinhof gang living underground in Lisbon, deranged, isolated but nonetheless unrepentant in her language of revolutionary scorn—running-dogs, serfs, bosses, pot-bellied slaves, and so on. But this almost plausible setting soon yields to a more authentically Volodinian project, that of saving the writings, the literature, of a whole network of imprisoned, exiled and otherwise nearly-erased groups and individuals, in an era marked by the passing of centuries since The Renaissance, which seems to be a code word for something very much like the failure of a revolution.

One of the more striking features of Volodine’s narrator-characters is that some of them, for at least some of the time, are dead. Others are insane, and others are suffering (and aware that they are suffering) from amnesia. These partly fantastical premises (that is to say, partly characteristic of fantastic literature) are not just literary tropes. The post-exotic world from which Volodine reports pays little of our normal heed to the distinctions between memory and imagination, sanity and madness, or life and death. Speaking on

their behalf, the super-narrator prolongs their lives by recounting the memorial texts they have composed, or are composing in the very act of being reported. If one of the ambitions of any literary project is to defy mortality, then Volodine's rarefied and at the same time transparent variant is to deny the meaning of death. It is not that he asks us to believe in shamanism (in interview, Volodine has denied having any specific mystical or religious beliefs) but that he finds in shamanism and animism much useful material for his literary project.

A recurring and characteristic scenario in post-exotic literature is the interrogation: a holder of memory responds—more or less deviously, more or less colorfully—to hostile and incessant questioning about his comrades, group, cell, or unit. Under physical as well as mental pressure, the narrator wanders between deception, delirium and self-defense, in an intoxicating generic and stylistic dance through which we—Volodine's readers—glimpse without fully grasping a world of anger, resistance, courage and despair. In a complete reversal of the normal functions of literary style, the interrogation mode puts the reader in the same position as the interrogator, who, like us, seeks to make a coherent, realistic sense of speeches designed to resist appropriation. The text corners us into a role we do not really want. It persuades us that as rational readers we are nothing other than ineffectual interrogators of already defeated and captured enemies. Volodine's post-exotic literature knows nothing as simple as the *captatio benevolentiae*. Justifiably suspicious and hostile narrators (they are, after all, detainees in a world in which we think we are still free) seek not to capture our goodwill, but to ensnare us, to deceive us, to ward off our too-prying eyes. The reader is the enemy!

The idea of a text designed not to be read, not to be understood, but to resist and to discombobulate haunts modern literature. From Stendhal's dedication "To The Happy Few" to Herman Melville's inscrutable *Bartleby*, from Velemir Khlebnikov's *zaumny yazyk* 'transrational language' to the "silence" of Maurice Blanchot and some of the pronouncements of Roland Barthes, the notion of the unreadable has acquired a prominent place in modern literary theory.⁵ It is only rarely observed how close this notion is to the place of writing itself in many earlier cultures. In the hieratic, priestly, magical and

religious traditions of (for example) Ancient Egypt, biblical Israel, and medieval Europe, the written text was not for the profane, and was characteristically encoded in ways that kept unwanted readers out. So it is with post-exotic literature, and for reasons of a similarly cultish kind. Hermeticism is the only possible mode of existence for a literature of the excluded, the captured, the denied and the imprisoned. Volodine, as the super-narrator and preserver of these recondite treasures, squares the circle in a way that only literature can make possible. He reports from a world that is different (like a foreign literature, for example) but opens it to us by his construction of texts bearing traces of a mode of existence that, by design, we cannot fully comprehend.

