An -Ism of One's Own: On Volodine's *Writers*

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Reviewed:

Writers by Antoine Volodine. Translated by Katrina Rogers. Dalkey Archive Press, 2014. 110 pp. $11.60

> *Use of a pseudonym unites a taste for masks and mirrors, for indirect exhibitionism, and for controlled histrionics with delight in invention, in borrowing, in verbal transformation, in onomastic fetishism.* […]
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> *The pseudonym habit is very much like the drug habit, quickly leading to increased use, abuse, even overdose.*
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> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*[1]

However much the Formalists and New Critics insisted on maintaining a separation between the work of literary interpretation and the life circumstances of authors, readers and reviewers generally expect a modicum of information about the author to come along with a book. Where such information is counterfactual, as in the case of pseudonymity or heteronymity, the situation is a little different, but fundamentally the same. The impulse towards biographical candor is not wholly dodged, as one might first think, but rather reinforced through a teasing gesture that only appears to oppose it. Pseudonymity calls attention to authorship and identity in ways that more conventional forms of

attribution do not, and it generally has the effect of intensifying the curiosity and mystique which sometimes surrounds literary authorship.

In other words, textual signification is never only intrinsic to the text, but on the contrary always also framed by what information is known about its composition and provenance. A famous Borges story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," pivots on this interplay between authorship/attribution and signification. The central character, a writer called Pierre Menard, develops an ambition to "produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes." When the narrator of the story compares Menard's fragments with the corresponding passages from Cervantes, he is awestruck by the differences of style that arise from attributing the text to either Cervantes or Menard. Where Cervantes' style radiates "naturalness," Menard's style is "archaic," "affected," and the narrator ultimately deems Menard's fragments "infinitely richer" than those of Cervantes on the basis of their radical anachronism. The point, for my purpose at least, is that a text's attribution encodes its meaning. Attribution matters in a big way.

This is a revelation so commonsensical, so mundane that it rarely merits discussion. But an author who signs his texts exclusively with pseudonyms (four, to be precise, although even that is a little unsure) and who withholds his real name creates a situation that needs an introduction. As contemporary literature's premier pseudonymist, Antoine Volodine creates a conundrum whereby no one can refer to him independently of his inventions. (This situation is perhaps the polar opposite of the autobiographical memoir genre, where there is an illusion of seamlessness between author, character, and narrator.) Whereas readers can choose to speak of either Isidore Ducasse or of the Comte de Lautréamont, or to speak of Samuel Clemens or Mark Twain, for now readers can make no such distinction with regards to Volodine. (That is, unless they

wish to parse the technical difference between "Volodine" and "the writer known pseudonymously as Volodine, Draeger, Kronauer, Bassmann.")

With the pseudonym, we are already well into the domain of the paratext —that dimension of the book that precedes, qualifies, and otherwise mediates our reading and interpretation of the text at hand. It would not be entirely wrong to say that the defining feature of Volodine's work is the systematic disturbance of paratextual conventions, those "fringe[s] of the printed text which in reality [control] one's whole reading of the text."[2] Titles, authorial attribution, footnotes, epigraphs, prefaces, afterwords, and the like—all are variously deployed in Volodine's work in deceptive, provocative, paradoxical, and interesting ways. His latest book to be published in English translation, *Writers* (trans. Katina Rogers, Dalkey Archive; original publication: *Écrivains*, Éditions du Seuil, 2010) is no exception. But as this book reflects the idiosyncrasies of its prolific author, before reviewing it I would like to draw on my knowledge of Volodine to provide something of an overview of the particular tendencies, problems, and oddities that are specifically characteristic of his work.

Let's start again by talking about paratexts. An excellent illustration of this mania, and probably one of Volodine's better books, is *Le Post-Exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze* (Gallimard, 1998). The title signals a ruse, a false affiliation with a genre to which the book doesn't actually belong, the pedagogic manual. The book is nevertheless divided up into numbered chapters called "lessons," through which its characters, who are political prisoners incarcerated in a penitentiary, speak and offer pedantic descriptions of the *sui generis* literary forms (*shaggâs*, *romånces*, *entrevoûtes*, etc.) which they compose and secretly circulate amongst themselves *samizdat*-style. The book's inside title page lists eight different persons as authors, and the book is only brought to its conclusion by a fifteen-page bibliography ("lesson ten") consisting of a bibliography of 343

works "by the same author in the same collection." Most titles are imaginary and unpublished (like *Ranting at Arthropods* (*Harangue devant les arthropodes*), for example), but interspersed in chronological order throughout are Volodine's own published works up to the year of publication—*Fabulous Hells* (*Des Enfers fabuleux*, 1988), for instance. Titles of stories that Volodine would not publish until a dozen years later, such as "Tomorrow Will Have Been a Beautiful Sunday"—the final story in *Writers*—also appear here. The universe of Volodine's books is thus strongly oriented around paratextual conventions, and is highly reflexive, creating links between narrators, literary works (sometimes published, sometimes imagined), and heteronyms. All these qualities indicate the metafictional character of Volodine's work.

