

Let's Take That from the Beginning Again...

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Let's Take that From the Beginning Again...

Antoine Volodine

interviewed by Jean-Didier Wagneur

Jean-Didier Wagneur: A recurring scene in your novels is that of the interrogation. An individual is forced to speak, to admit, to justify himself. Our conversation will be more peaceful, I hope, but it places us in an identical situation.

Antoine Volodine: In my early novels, I was referring exclusively to police situations. The exchange took place in prisons, in cellars, in torture chambers. Nevertheless, the form of the responses always had a relationship to literature: under the guise of a response, the interrogated person recounted stories, or, more accurately, imagined them. Sometimes, too, as in *Rituel du mépris*, he wrote them down, on whatever was available—straw, mildewed paper—in the darkness of a cage. Quickly, though, starting with *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, the interrogation was carried out on two fronts: that of information and that of literature. For example, in *Vue sur l'ossuaire*, the truth that the inquisitors seek with such brutality is inexplicably included in a collection of poetic prose. This slim volume becomes the focus of all the questions. Despite their obsession with piercing its secret, the interrogators do not see the evidence: there is no great mystery; the book seals an amorous alliance that is beyond the reach of the ugliness of politics and war. It's true that the frequency of interrogations in my books has been reinforced since I have been invited by researchers and journalists to speak about my texts, to avow my intentions, and to justify myself concerning the literary means that I use. At the risk of appearing disagreeable, I affirm that only my texts contain the answers to the questions you'd like to ask me. The interview is an exercise that I go along with because I am obliged to, but I don't sincerely believe that it is part of the communication between my readers and myself, or, rather, between the voices of my narrators and the friendship of my readers.

JDW: Your characters have the habit of using cunning, inventing fictions for the police. What assurance do we have that you will tell the truth...

AV: I have always been very close to my characters, as I've often said. Sometimes, to use the words of Lutz Bassmann, I believe, there is not even the thickness of a sheet of paper between them and me. Thus we have the same conception of truth. I suppose that from your point of view, you have the same conception of truth as those who beat them up. Or am I mistaken?

JDW: What does a writer today have to say—or rather, what, as a writer, is he competent to say?

AV: That will become apparent later. At first glance, I think that a writer's expertise is limited to writing his books. The rest, especially as a voice in the city or in society, does not come from his competence as a writer, but simply from his talent—more or less real—as a worldly chatterbox or agitator. Just because a person knows how to create a novelistic text does not mean that he is suddenly more insightful than others about political and ethical problems. More often, it is the opposite. When a writer talks about something other than his books, it's better to treat him as though he were an official politician, and thus not to believe for a moment in the sincerity of his discourse.

JDW: The literary interview, which dates from the nineteenth century, usually begins with some biographical references. The writer has had a past, family origins, an education. But in your case, we know very little—as little as we do about the narrators of your novels. Is this by design, in order to blend into the world of your characters?

AV: Yes, if you will. As you say, the world of my characters is profoundly interesting to me. My non-literary, daily life may be interesting to me—in fact I am the one who is the most interested in it, but in my view it has nothing to do with the general public. I have no desire to exhibit my individual self, and I am annoyed by this recurring journalistic curiosity, at the beginning of every interview, about my autobiography. My characters are often madmen, dead men, dreamers, shamans, the disenfranchised, the underdogs. Only their present counts in the narration, as well as their obscure past. Some of them are writers—humiliated and assassinated writers. I would be more than ashamed if I were to separate myself from them by

complacently recounting my own life, supplying futile details on my small personal destiny, which is more comfortable and less tragic than theirs.

JDW: Nevertheless, we often perceive (notably in *Rituel du mépris*, which gravitates around the childhood of a narrator) something beyond the fiction, something arising out of personal revelation.

AV: Autobiography plays a central role in most of my books, but that does not mean that my life is exposed in the course of the narration. Who is speaking? Who is recounting his life? Who is manipulating novelistic material in order to reconstruct his existence? Certainly not the person sitting across from you today. When I say that I feel extremely close to my characters, that functions in both directions, obviously. They are linked to me by a thousand ties—physical, psychological, psychoanalytical—and by common experiences. I would be incapable of writing a text that was not based in large part on autobiographical material. This said, we must refine our notion of autobiographical material. I extend it to dream-like experiences. My approach to the world is somewhat shamanic—dreams and reality are not neatly distinct spheres, or, rather, there is no hierarchy between them based on quality or verisimilitude. Further, in this magical system, “others” and “self” are not necessarily different entities. This is far from the western, cartesian or proustian biographical tradition.

JDW: Is the story of self an inaccessible secret that only exists through illusory perceptions and fragments of images and of memory?

AV: Fragments of images and of memory retained by the filter of the fiction, and, I would add, belonging to multiple individuals. It is not inaccessible, in my view. It is intimate and not secret, admittedly with shadowy areas, but which introspection or psychoanalysis easily render visible. What seems certain to me is that it cannot be expressed in words. In fact, it is muddled, weighted down with so much information that one must choose a miniscule part in order represent it or express it. To return to the beginning of this interview, this miniscule part is the object of a confrontation between an intimate interrogator and interrogatee. He or she who demands explanations and he or she who replies do not have the same idea of the choices one must make in order to explain one’s life and therefore to express it.

JDW: The biography of a character, Jorian Murgrave, is the subject of your first novel. It is not an accidental choice.

AV: In that novel, Jorian Murgrave never speaks. Marginalized characters—madmen and hallucinators—do it for him. They are organized in a kind of clandestine, international network that aspires to install Jorian Murgrave in their own dream-world, so that from there he can emerge into the outside world. They are the ones who recount the story of Jorian Murgrave—his childhood, his arrival on the scene, his confrontations with the police. The resulting biography is by nature chaotic. And since it is a first novel, the chaos is still greater. In spite of everything, I think that this is a good example of the way I deal with autobiographical discourse: dreamed, falsified, deformed and manipulated by narrators other than the “self.”

JDW: When did you begin writing?

AV: My first story was written before I knew all the letters of the alphabet, and certainly didn't know how to spell. The text dates from 1955. It is written in lead pencil on three notebook covers. Curiously, it had a title, which was “Commencer,” spelled “Comancer.” After that, I had to write, in order to continue. Today I believe that I write in order to end. I must say that I am fairly intrigued by this primal work, for it contains the seeds of themes that traverse several of my published books: travel, contacts among intelligent, non-human species, mystery and fear—traces from which one reconstitutes an anecdote or even history in general. 1955—that's already a long time ago. That was also the year that I met Maurice Blanchot for the first and last time.

JDW: Maurice Blanchot?