The involutions of post-exotic literature are complex and fascinating, and nowhere are they presented more challengingly than in a fiction cast in the form of an essay, *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze*, the work that perhaps more than any other brought Volodine to critical attention, precisely because it is a fiction of critical attention. We are in a prison, in attendance on a character called Lutz Bassmann, whose life is ebbing away in the sweltering, oozing filth of his cell. He is our spokesman, one among many others, but after the list of names given, the super-narrator corrects our impression of having learned something: “Cette liste que je donne contient des informations volontairement erronées et elle est incomplète... La liste aux apparences objectives n’est qu’une manière sarcastique de dire à l’ennemi, une fois de plus, qu’il n’apprendra rien” (*Le post-exotisme* 11) ‘The list I have given contains intentionally erroneous information and is incomplete. The apparently objective list is only a sarcastic way of telling the enemy one more time that he will learn nothing.’ Now the list thus undermined contains among other names that of Antoine Volodine, putting the apparent (pseudonymous) signatory of the volume among the characters of his own fiction. The we who are present is thus a most peculiar kind of inclusive plural person, as it envelops the reader (by convention), the speaker of the text, its external author, and an unspecified number of other inmates and former revolutionaries ... to whose company we now belong. Are we friends or enemies? Spectators or participants? That is precisely the kind of question to which no Volodinean text ever seeks to give a clear answer. By means as unusual as

they are unambiguous, Volodine creates his implied reader exactly as Wolfgang Iser defined it long before: “der im Text vorgezeichnete Aktcharacter des Lesens” (Iser, qtd. in Link 32) ‘the nature of the performance of reading designated by the text itself.’

The fragmentary inventory of seventy-two deceased dissidents presented in the first of the ten lessons of post-exoticism in 1998 includes many whose works will only appear several years later, such as Maria Soudaïeva, imprisoned in 1975 but the alleged author of *Slogans* (2004), a posthumous publication translated and edited by Volodine.⁶ Similarly, Maria Clementi, of the same generation of prisoners, is credited (86) in the last of the ten lessons—which takes the form of a bibliography of post-exotic literature—as the author of *Des anges mineurs, Minor Angels*, 1977, a work which appeared under the signature of Volodine in 1999. Volodine’s first published work, *Biographie comparée de Jorian Murgrave*, is entered in the same bibliography, attributed to Iakoub Khadjbakiro, and his second, *Un Navire de nulle part*, as possibly the work of Wernieri. Are these the same books? Or are these titles, like the names of some characters living under deep cover, intentional confusions? In fact, all of Volodine’s work to date and several titles as yet unwritten (or at least, unpublished) figure in the bibliography of post-exotic literature under the names of a whole raft of different named characters (Jean Vlassenko, Vassilissa Lukaszczyk, Lilith Schwack, Yasar Tar-chalski, Rita Hoo, Aidan Sherrad, Jean Khorassan), but always with the correct date of publication (in the real world). Volodine makes himself just one part of his own fiction of an autonomous literary universe. His procedure is not really to be equated with Fernando Pessoa’s use of heteronyms, which serve the relatively comprehensible aim of becoming someone else (as all novelists do, while maintaining the fiction that the someone else is a character distinct from themselves). It seems to me to be an even more complete involution of the project of writing: to allow imagined characters to usurp and absorb the role of author, to relegate the transcriber to a rank exactly equal to that of a subject of the world he has created.

The self-envelopment of the Volodinian universe is completed by a literary terminology that mimics but falls short of being a satire of existing literary forms. The works of post-exoticism fall into one of several kinds, called *românces*, *shaggâs*, *narrats* (with secondary

qualifiers, such as *narrats poétiques*, and *narrats lyriques*), *entrevoûtes*, *leçons*, and *féeries*—recognizable verbal correlates of romances, sagas, narratives, essays and fairy-tales, but with definitions that do not really help us grasp what they are. The *shaggå*, for instance, is defined as a two-part structure consisting of seven sequences of identical length and tone followed by a commentary in free form. The sequences are seven aspects of the same event.

L'action obéit en même temps à des principes d'incertitude et à une tenace exigence de stagnation narrative, voire de répétition. On éprouve des doutes sur ce qui se passe, à quoi on assiste plusieurs fois. Une phrase travaillée, volontiers précieuse, un vocabulaire riche, une prose ornementale soutiennent cela. (*Le post-exotisme* 29)

The action is subject both to principles of uncertainty and to a rigid constraint of narrative stagnation, or even repetition. One is not sure what has happened and one experiences it several times. All of which is supported by a honed, even precious style, a wide vocabulary and ornamental prose.