The sum totality of Volodine's fictions fall into a category given the name of "post-exoticism." The term was first introduced in relation to Volodine's fifth book, *Lisbonne, dernière marge* (1990) somewhat extemporaneously. By Volodine's own account, it was intended to be "provocative, to affirm a difference of a kind, a voluntary distinction, a refusal to be confused with seasonal literary production. It was unclear and acquired value only gradually over time, as the books illustrated it, fleshed out its principles and allowed its nuances to take shape."[3] In this candid remark—"to affirm a difference of a kind, a voluntary distinction, a refusal to be confused with seasonal literary production"—we can perceive the logic of marketing, and see to what extent "post-exoticism" constitutes, at its origin, what marketers call a "brand"—an easy-to-recognize emblem, a stamp of singular identity. The tenets of post-exoticism[4] may state the core concerns of Volodine's fiction, but it's useful to remember also how fundamentally the significance of post-exoticism resides in the usefulness of having a particular *-ism* associated with one's work. The significance of post-

exoticism remains, first and foremost, to distinguish it from the morass of contemporary literary production.

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At just over a hundred pages, *Writers* (2010) is a thin volume comprising seven stories that are essentially vignettes, brief literary-biographical sketches designating seven writerly personae. The use of "biography" as a literary pretext can be traced back to Volodine's debut novel, *Biographie comparée de Jorian Murgrave* (Denoël, 1985). As is typical of the post-exotic writers, the characters in *Writers* are political dissidents suffering *in extremis*, often on the verge of death.

The first story in the collection, "Mathias Olbane," establishes this grim scenario with little complication or embellishment. A writer suffering from an obscure disease that lends him a gruesome appearance, who has passed half his life in penitentiary for the crime of "assassinat[ing] assassins"—a writer with two published but entirely commercially unsuccessful books to his name—takes up his pistol nightly and presses it to his head as he counts toward a number signifying "the date of his paternal grandfather's death at Buchenwald." His most remarkable work as an author was conceived of during his years in captivity, and it remains unpublished. It's a colossal list of approximately one hundred thousand imaginary terms designating plants, places, exterminated persons, mushrooms, and rivers. The story concludes with Olbane's decision to defer suicide for yet one more night. That's pretty much the whole story: a dark, brooding mood piece that recalls the tales of Borges with its literary-biographical orientation and a synopsis of a vast conceptual literary undertaking. It lacks, however, the precise qualities for which Borges's work is so meaningful and so universally admired. There is no branching complexity here,

none of the compounding metaphysical ramifications for which we read (and re-read) Borges's stories.

The strongest story in the collection is without a doubt "The Strategy of Silence in the Works of Bogdan Tarassiev." It takes the form of a short capsule biography of Tarassiev, who toils away in illness and obscurity for much of his lifetime, only to attain posthumous infamy. Late in his career, thanks to a successful television appearance, he's "discovered" by the public and invited to a gala for a "quasi-governmental" humanitarian organization:

> *Tarassiev's universe, whether in his fiction or in his real life, has never intersected with the sphere of luxury, has never approached the social strata that swarm with the smiling faces of the happy people of the world, those who govern the planet and who, supposedly in passing, imagine that their governance is good and generous. . . . His heroes are often killers, men and women who preach pitiless elimination of "those responsible for misfortune," but, aside from a few murder scenes that are more fantasy than realism, the narratives don't explore the concrete spaces where the powerful prevail.*

At the gala this changes once and for all, as he assassinates three state officials with a revolver, then shoots himself. A brief note in his jacket imploring others to do "like he has done" is widely reported in the media, and considered his final work, "Opus 25."

If this story succeeds, as I believe it does, it's because it reads convincingly as an article written in the style of a literary-biographical encyclopedia, with a suitable tone and structure. Despite this formal conceit, it achieves a high level of narrative drama through Tarrasiev's acute class consciousness, which provides the motive for the violent climax. It's this unexpected eruption that makes the

story aesthetically satisfying, more so than the rest of the stories in *Writers*, where the stakes are lower, the outcomes more predictable.