AV: Yes. I was taking piano lessons at the home of his sister, Marguerite Blanchot. Since my brother and I were impossible, this lovely lady had separated us. I was sitting in the kitchen, awaiting my turn with the Pink Method. For me it was a strange place, and it was disquieting to be parked there, next to the cold stove, facing the enamel sink, surrounded by the smells of an old house. I had been motionless for ten minutes when someone entered—a tall, intimidating man. He was looking for something among the cans aligned on a shelf. He was muttering. He was unaware of my presence, at first.

JDW: And then?

AV: Then, we spoke a bit. He asked me if I knew where “she” kept the sugar. I think he was speaking of his sister.

JDW: And did the dialogue between you amplify?

AV: No. I felt awkward. I knew nothing about the sugar. I stammered a hasty reply. Maurice Blanchot left. He seemed disappointed. Our relations were interrupted, and have not been renewed since.

JDW: Your earliest texts appeared in *Les Cahiers du Schibboleth*. Did you have literary contacts—either individual or group? You once told me that you used to frequent a group.

AV: Let me set the record straight. *Les Cahiers du Schibboleth* solicited some small poetic prose pieces from me beginning in 1987. My first text is indeed *Biographie comparée de Jorian Murgrave*, which appeared in 1985. I had no literary contacts at the time. Since I published my first novels in a science fiction collection, I was in contact with the world of science fiction authors of the 1980s. It’s a milieu of its own—its authors are in general a lot less pretentious than elsewhere. For a few months I supported the efforts of an ephemeral group called “Limites.” We produced a collective anthology of novellas, which was very badly received by critics specializing in SF.

JDW: On the cover of *Jorian Murgrave*, you state that you want to make writing into a martial art. How are we to understand this?

AV: I believe that on the cover the complete sentence is: “[I] wish to practice literature like a martial art, by engaging completely in each book, as though it were to be the last one before a peaceful death.” In the philosophy of Japanese martial arts, which I practiced with a certain intensity at the time (in particular the disciplines linked to handling the saber), the battle against the adversary is accompanied by a battle against oneself, in order to achieve a kind of absolute sincerity of the body and the mind. The end of the battle, be it sanctioned by a victory or a defeat, can be peaceful if this sincerity has been attained.

I also find numerous points in common between the traditional martial arts and writing: repetition of the gesture, the quest for harmony between self and the external world, the will to preserve one’s integrity, the search for effectiveness, the refusal of appearances, etc.

JDW: Elisabeth Gille, the editor at Denoël who read your [*Jorian Murgrave*] manuscript, told you at the time that “It will be hard to launch it into general literature.” She added, “On the other hand, no problem for [the series] ‘Présence du Futur.’ You have nothing against Science Fiction?” You modified your text a bit. What was the first version of *Jorian Murgrave* like?

AV: That’s a long time ago. I have a poor memory for my texts—the manuscript was destroyed—I don’t preserve that kind of archive. I think that the underside of the police tracking down Jorian Murgrave (its stages, its protagonists) appeared less clearly than in the published version. It must have had biographical texts: childhood, adolescence, etc., up to his death, and fewer “linking” texts. The “extra-terrestrial” elements were not made evident to explain the alien character of Jorian Murgrave—his dreams and his actions. Jorian Murgrave was more a kind of surrealist, mythical “Grand Transparent,” arising from the depths of the human, than an invader from some unknown planet. Everything was placed like a bizarre little novelistic accretion, unrelated to science fiction. It must have been pretty tough to read. The additions enabled the book to fit easily into the collection “Présence du Futur,” but they also surely helped the reader to enter the fiction, to visit the images.

JDW: Promoted as a science fiction writer in spite of yourself, you pursue the writing of your Unidentified Volodinian Objects, as Jacques Chambon has called them. How have you managed this fairly schizophrenic situation? You were living out in reality the situation of numerous characters in your work: to write for a reader other than the bookstore reader...to encode, to mask...

AV: Before publishing, I started by writing books for myself, books with a single reader. I did not circulate them; it was a matter of creating objects, and not of obtaining social recognition through them—not even at an elementary level, limited to the narrow circle of my friends. After publication, I wrote for readers whom I imagine, in principle, as friends or accomplices, for readers who are “sympathetic” (this is the term used by the German police and the press to characterize those likely to appreciate the rhetoric and actions of the Rote Armee Fraktion in the early 1970s. My narrators always address themselves, over the heads of the police who force them to speak, to listeners who are friends and accomplices, real or imaginary. So the question is not whether or not to respect the rules of the official literary

game, or to belong to this or that branch of literature, or to know if you're writing prose destined to be commercialized in bookstores, and under what label, with what editorial endorsements. In this sense, the writing of my books is more obstinate than schizophrenic: even when it is aware of a hostile readership, it is unconcerned. It forges ahead, regardless of its reception and of the quality of its audience. Just as the fictions organized by my narrators forge ahead. Once the text is finished, I force myself to take steps so that it exists in the form of a book, in the best possible conditions, in order to reach its friendly readers. Among these, of course, are bookstore readers.

JDW: With *Biographie comparée de Jorian Murgrave*, a whole universe seems already assumed: pseudonyms, animal metamorphoses, apocalyptic literature. At that time did you already have a precise, wide-ranging aesthetic project?

AV: *Jorian Murgrave* is my first published novel. But it was preceded by several unpublished works with fairly elaborate texts—in particular, an *Anthologie de la Renaissance* that presents itself as a series of excerpts from an alien literature, analyzed by critics who are themselves far removed from any identifiable human civilization. It was in constituting this *Anthologie* that I elaborated several forms that are particular to post-exoticism, in particular *les Shaggås*. Also with this *Anthologie* was born the habit of considering that a book is composed of polyphonic texts, turning around a more general description of a destroyed universe, a black post-war universe, following all the defeats—a universe seeking its own origin and its lost cultures and memory. Some of the texts were reprised in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, but what can be seen in this project, dating from the late 1970s, is a kind of prototype for the novelistic totality to come. Curiously, I made no effort to systematically put it into prose in my early books. I had more or less repressed it. I prefer to write instinctively, without submitting to a theory or a system. *Lisbonne, dernière marge* reutilized the principle of the *Anthologie*, but placed it in a fiction that was far different from what I had envisioned ten years earlier. It seemed to me that I was exhausting the subject, the techniques, and that research, in which literary pursuit had become police pursuit and a political fiction. It was later, after *Alto solo*, that I admitted that I had blindly, instinctively written volumes that could themselves take a place in a vast *Anthologie*. It was then that an aesthetic and novelistic project became more clearly affirmed within me, which I called post-exoticism.

JDW: Your linguistic education points you toward Russia. Where does your fascination with this culture come from? You have read widely among authors who are little known in France or the United States. What is your universe, as a reader?