It is obviously nothing like a saga, and it is only like the writings of Volodine in respect of its luxuriant language, its principle of uncertainty, and the doubts it encourages about what is really happening. Slightly less baffling is the *narrat*, partly because Volodine redefined it on the back-panel copy of his *Des anges mineurs* (trans. Jordan Stump) which bears the generic subtitle “narrats” (presumably, not to be confused with *Des anges mineurs* by Maria Clementi, which is listed in the bibliography of *Le post-exotisme*.... as a *romance*): “J’appelle narrats ... des instantanés romanesques qui fixent une situation, des émotions, un conflit vibrant entre mémoire et réalité, entre imaginaire et souvenir” “What I call narrats ... are novelistic snapshots that encapsulate a situation, emotions, an oscillating conflict between memory and reality, between imagination and recall. In other words, perhaps, a prose poem....

The rules of the *romance* are more elaborate, and more confusing, yet entirely coherent within the strange world we are exploring. All *romances* share a family likeness that Volodine calls the “*unité de sang*” ‘unity of blood’ and evoke themes of “*désespoir extrémiste*, un principe agressif lié à l’extrême, à des hypothèses de non-retour”

(*Le post-exotisme* 37) ‘extremist despair, an aggressive principle connected to the extreme and to speculations of non-return.’ Second, the narrator of a *romance* adheres to an ideology of “unrepentant, defeated, exacerbated, criminal egalitarianism.” Thirdly, the narrator seeks to disappear: “il se cache, il délègue sa fonction et sa voix à des hommes de paille...” (n. pag.) ‘he hides, he delegates his function and his voice to straw men.’ This seems to be coming close to a description of Volodine’s own position, and thus to a *mise-en-abyme* of his whole literary project. Fourth, *romances* employ a logic that does not exclude contradiction: “la victime est bourreau, le passé est présent, l’achèvement de l’action est son début ... l’auteur est un personnage ... le silence est parole, etc.” (*Le post-exotisme* 39) ‘the victim is the perpetrator, the past is present, the completion of an action is its beginning ... the author is a character ... silence is speech, etc.’

In many places Volodine’s work shows signs of careful formal arrangement, in which the number 7 plays a major role. Alongside the seven sequences of the *shaggå*, there are 49 sections (7x7) in *Des anges mineurs* as well as in *Nuits blanches en Balkhyrie*, and 343 (7x7x7) items in the bibliography of post-exoticism (and 343 numbered exclamatory sentences in Maria Soudaïeva’s *Slogans*). In his discussion of the formal rules of the *romance* Volodine points out that the initial capital letters of the 666 paragraphs of *Igor Euwe appelle Igor Euwe* spell out “un sous-texte lyrique... par lequel s’exprime la compagne torturée du narrateur principal” (41) ‘a lyrical subtext ... through which the tortured partner of the principal narrator speaks’—in other words, an acrostic, as in Chapter LI of Perec’s *La Vie mode d’emploi* (*Life A User’s Manual*). More disturbingly, because it can be checked and turns out to be true, is the assertion that *Vue sur l’ossuaire* is divided into two symmetrical parts whose subsections correspond to each other and contain exactly the same number of words, 111, 777, and 333.... In one way, these numerical decorations appear to pay homage to the Oulipo, or perhaps to constitute a mild joke at its expense. But they do not make Volodine an Oulipian writer.⁷ It is the poetical, magical and talismanic associations of these numbers, not their formal generating power, that give them their place in the post-exotic world of Volodine.