In general, Volodine's special talents seem less suited to traditional story development or drama, and more suited to conjuring sinister atmospheres of otherworldly stasis. (Sometimes these are "post-apocalyptic," other times they involve psychic migration through an afterlife state.) "Speech to the Nomads and the Dead" and "The Theory of the Image According to Maria Three-Thirteen" are prime examples of this aspect of Volodine's work, as they involve writers—one in prison, the other in metaphysical limbo—who recite post-exotic principles in bizarre locales. In both stories there's an element of mysticism or trance-state, which provides a touch of interest, but the stories ultimately go nowhere. The final story, "Tomorrow Will Have Been a Lovely Sunday," suffers for similar reasons. In it, a Moscow writer discovers that the moment of his birth coincided with a nearby massacre in an adjacent forest, a discovery which permits him to become a conduit for the names and stories of the victims, which he recites to an audience of figurines he assembles from "rags" and "bits of iron or bits of wood." The extreme pathos of genocide is presumably the *raison-d'être* of this story, but due to a lack of narrative development and/or conflict it fails to be compelling. The slight appeal to these weaker stories is their element of novelty (post-exoticism, and bizarreness), and their short length, which makes them rapidly consumable.

The major disappointment of *Writers* is thus that its tales pale so dourly in comparison to the elaborate metafictional gimmicks and paratextual pyrotechnics that prop up Volodine's books. In numerous passages, *Writers* uses metafictional, reflexive commentary in ways that suggest paradox and that are slightly amusing, but which fall short of true philosophical or metaphysical depth.

> *I think that what we have here . . . is a literary procedure intended to problematize the limits of creativity in fictional works, but which also indicates an active disdain for writing itself, a sort of self-mutilation intended to ridicule and degrade the notion of the book, the notion of the author, and the false values that are associated with them; we must take it as a demonstration of hostility in which are mixed equal parts disgust with writing and hatred of the official publishing world.*

This is Tarassiev commenting on one of his books, but we might also read it as Volodine commenting on (and perhaps against) his own literary production. Despite the palpable irony, this auto-commentary risks devaluing the reader's assumption of the writer's goodwill, because it insinuates that the book we are reading is degraded, and even characterizes the writer's relation to his material as tainted by an attitude of "disgust," "hatred." Beckett visited this territory, but far more successfully than in the above citation. Whether we keep in mind the separateness of author and character (Volodine / Tarassiev); or whether we read this passage naively, as though it simply meant what it implies about Volodine's project: either way, this auto-commentary reflects poorly on the seriousness with which Volodine's books are crafted.

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In Volodine's defense, it should be noted that the present translation fails to capture some of the lexical weirdness that distinguishes his work.

One signature mark of Volodine's prose is its penchant for the occasional odd word that lies beyond the reader's immediate recognition. This is an important part of of Volodine's program, given by him as a tenet of post-exoticism: "to write foreign literature in French."[5] Sometimes the unusual words are archaic or simply obscure, and other times they play on certain aural and/or

etymological associations. The occasional use of difficult or abstruse diction produces an effect not unlike the strangeness of coming into contact with loan words from another language, a quality that might well be seen as stemming from Volodine's work with Russian-language texts.[6] The first sentence of *Écrivains*, might serve as a perfect example:

> *Toutes les nuits, à l'heure la plus pénible, l'écrivain Mathias Olbane quittait le lit où il avait saumâtrement somnolé depuis le soir, assaili de rêves et de désespoir, et, sans allumer, il allait s'asseoir devant le miroir de la chambre.*

There's an odd word here that very few French readers will be able to read without some difficulty: *saumâtrement*. The word is rarely used in French, and nor is the adjectival form (*saumâtre*), which serves as the basis for the neologism. It means something to the effect of either *brackish* or *briny* (as the etymological link to seawater attests), or *bitter*, *disagreeable*, *nasty*. No one but Volodine would coin an adverb from this adjective, and, in an otherwise nondescript sentence, it serves as his calling card. In Katina Rogers's translation, the crystalline singularity of that sentence, which hung on that one weird word, is lost, when it becomes just *fitfully*.

> *Every night at the bitterest hour, writer Mathias Olbane would get out of bed, where he had dozed fitfully since nightfall, assaulted by dreams and by hopelessness; without turning on the lights, he would go and sit in front of the bedroom mirror.*

To state a generality, then, a challenge faced by Volodine's translators is matching his unusual and difficult diction with adequate substitutes in the language of translation. As literal translations, *brackishly* or *brinishly* might work here, or they might not; but *fitfully* does not. For the feel and sound of

Volodine's prose to come through in translation, there would have to be some corresponding lexical strangeness—not necessarily in the same places, but present *in roughly the same proportions*. The present translation by Katina Rogers plays it safe, rendering *Writers* intelligible, but taking few liberties to match the unstable and unusual word choices that make up part of Volodine's practice.