AV: I am distancing myself more and more from any national or nationalist affirmation. If, a few years ago, I could still be tempted to speak about the Russian part of my origins, I no longer am. I can no longer stand the fundamentally racist ideology that hides behind questions about ethnic origin. I can no longer stand the calculations thereby assumed, as in every racist culture: that person there: one-fourth Jewish blood, one-fourth Russian blood, one eighth Mongolian blood, one-eighth pure blood, one eighth dirty blood. You're on the slope that leads to ethnic cleansings and to ghettos. Today, as religious and ethnic wars spread, I find myself profoundly shocked both by questions about ethnic origin and by the answers, where often this ethnic origin is brandished like a passport. In my opinion, loudly to claim your ethnic particularity, no matter what it is, is more like brandishing a passport to death, than an act of intelligence. Therefore, like my narrators and my characters, I refuse an individual characterization based on blood and ancestors. I find it's already quite sufficient to be able to affirm that one belongs to the human race. Since at heart I am not completely sure of that, I even prefer now and then to locate myself with my characters in the category of *Untermenschen* [sub-humans]. At least they don't have to worry about passports; no one grants them any.

But let's return to the domain of culture. Allow me to correct your question. I am impregnated with Russian culture, but the impregnation does not necessarily mask a fascination. And, for a long time now my contact with other cultures has profoundly modified my artistic comprehension of the world. Let's say that in the course of my university studies I read a lot of Russian and Soviet classics, after having been interested in music, cinema, and languages. Over the course of 20 years, while I was passionately interested in other literatures (including French), I traveled through the interior of Russian and Soviet works. But since then I have greatly enlarged my field of interest. I was never truly fascinated by Russia, but by Soviet Russia, the Soviet Russian culture, with its Russian and Ukrainian folkloric dimension, its epic and populist artistic resonances submerging all cultural activity, and of course, by its political dimension—in its October 17 variation—and wartime communism. I never had the least sympathy for Stalinism, but even later, even under Breznev or Andropov, there were crumbs

that recalled that heroic period. I appreciated those crumbs. They were certainly incorporated into my books. No doubt we'll talk more about this later.

I was talking about your question on cultural fascination. If you want to talk about fascination, we must mention a culture that dazzled me and that will continue to fascinate me at least to my dying day, and whose richness and diversity are beyond compare with Russian culture: the ocean of China, Chinese civilization from its origins to the present. Again, no doubt later we'll talk more about this world of infinite richness. But if not, let me proclaim here my bedazzlement by it.

JDW: The Paris Commune, the year 1917, the Chinese revolution, Latin American guerilla warfare, Cuba, the Portuguese "Carnation" Revolution, Vietnam and Cambodia, the Rote Armee Fraktion, are all indirect referents of your novels' world. Are you drawn to epic ruins?

AV: Yes, I'm drawn to epics, to revolutionary epics, and also to ruins in general. But I am even more drawn to that extraordinary and apparently inevitable toppling of revolution into caricature or betrayal. In human terms, it's a tragic domain, but from a novelistic point of view it's fascinating, since you cannot know in advance what the ruins will look like. Any surprise is possible, including the most appalling. I adore this idea of an epic that derails towards the unknown, unpublished forms of a nightmare. My characters are situated at various moments of this process. They carry within them two certitudes: one the one hand, the liberation of mankind by revolution is the only activity that justifies their time on this earth; on the other hand, the revolution is called to degenerate and to crush them. This is why they are so much at ease in the universe of camps and prisons, where the two certitudes touch their point of harmony.

JDW: "Smothering generosities" and "vertiginous agony of utopian and fraternal projects" are expressions that you use to describe reality. Do you hate the real as Murgrave does? *Des enfers fabuleux* paints the picture of a rebellious youth. What part has politics had in your life?

AV: You're returning to biographical questions that I will only address from the point of view of my characters, and not from a strictly autobiographical point of view. Hatred for earthly reality is fundamental in Jorian Murgrave, and it develops in the book with a concrete project for survival elsewhere

than in the real: inside the dreams of some human “hosts”—friends or enemies—some of whom will become the “biographers of Jorian Murgrave.” We’re talking about an aggressive, surrealist “possession,” about an alienation in which the purely political aspects are pushed into the background. The subsequent books (*Un navire de nulle part*, *Rituel du mépris*, *Des enfers fabuleux*) shifted this refusal of reality toward a more political world, ending up with *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, where the refusal of the real superimposes itself on the refusal of the capitalist world without any ambiguity. I might add that the refusal of the real is not only manifested in the activities of the characters; it is also seen in the type of fiction organized by the narrators and meta-narrators, who are placed above the narration, in the fiction, behind the novels. For example, if you look closely at the universe in which the fiction appears, you should be able to realize that it is a universe stripped of capitalist décor. Voluntarily stripped of capitalist reality. The universe of all my books is a fictional one governed by an ideological will—a refusal to give capitalism the status of reality, and, in particular, a refusal to admit that it is present in the setting where the heroes and heroines evolve. In this refusal resides one of the post-exotic meta-narrators’ magical procedures for combating reality. There is a permanent political concern inscribed in the novelistic dough that I knead in order to make stories. Such is the role of politics in my existence as an author.

JDW: Critics have often used the expression “literary terrorist” in regard to you. We are conducting this interview for a scholarly American journal, conducting it after the American offensive in Afghanistan and before any announcement of a war in Iraq. Concerns for “political correctness” would dictate that we avoid this question or that we remain silent on this term. Must we confine ourselves to literature and its metaphors? What is your feeling?

AV: I have always been horrified by military operations that have civilian targets. The attacks of September 11 are a monstrosity, the atomic bombing of Japanese cities is a monstrosity, the massacre at Nanking is a monstrosity. The list of military misdeeds against civilians is extremely long. None of them is tolerable. Today we witness the type of conflicts where over-equipped armies attack populations incapable of warding off the slightest blow. The battlefield no longer exists; military victory takes place at the level of physical and moral destruction of the adversarial population, and not of the adversarial army. Being in uniform has become the best way to protect oneself

in the case of conflicts, and the lack of a uniform is tantamount to exposing oneself to all the risks of war. It's unbearable. Military strategists have always been the scourge of humanity, but it seems to me that in our times they are worse than ever. Among them I count the Al Qaida network and other religious madmen, of course. For a century, armies have not ceased to widen the field of their attacks on civilians. I am considering them globally, making no distinction among flags. These are the ones who are terrorists—ideologists of terror. I advise anyone who doubts it to read some pointed works on strategy—for example, those that flourished in the 1970s. (I had the opportunity to read some pages from some of them—they were never secret.) One has only to read the theoreticians of atomic warfare—the first strikes and the preventive strike and all that garbage. At the time, they were planning mass exterminations; they were speculating on mass terrorism. Did anyone pursue and denounce these evil-doers? No. They are still active, decorated, in power everywhere on the planet.