What is the original language of post-exotic literature? All and none. It exists in an ideal space of egalitarian internationalism where

we can safely assume that the language barrier is the least of the hurdles to the free circulation of feelings, ideas and texts. It exists in our world, to be sure, only in the French translations that Volodine provides, but we have to understand that the speakers, characters, and narrators of all his works are only being represented as expressing themselves in French. “Leur langue n’est pas une langue nationale, mais la langue trans-nationale des conteurs d’histoires, des exclus, des prisonniers, des fous et des morts”(“Écrire en français” 4) ‘their language is not a national language, but the transnational tongue of story-tellers, rejects, prisoners, madmen and the dead.’ Of course, all translations are fictions at a primary or secondary level: we accept as a practical convenience but we do not really believe that Rastignac and Vautrin conversed in English, just as we know that Plato did not say anything like what we conventionally ascribe to him. Volodine imports into writing in French that particular quality of translated literature that makes it more literary (that is to say, in this context, more unreal) than original work.

The language into which Volodine translates is something about which he holds still quite unorthodox views. French is for him not only the language of Racine and Voltaire. Because translation exists, and has existed for a very long time, French is also the language of Pushkin, Shalamov, Li Bai and Marquez. Far from being the privileged vector of national identity, history and culture, French is “une langue qui porte des cultures, des philosophies et des préoccupations qui n’ont rien à voir avec les habitudes de la société française et de l’univers francophone” (n. pag.) ‘a language that transmits cultures, philosophies and concerns that have nothing to do with the habits of French society or the Francophone world.’ It is not that French is by its nature or destiny an international language: on the contrary, only the practice of translation into French makes the language a tool of internationalism in the modern world. Consequently, Volodine’s insistence that what he writes is a radically foreign literature translated into French is a way of asserting the authenticity of his project, not an undermining of the reality of his achievement. In this way, the Volodinian enterprise turns many current academic shibboleths—hybridity, creolization, post-colonialism and *littérature-monde*—upside down. Thanks to a long history of translation from exotic languages, French has become able

to channel post-exotic texts and to carry the trace of an imaginary, but infinitely haunting literature that is, as we have already quoted Volodine saying, not relatively, but absolutely foreign to it.

The post-exotic world is not one that any of us would rationally wish to enter for real. Structured, secret, oppressive, miserable and contradictory, hovering in a no-man's land where even death is not a final release from suffering, deceptive, baroque, and hostile to the reader, the alternative universe of Antoine Volodine nonetheless echoes with too many half-fitting allusions to lived experience in the twentieth century to be dismissed as fantasy-land. It is not obvious that its convoluted, self-confirming and autonomous forms belong to contemporary French literature as it is commonly understood. But they most certainly belong to literature.

Notes

1 For a full list of the works of Antoine Volodine see Ruffin, *Volodine post-exotique* (323-28).

2 All translations are my own. The Balzacian hinterland of Volodine's project is mentioned explicitly by Ruffin (94) but is also implicit throughout his remarkable work.

3 On the Gary/Ajar adventure, see (among many other sources) David Bellos, "Ce que Momo veut dire" and "Petite Histoire de l'incorrection à l'usage des Ajaristes."

4 See Hippolyte (143-87) for a sensitive and well-informed reading of the fuzzy referentiality of Volodine's historical and literary allusions.

5 In what is presumably a genuine but also humorous aside, Volodine has told of his encounter with Maurice Blanchot. As a boy he took piano lessons with Blanchot's sister. One day, when he was waiting for his lesson in the kitchen, a tall man came in and looked for the sugar, and then went out. "Our relations were interrupted and have not been renewed since" (Interview 16).

6 Ruffin, whose authority is hard to challenge, lists this as a genuine translation. But if it is a work by Volodine, as I suspect, then it is the only one for which a well-established publisher has agreed to take the fiction of post-exoticism to the extent of printing fake copyright attributions.

7 The misapprehension was fostered by the inclusion of a short story by Volodine, "Un étrange soupir de John Untermensch," in an issue of *Formules*, a review not directly connected to the Oulipo but nonetheless devoted to the "literature of constraint."

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