Numerous other instances illustrate how the flamboyance or directness of Volodine's diction gets watered down in English. Where Volodine writes that:

> *Par expérience, je peux dire que cette interrogation suscite une montée du taux d'adrénaline dans le sang, quand on a encore du sang […]*

The translation by Rogers reads:

> *I can say from experience that this interrogation elicits an increase in the amount of adrenaline in the blood, when one still has blood […]*

The active verb, *suscite*, becomes *elicits*. This is a particularly weak choice, given that it most often connotes civilized discourse and interaction. Consequently, the body's autonomous adrenaline response is rendered a little less fierce, less immediate and visceral. (*Causes*, *incites*, or *provokes* would be far more suitable for the terrifying experience of a formal interrogation.) These examples, in my opinion, attest to some of the particular and general problems of translation, and show how fraught the choice of a single word can be.

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Which is not to say that I think a better translation could have made *Writers* worthwhile. Of the several books by Volodine that I have read, *Writers* is by a wide margin the least captivating and the most insubstantial. It seems to serve primarily as another occasion to pontificate on the post-exotic principles set out

long ago. In this respect, I believe it occupies a similar position relative to its author's career as Burroughs's *The Red Night Trilogy*. These late-term works reflect deeply conceptual and even programmatic concerns developed decades earlier, but the story, plot, and language come across as rehashings of the works that made their names recognizable.

What's most irksome, though, is the way that the ideological content of post-exoticism—in particular its political aspects, such as the recurrent scenario of interrogation, imprisonment, and persecution—are so well suited to the current historical moment, but remain underdeveloped and sequestered from the wide world. Despite the overwhelmingly intertextual quality of Volodine's fictive universe, the intertexts and geographies refuse affiliation with both the unacknowledged precursor texts of post-exoticism (think, for instance, of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940), Danilo Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), or Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits* (1966)) and with the culture of interrogation and torture in place at Guantanomo Bay and at the numerous extraterritorial "black sites" situated around the globe. Volodine's *Writers* depicts the future (often a distant one) or the past, suggesting "the long catalogue of the murdered and missing which makes up the record of twentieth-century Russian literary achievement,"[7] but, through its metafictional cues, suggests sequestration from, rather than affiliation with the present.

Writers is a book therefore for the completists. While it affords the semblance of engaging with very weighty, existential subjects—the struggle of the individual against a totalitarian regime, in particular—it shies away from plumbing their depths, employing them less for drama than for setting and allure. Readers enticed by *Writers* would be well advised to search out Volodine's previously published books in English translation, such as *Minor Angels* (trans. Jordan Stump, University of Nebraska, 2004) or *Naming the*

Jungle (trans. Linda Coverdale, New Press, 1995), if they wish to have a better idea of Volodine's powers. Or, better yet, wait for the forthcoming publication of *Post-Exoticism in Ten Lessons, Lesson Eleven*, coming from Open Letter next year.

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[1] Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. J.E. Lewin. Cambridge UP, 1997. Pp. 52-54.

[2] Ibid, p. 2. The quoted phrase, "fringe[s] of the printed text which in reality [control] one's whole reading of the text" is in fact from Philippe Lejeune's *Le Pacte autobiographique*, quoted by Genette.

[3] Volodine gives this account of the term's genesis in the interview "La littérature du murmure: entretien avec Antoine Volodine." In *Devenirs du roman*. Paris: Inculte, 2007. P. 262. The translation to English is my own.

[4] In "A la frange du réel," included in *Défense et illustration du post-exotisme en vingt lecons* (vlb, 2008), Volodine offers the following tenets of post-exoticism:

- a literature of elsewhere, arriving from, departing from elsewhere;
- an internationalist, cosmopolitan literature whose memory is rooted in 20th-century tragedies, wars, revolutions, genocides, defeats;
- a foreign literature written in French;
- a literature where the dream-like and the political are seamlessly joined
- trashcan literature, opposed to 'official' literature(s)
- an imprisoned, ruminatory literature, of pyschopathology and failure
- a novelistic structure closely tied to shamanism, especially a Bolshevik variant of shamanism.

(The translation to English is my own.)

[5] See the tenets of post-exoticism listed above, as well as the title of the following article by Volodine: "Écrire en français une littérature étrangère." *Chaoïd*, n°6, automne-hiver 2002.

[6] Volodine has translated eight books from Russian into French.

[7] The phrase, which is George Steiner's, appears in "Under Eastern Eyes," a discussion of Alexander Solzhenitsyn that is included in *George Steiner at the New Yorker* (New Directions, 2009. P. 187).