Now, let's return to my books. Since *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, the characters who are animated, the narrators who speak, are often nostalgic about world-wide revolution. They are pursued by the police or already in prison, and often they are also already dead. They are never in a position of victory. Even when they dream, only defeat is accessible to them. The term "terrorist" is applied to them by the police; they do not claim it. They made the revolution, participated in guerilla operations, they deny nothing; they have lost everything. Ingrid Vogel, the heroine of *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, is the first very clear voice in this bizarre and desolate choir. She is fleeing from Germany where her organization was dismantled; she is terrorized; she is crazy; she is a writer. The texts that she imagines reflect her experience—an experience that is cleverly encrypted, but also deformed by delirium and by fear. She addresses herself to "sympathizers" beyond those who could attempt to de-code the text. As is always the case with my characters, I found myself in total literary symbiosis with Ingrid Vogel. Not a millimeter separated us. Let anyone deduce what they will from this about my approach to "terrorism." In any case, I would be unable to get inside the skin of a guy piloting a plane of death, be it headed for Nagasaki or the World Trade Center. Such despicableness does not belong to my culture.

JDW: Let's turn to your arrival at Minuit, a publisher that is emblematic of the Nouveau Roman and, globally, of the "after" that has only ever been approximately defined by minimalism or by parody, with examples as different as Echenoz or Toussaint. With the publication of *Lisbonne, dernière*

marge, critics have seen in you essentially a textual experiment, a deconstruction of the classical novel, in the footsteps of, say, Robbe-Grillet, while one could think also of Beckett when faced with the last men of your apocalyptic universe. What is your feeling about these possible antecedents? Has the aesthetic of the Nouveau Roman played a role in your “art of storytelling”?

AV: When *Lisbonne, dernière marge* was accepted by Jérôme Lindon, I had no notion of contemporary French literature. You mention the only two names of contemporary French writers whom I had read—Robbe-Grillet 20 years earlier, Beckett ten years earlier. I had not studied either one of them in a university setting, no more than I had reflected on their contribution to my imagination and to my writing techniques. But they must have had an influence on all of that. Over the course of 1990, I discovered with delight the authors of the Minuit catalogue—the great older ones like Claude Simon, and the authors of the new generation—Echenoz, Toussaint, Chevillard, Redonnet and many others. If you look at my intellectual itinerary and my knowledge at that time, you can’t help being amazed to see me integrate a Minuit culture that had been virtually unknown to me up until then.

JDW: Nevertheless, there are convergences. The breaking up of the novelistic character and especially the opacity of narrative authority, the dissolution of the apparent objectivity of reality in a consciousness that juxtaposes it with the imaginary, with dreams and with myths.

AV: All of that exists in a number of primitive cultures. All of that is practiced fluently by shamans. These are basic intellectual principles, and not just among certain marginalized writers published by Minuit.

JDW: What literary experiences were the most important for you? Kafka, Borges? One often has the impression that the references invoked in speaking of you are never the most pertinent ones. In any case, the heteronyms in Ingrid Vogel’s novel and the presence of Lisbon make one think of Pessoa.

AV: Perhaps that is what one should not do—invoke, as you say, literary references, whereas all the novels that you want to focus on are wary of literary references, and most of the time consciously steer clear of them. They make an effort to situate themselves outside of a system of official, normalized literature. I like Kafka, Borges, and also hundreds of first-rate

writers, and I have been affected by numerous films, by paintings, by musical works, by personal experiences and by personal experiences lived by others, recounted, imagined, dreamed, interpreted, understood, misunderstood. I have difficulty with the fact that people want to shed light on my texts via the light of literary influence alone, and I am annoyed, in fact, when the name of a writer is proposed in order to “explain” this or that detail in the prose that I sign. I am annoyed when the name has scarcely any relation to my readings and reflections, when it is completely outside my sensitivity—i.e. when the critic is totally mistaken. I am also annoyed when someone invokes a reference that is undeniable—when the critic was discerning—for immediately one is going to witness a reduction of the text, whether blatant or subtle. The text is going to be reduced to a game between a definite source and novelistic material. It is this function of analysis that upsets me. The novelistic material always has numerous sources, most of which have been deformed by time, introspection, doubt, and memory. Nothing in your head is authentic. You speak to me of Kafka, but when I think of Kafka, I don’t remember the ensemble of Kafka’s work. I don’t summon up anything like that. I remember Kafka’s images that traumatized me when they projected themselves onto me as I was reading: the lunar color of the ground and the crunching of the gravel underfoot when K was executed, at the end of *The Trial*, and a barouche that suddenly comes out of a closet, in a brief novella whose name I would be hard-pressed to recall today—assuming that it exists, and I didn’t dream it. Then, but only then, I superimpose on that a more reasoned knowledge of Kafka, a more conventional knowledge—the one that some people would like to invoke and associate with my work—but which certainly has had less influence on me than these two very powerful images. This is why one should be careful about invoking Kafka: all of Kafka, or what part of Kafka? And what has then been the work of memory, of the digestion of information, rumors, theories, etc.? What puts me off in these kinds of questions (which is why I rarely answer them) is the intellectual matrix that impels the critic to formulate them—something clear, square, reductive, definitive—which in my mind is terribly hasty and terribly like a slab.

As for the heteronymy practiced by Pessoa, I had some idea of it from a scholarly lecture on Pessoa, not via his texts, with which I had only limited and fragmentary contact before writing *Lisbonne, dernière marge*. A propos of *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, it is good to evoke the shadow of Pessoa, but he must be given a furtive place, only the place of one literary theme among dozens of others. It would be useless to seek the points of convergence

between Ingrid Vogel's texts, which constitute the framework of the book, and those of the Portuguese poet. It would be an exercise without any serious foundation.

JDW: Echenoz would seem the closest to you, in that he also takes "trashcan literature" as his point of departure—which in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, serves to reveal an imagination eclipsed by official literature.

AV: Echenoz subverted lower forms of literature; he takes off from models that were scorned by literature, in order to fabricate Echenozien objects that are funny and extremely intelligent, in which literature is present on two levels: via the sentences and their humorous syntax, and via the distancing in emotions and anecdotes, confirming that we are in an impeccably mastered project of genre subversion (detective genre, adventures, etc.). In this sense, Echenoz carries to a new degree the often fastidious literary experiments of the Nouveau Roman. He opens them to a content, and while being a sort of legitimate heir to this Minuit trend, he lifts it out of its impasse.

The activities of the "trashcan writers" described by Ingrid Vogel in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, do not enter into this intellectual framework. Their status—the status given to their words and their prose, the status of their imagination—is threatened and crushed by the totalitarian society in which they live. The texts pondered, invented, and visited by Ingrid Vogel and her heteronyms are not destined to be inserted in a literature marked by Robbe-Grillet or his heirs or imitators. They have nothing to do with the Nouveau Roman; they are as alien to the Nouveau Roman as, say, classic Chinese novels of the eighteenth century. There is no hostility in this acknowledgment of distance. It's just that to read examples of the one in light of the other is senseless.

JDW: Also, how has Jérôme Lindon read you? What role will he play for you? Was he familiar with your other texts? They are not included in the listing "By the Same Author." When you are published by Editions de Minuit, are you "the same author"?

AV: Jérôme Lindon read *Lisbonne, dernière marge* as a book that resembled nothing else, as unpublished literary machinery that functioned according to somewhat surprising rules. He was interested especially by the form, by the architecture of the book, whereas for me the form was simply the pretext for setting out visions, a baroque imagination, and numerous somber and

violent stories. Jérôme Lindon has never been a fan of fantastic literature; one has only to consult the Minuit catalogue, which reflects his literary tastes, to be convinced of this. No doubt he was often repulsed by the unbridled character of the images in my books. That didn't stop him from publishing me, but I'm sure he would have been happy to read a manuscript by me that was more in tune with contemporary, everyday tastes. At least one. A manuscript that would have been easier to situate, easier to summarize, and therefore to defend. As for my earlier titles that appeared inopportunely in a science fiction collection, they did in fact disappear from the "By the Same Author" lists. Jérôme Lindon preferred to consider that he was welcoming me as a novelist who had produced nothing important previously, and for me it was a way of avoiding the annoying and useless debate over the relationship between my little post-exotic works and science fiction. Thus for a few years my earlier books had a discreet status, though not secret. As soon as circumstances permitted, I reintroduced these four titles into the list. For of course they belong squarely in the post-exotic edifice.

JDW: With *Lisbonne*, you enter what you call "general literature." In *Lisbonne* we find the coexistence of the fantastic universe of your early texts and a more "classical" universe, that of the Lisbon of the two characters.

AV: The term "general literature" is used in the science fiction ghetto, where writers live in a vacuum and develop inferiority complexes in relation to those who write "general literature." On the whole, they are each content to be published in the tranquil atmosphere of the ghetto, but they hope, some time or another, to accede to literary recognition beyond the ghetto. My problem was being a writer of the ghetto, but alien in the ghetto, where the perception of literature and literary culture are not the same as my own. I wrote *Lisbonne, dernière marge* without thinking about publication, but with the certitude that I would not propose the manuscript to a science fiction editor. I had to extricate myself from that untenable intellectual position. After signing my contract with Jérôme Lindon, I recall thanking him for having saved me "from the quagmire" in which I found myself, and Jérôme Lindon, with his somewhat brisk kindness, corrected me by saying that I had done the extricating by myself. For him, my having published literary texts in a science fiction collection was absurd—an act of youthful folly. *Lisbonne, dernière marge* must have been an enigma to him, as was my past as a writer. But it's pointless to speculate on what Jérôme Lindon saw in my little books.

JDW: At the same time, it's indirectly indicative of how your world is going to be read. Critical predation, then labeling. In this novel you describe an entire world of literary sociability, fulfilling the avant-garde's literary metaphors. Is this a vision of literature that also serves to make war? Behind some of these groups one can think of the Russian formalists and their fate.

AV: So that there will be no ambiguity, I will restate here what I have already declared several times in recent years: literature does not foster revolution; literature does not foster war against anyone; literature has reached a point in its history where its power in socio-historical events is absolutely null. At one time, perhaps, poets carried weight in society. Today this is no longer true. In the fantastic and political universe of *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, Ingrid Vogel recreates worlds—the “society of the Renaissance”—where the poetic word is capable of threatening the impostures and lies upon which a totalitarian society is constructed. Since Ingrid Vogel is in reality a militant in clandestine and urban guerilla operations, she projects into her imaginary book elements that structure her own vision of the world: combat, violence, weapons, faction struggles, fear, the police, madness. Her vision of literature passes through a mental construction dominated by extremist political passion, military action, destruction of the real by propaganda, survival via the group, and, at the same time, the pain of being alone against the world. And it is only in a “second” time that one can color this tableau with literary references that will be exterior to the narrator and exterior to the function of her text.

It is only in this second time that one can speak, as a critic not involved in Ingrid Vogel's world, about the Russian formalists, about debates on literature in Russia from the Revolution to the Writers' Union, about violent polemics among the numerous groups of the period—from the 1920s to the early 1930s—or that one can reflect on Ingrid's heteronymy by comparing it to that of Pessoa. In truth, I think that in so doing one ventures onto slippery ground. One can concede to Ingrid Vogel a certain knowledge of world literature, but what in reality motivates her expression (indirect, intimate and fantastical) is the guerilla culture, the political struggle to the bitter end, a culture of prison, defeat and flight—a culture of the writer-soldier. I repeat that the book refers to this culture, and much less to any literary reflection.

JDW: Ingrid Vogel's novel takes place in the fifth century and undertakes to understand a literature across three centuries. In it we witness a progressive “revision” of forms and contents by forgers, and the perversion of humanist

ideas leading to violence and death. In the other level of reality that envelops this novel, the fathers of Ingrid and Kurt have been implicated in Nazism, here referred to as “the dark war.”

AV: Ingrid belongs to the post-war generation. Outside of her extreme left political itinerary and her particular psychological problems, she is a typical representative of that generation that is crushed by a sense of an entire population’s guilt, but also, on a daily basis, by her parents’ poorly assumed guilt—by their silence, their half-truths, their lies.

Lisbonne, dernière marge presents these children of post-nazism, and they, when they read the book, tell me that they recognize themselves, and consider that the portrait of their generation has not been misrepresented. I don’t deny it: they see in it a German novel depicting Germany from within, during the war years. But the delirious imagination of Ingrid Vogel exceeds this realistic and limited framework, and quickly the world war that is “familiar” to us is transformed into a fantastical war, a “dark war” that is evoked in several other post-exotic texts (*Le port intérieur*, *Des anges mineurs*, *Outrage à mygales*...) It’s history’s ultimate war, during which the human race destroys itself and disappears. We are already far from Nazism here. Even if there are metaphorical passageways from one war to the other, the preoccupation of the post-“dark war” narrators is to understand whether or not the thinking species to which they belong has the right to claim to be human—whether, genetically, it is human or something else. This questioning generates an anguish that marks Ingrid Vogel’s world representations and those of her heteronyms, all obsessed by questions of identity.

JDW: Once again in *Lisbonne*, one is faced with the recurring figure of the son confronting his father. Elsewhere, we find avuncular relations. Ingrid and Kurt, potential victim and executioner, both seem like brother and sister.

AV: The amorous relations that I present often pass through moments of fraternal tenderness. “Little sister,” and “little brother” are recurring terms, used in extremely tense moments—those of distress, defeat and fear. And of death. Post-exoticism’s traditional lovers are separated by prison, by war, by eternity; they are reunited in dreams. Dreams that are never synonymous with happiness, with stability, with duration, but which nevertheless correspond to an intensely passionate situation, on a par with any long-standing conjugality.

You want me to talk of relations of a son confronting his father. They are not much illustrated in my books, where family relations are skirted around,

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where the children who speak are adults when they speak, where the adults whom the children evoke are usually old people, and where even, in *Des anges mineurs* or in *Dondog*, the generation of parents is replaced by that of grandparents. In *Rituel du mépris*, the figure of the father is replaced by those of numerous uncles. The family structure that I present in *Lisbonne* is reduced to a individual soldier (Ingrid) and her memories, eventually allied with an other individual soldier, Kurt. The rules of psychoanalysis apply here as elsewhere, but they are deformed by the fiction and its wartime necessities.

JDW: What has been forgotten in this literature and in yours, at least in its reception, is situated at the level of the deepest myths—the archetypal situations of childhood imagination, with its universal and enigmatic poeticness. *Clarté des secrets*, one of the texts “embedded” in *Lisbonne*, seems to be the true center of this book. *Clarté des secrets* will be burned because it speaks of this primordial memory that is the basis for the situations in all of your books. Love and blood, victim and predator, redemption by writing, the narrative.

AV: Let’s set aside the term redemption, which is incongruous if one attempts to attach it to my little post-exotic works. You are right in pointing to the irreducible kernel of all these fictions—a “primordial memory.” My characters incessantly dip into this memory and stir up its images. Sometimes it’s their personal, lived memory, that of their earliest childhood with its richness of dreams. Sometimes it’s the historic memory of their generation, of their century, with its echoes of propaganda and war, combined with another piece of personal memory—that of political engagement and battles. Sometimes it’s collective, primordial memory, touching the collected peoples who have lived on the earth, with their myths, their beliefs, their magic. All of this, at these three levels that are rich in poetic fiction, is inaccessible to the minds of inquisitors, policemen and executioners who try “to obtain something” from the post-exotic narrators. I present this poor listening on the part of those who ask the questions; I do it in several books, in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, obviously, but also, for example, in *Vue sur l’ossuaire*, where a book written in two voices, those of Jean Vlassenko and Maria Samarkande, is superimposed on their double interrogation. It is a love book, but the torturers ascribe a different value to it and don’t understand it. Likewise, *Clarté des secrets* can only be destined to be destroyed. In one case, it’s the police against love; in the second case it’s the police against the truth. In every case, it’s the real versus fiction.

JDW: The following novels—*Le nom des singes* and *Alto solo*—explore other narrative universes. So what is your project? To stress the universality of the egalitarian dream and of its catastrophe with Latin-American guerillas and sinisterly carnivalesque dictatorships? *Alto solo* freely mixes elements from Russian and American history.

AV: *Le nom des singes* explores other settings, other images, but everything that's just been said about various levels of memory and about institutional representatives' faulty hearing is equally applicable to this text. In this sense, the meditation on guerillas and on warring factions, and the dream-based techniques of resistance to interrogation have simply been displaced into the suffocating world of the rain forest.

Fabien Golpiez, in the presence of his hallucinated psychiatrist or of his torturers of 19 de Febrero Street, enumerates the fundamental elements of the setting (the trees, birds, snakes, spiders, etc.), attributing to them the musicality of the "general language" (the *tupi* of the Amazon basin) as well as a delirious, encyclopedic character. In so doing, he subverts the descriptive function of "ordinary realism." In articulating the universe that surrounds him, in naming with precision the present, he "speaks of other things." Here we find one of the fundamental practices of resistance to oppression (intellectual and physical), which is situated at the origin of post-exotic speech. When Fabien Golpiez recounts fragments of his individual and collective experience, when he chooses to recount them in a dream-like manner, in a disorder that prevents the hostile listener from fully and easily reconstituting the story, he abandons himself to the exercise upon which nearly all post-exotic fiction rests. Thus in his world of fictional references, one encounters a lot of elements that refer the reader to precise historical or political information, but which do not directly belong to the fiction. In *Le nom des singes*, Fabien Golpiez displaces himself mentally to the interior of an Amazonian planet, immense but closed, where the revolution has triumphed everywhere a long time ago, where civil war and social collapse are the only political perspectives, and where the entire population belongs to the Amazon Indian ethnicity. The Indians are seen here as a variation of the *Untermenschen*, of "sub-humans," who in the post-exotic world are usually the privileged interveners, those to whom the post-exotic meta-narrators cede the word, along with those in agony, madmen, and the miserable of every kind.

This is why, even if it is possible that readers of *Le nom des singes* reassure themselves by interpreting the book as an exploration of Latin-American guerillas and a meditation on the conditions of combat in an equatorial

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atmosphere, my project was different. My concern was to penetrate into the Amazonian image in order to make it into a hermetic, universal territory from which one could only escape via utopia, dreams or delirium, or else by falsified memories. This book is inhabited by the speech of degraded individuals, by Indian *Untermenschen* to whom I felt very close during the whole process of writing and rewriting the text: the exhausted narrator pretending to be mad, the wild psychiatrist, the exhausted and crazed demobilized soldier, and their common lover, Manda, resigned and at the same time strong with a feminine power infinitely superior to that of her masculine partners. My project was to accompany these miserable characters who were dear to me for as long as possible, remaining in as close contact with them as possible. To accompany these "minor angels" of the flooded forest, faithful to the ideology of fraternity, above all preoccupied with transmitting their egalitarian enthusiasm to those more miserable than themselves: the exterminated, the vanished Indian peoples, the spiders living across from the Manuela Aratúpe slum. That was my project: a pure project of post-exotic fiction, and nothing else.

JDW: For numerous readers who haven't read your early texts published by Denoël, *Le nom des singes* powerfully reveals the mythography upon which you rely. This myth, being on the margins of the capitalist world and of the egalitarian revolution, seems also like the first arena for inequality and marginalization.

AV: In my view, one can discern in *Le nom des singes* several levels of myth. The question deserves reflection, in a different setting, not in a simple interview. If I remember correctly, several times in the text I call upon "la Cobra Grande," who is "the Mother of all the Waters." There we are in a recognizable founding myth. Also, developed here in an exaggerated and mythical way is the "virgin forest," which, especially through novels and adventure films, belongs to our collective imagination. And, of course, there are political myths, the utopias that illuminated the mental shadows of my characters. You know, I rely on images and intuitions, and not on learned sources, well organized in my consciousness or my memory. This is why I have difficulty in following you over this theoretical terrain. Admittedly, it is not completely unknown to me, but in my work it only plays a background role, scarcely solicited, scarcely present or active. For me, rather than speaking of learned sources, it's more appropriate to speak of dream resources that function like a reference library. I will give you an example: at this moment I remember almost nothing of what I read about myths (Indian or others),

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but I have, very immediately present in my memory, a dream image where I am walking next to a boat, waiting for an aquatic monster to rise up: it is dawn, one is on an immense lake surrounded by rain forest. You will see that indeed, this intimate dream image is much more effective for writing that a learned synthesis on Guarani or Araé myths.

JDW: You are fascinated by languages, by the magical powers of words. The names of your characters seem encrypted. How do you choose them?

AV: Let's say that I fabricate them with care. One of my first concerns is to create names for the characters that respond to aesthetic criteria, with a musicality that is satisfying to me. Thus it is very personal—there is an element of author-character attachment. When I inhabit a character during the long time of a fictional journey, I have to “feel comfortable” in his name. Schlumm, Breughel, Dondog, Ingrid, Maria Gabriela and the numerous “Marias” of post-exoticism, Murgrave, Golpiez, etc.—these are examples of the names with which I can travel for a long time, and indefinitely. This list is far from complete.

Another of my concerns is to displace the names of my characters into an internationalist world where national, ethnic and obviously chauvinistic references have long been erased. The Post-exotic meta-narrators write, dream and communicate in an indeterminate language that reaches the books in a translated form: Francophone, yes, but without being weighted down by the Francophone cultural background. Freed from this specific cultural background—French—as well as any background linked to a determined language. I insist on that, we all insist on that, for aesthetic and ideological reasons. The association of a given name and a name belonging to different cultural or geographic regions is thus a small act of internationalist militantism: Sarah Kwong, Rim Scheidmann, Erdogan Mayayo, Dondog Balbaian...I'm naming at random—there could be more than a hundred examples.

More generally, the choices are dictated by the context, with an insistence on musicality. Often I work with telephone books, with dictionaries of names, but mainly to modify or invent without committing any serious linguistic blunders. In certain cases, it is true that the names contain “encoded” elements. I leave that as food for researchers who love to play with details. Thus a supplemental meaning is given to a character; his name is not chosen at random. It is not in the least indispensable to a true perception of the person, of his character, of his function in the anecdote. But it's a little “plus,”

satisfying to the mind. Ingrid Vogel is a bird—there the code is elementary. A second example: Fabian Golpiez belongs to an imaginary tribe, the Jucapiras; now, in *Tupi*, *jucapira* means “the murdered one.” There the encoding is total—no one (except a *Tupi* reader) can discern it, or even suspect it. Here and there secrets of this sort have been embedded. Little secrets between the complicit meta-narrators, but never necessary “keys” to the text.

JDW: *Le port intérieur* opens on China. What place does it occupy in your world? You have a precise knowledge of it; you are studying its language and culture. In your personal scenarios you even dream of ending your days there. Is this an exotic concession in this post-exotic world?

AV: When I was 12 or 13 years old, the first thing I bought with my childhood savings (allowances were rare in those days) was a Chinese opium pipe. I never used it, rest assured. That could have been the very beginning of a long adventure, but what opened up first in my life was what could be called a vast Russian page. That page was perused, and it is more or less closed today. The Chinese page, on the other hand, is in the course of being read, so to speak. An apprenticeship in the Chinese language requires a lifetime. I began late, too late, without having the necessary time, without method, without a teacher. Which is to say that I still will have much to do, after my death, to attain a level of honorable Mandarin.

In fact, China occupies a large place in my life. I lived at Macau for two years; I dream of settling there again for a long and perhaps definitive stay. I return to the area of South China as often as possible. It's a place where I feel a complete stranger and completely at ease, and, to sum it up, perfectly in my place. There I am in contact with atmospheres, sensations, urban landscapes, human landscapes that bring me a very simple peace, a sense of well-being that I have not found anywhere else. I am also closer, over there, to Chinese cultural domains that charm me and about which I continually discover new richnesses: the Canton Opera, popular religions, architecture, porcelain, etc. And the Chinese street is the street that I love, the Chinese faces are the faces that I love. All of these elements have echoes in my books, over the last dozen years. I think one could speak of an exotic concession if it served as a pretext for specific works. That is not the case, at least up until now. Macau is a background that is very present in *Le port intérieur*, but no less than Lisbon in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*.

One single work corresponds to what you suspect is an “exotic concession to the post-exotic world.” It’s a little book accompanying an exhibition by the Portuguese photographer Paolo Nozoline—very powerful and somber photos of Macau before it was ceded back to Populist China. The catalogue-book is entitled *Fim* (the end). Concession or not, I am proud of the result, and happy to have collaborated with a very talented photographer in an initiative where our two visions were joined.

JDW: We find Breughel, the protagonist of *Port intérieur*, in *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie*...

AV: I’ll stop you right away. We find a character with the same last name. That’s not exactly the same thing. As I explained a few minutes ago, Breughel is one of those names that allow me to enter easily into the character, to be one body with the narrator. It’s a name that I used in the prose poems that appeared in *Les Cahiers du Schibboleth*, a long time ago. At that time it was declined with various first names: Iohann Breughel, Istvan Breughel, Andreas Breughel, etc. I’ll refer you to a little enumeration and a reflection that appeared in *Dondog*. It’s about Schlumm. “With all these Schlumms somewhere inscribed in the night, there is no risk that the night is closed,” says Dondog.

For Breughel, it’s a similar system. The Breughel of *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie* and the Breughel of *Le port intérieur* are close, in the sense that they are each the main narrator of a novel, but they have different characters, a different future, a different fate, and, obviously, they are “carried” by different meta-narrators. Compared to *Le port intérieur*, *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie* can be taken as a variation. The worlds, the implications, the atmospheres and the characters have nothing in common from one novel to the next, but everything happens as though the meta-narrators of the two books agreed to respect a few constraints and, from there, to develop a fiction where they would be absolutely free. What constraints? In brief, to write a story of hopeless love, to give the role of narrator to a character named Breughel, to place the beloved woman in a psychiatric setting, to involve a certain Kotter, hostile to Breughel. Beyond these minimal elements, there is no further common ground between the two books. Except for subliminal images, ideological and dream-like coincidences, and allusions to a common post-exotic world.

JDW: Speaking of *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie*, I’d like to talk about the theatricality in this book, where Breughel imagines an “Opéra balkhyr” for his rag puppets.

AV: It's true that I forgot the opera when I mentioned the common elements of the two books. The opera plays an important role. In *Le port intérieur*, it's the Canton Opera, much more familiar to me than the Peking Opera, and an integral part of my personal cultural references. In *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie*, it's western opera. I placed singing and percussion instruments in *Nuit blanche*, but especially, and well-situated, I placed an operatic libretto. It reprises the main action and "represents" it with dream-like, theatrical and lyrical effects, which an ordinary text would not have allowed me to introduce. And during the time of the book (which, by the way, follows the strict rules of classical theater: unity of time, since no matter what happens time stands still; unity of place, since the setting does not change, even if one sometimes ventures 20 or 30 meters outside the ruins of the psychiatric hospital; unity of action, even if this notion is somewhat elastic), the presence of the theater is constant.

It's theater, the fact that Breughel speaks before rag puppets, animates them, mixes with them. It's theater, the proclamations and tirades of the propaganda office, of which Breughel is one of the principle activists, if not the only one. Theater, the relations between the Balkyr tyrant Kirghyl and his beloved Zoubardja. Theater, the monologues, dialogues, moments of immobility. Theater, the relationships of the characters with the outside world (whether they are animated puppets or not). I'm far from having evoked all the aspects of theatricality in this book, and besides, it's not my role to embark upon a critical or scientific commentary on one of my works. Simply, I believe that this novel, along with *Le nom des singes*, is the most "theatrical" of all my works. Beyond the properly theatrical techniques of representing the action, we find in these two books techniques linked to the presentation of images, evoked in the foreground and underlining the text's non-"belle prose" character. In *Le nom des singes*, slides are projected and commented upon (the "slide therapy" [*diapothérapie*] of the insane psychiatrist, Gonçalves). In *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie*, it's films. I have a great tenderness for the screenings of the "Cinema for the Armies," which admittedly take place in the dark, with no screen and with imaginary or destroyed reels of film, but all the same...[It's] somewhat as though, besides the theater, some non-bookish elements were indispensable—fixed or animated images.

It's possible that my contact with the Chinese opera theater during my prolonged stay in South China has played a role in my sensitivity, but the relationship between the text that is pronounced (murmured or shouted, sung, or chanted) and the narration (or a representation of the narration) is nothing recent for me. Without establishing a filiation, which would be grotesque, it seems to me that certain narrative techniques, certain post-

exotic devices, have to do with Brecht's theater. And also a rigor in the analysis of the world and its values, a rigor that will be called Marxist. I think that Brecht's theater, with its effects of distance, with the ideological vigilance that he encourages and demands, has had a greater influence on me than the Chinese opera theater—at least at the time I was working on *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie*.

JDW: The publication of *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze* renews, after *Lisbonne*, the "anthological" line of your work. It can be read as an *art poétique*; many have seen in it the key to your writing.

AV: This eleventh lesson, corresponding to an eleventh work, implies first of all that ten "lessons" in post-exoticism have preceded it. Thus it is not a separate work. Nevertheless, one finds in it—explicated in the fiction, intertwined with it—explanations that shed light on the entire edifice of post-exotic works. For me, it is above all an opportunity to bring in the meta-narrators—those who "speak" the post-exotic novels, who murmur them, modify them, transmit them, dream them—all those men and women who are situated upstream from all the fictions, and for whom I am simply the "spokesperson." I make them appear in their natural milieu: prison, solitary confinement, separated from the world, sensorially deprived. I explain their solitude, their madness, their trance-like, murmuring, shamanic practices. I reaffirm their obsessed fidelity to revolutionary utopias, their radical ideology of brotherhood, liberty and equality. By placing this in the images of a fiction—which becomes a referential fiction—I render the basis of post-exotic expression more comprehensible, and especially its persistence, book after book. The entire post-exotic edifice is constructed, conceived and spoken by these men and women who are locked away from the world until they die, whereas before their incarceration they were trying radically to transform the world.

Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze is first of all a stage in the construction of the vast novelistic edifice (of which, theoretically, only a fraction is destined to see the light of day under my signature). But it is also a reflection on writing and an aesthetic reflection on the ten works that preceded it. And, more than an *art poétique*, I see in it an affirmation of rupture with the official poetic arts, an affirmation of liberty in collective and individual creation. With this slim volume, my ambition was not to proclaim a new avant-garde path. I simply wanted to clear a convenient territory in which we could meet more comfortably. "We" means post-exotic writers, their readers, and

myself. *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze* is not an essay. It's a fiction and also a place—a collective place, a refuge destined for our intellectual pleasure and for our encounters.

JDW: *Des anges mineurs* surprises the reader again with a book that proposes a portrait of the artist as shaman, which will be followed by *Dondog*.

AV: Shamanism is often portrayed in *Des anges mineurs* and in *Dondog*. The aged grandmothers who shoot their grandson Will Scheidmann, a traitor to egalitarianism, are nearly all shamans. We witness a ceremony of shamanic procreation in the retirement home where the old women are all confined, and a scene of shamanic birth recounted with horror by the “newborn” Will Scheidmann; there are several shamanic journeys at several moments in the book. In *Dondog*, the main character says that he is a very ineffectual shaman, and a few pages are devoted to an invocation of the spirits—spirits that no one believes in, I might add. The geographical context is also shamanic—it often harks back to Siberia, to the steppes and to the vast deserts of Mongolia.

But you could also find shamanic practices used as fictional techniques in the earlier books. I can't give you an exhaustive list here. *Des enfers fabuleux* is based on interlocking journeys and shamanic transfers and dreams. *Le nom des singes* includes among its main characters a “shaman-psychiatrist.” In *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze*, the references to Tibetan tantrism and to the *Bardo Thödol* concern their least Buddhist aspects. Speaking of which, I'll say a few words about Buddhism as it is touched upon or evoked in post-exotic texts. The mental or ritual practices that one encounters in these texts are inspired primarily by magical practices that pre-date Buddhism. These have persisted within Buddhism, but remain essentially foreign to it. The post-exotic meta-narrators are out-and-out materialists, and what they “glean” from Buddhism has almost nothing to do with Buddhist spirituality. What interests them most is the poetic dimension and techniques of fiction. It is the same with shamanism—their approach is not encumbered by any belief.

I have no interest in exploring what I would call “ethnologists' shamanism.” I have neither the knowledge nor the means for that. Nevertheless, it seems to me that with my characters I go in a direction that is “naturally” shamanic: together we travel from one world to another without respecting the boundary between the living and the dead, between humans and *Untermenschen*, between the imagination and memory, past and present. We accomplish this journey without difficulty, in a “trance” that for

me is terribly easy to attain through writing. The post-exotic shamans can have the special status of intermediary between the upper and lower worlds, between here and elsewhere, but, more generally, all of those who speak have the power, through the word (whether murmured in solitude, shouted during an interrogation, or internalized) to slip from one world into another.

One of the definitions of shamanism (beyond the ethnological term, which connotes drums, animal skins, and rattles—in fact very present around my shaman characters) is the quest for an “altered state of consciousness.” I believe that my characters attain this state immediately, thanks to the spoken word. As for myself, I attain it immediately thanks to writing. No need for any particular substance or for alcohol!

JDW: In *Des anges mineurs* we see a particular architecture, a division into “narrats,” and narrative constraints. What role do constraints play in your writing?

AV: *Des anges mineurs* is a “collection of narrats.” It is organized in a way that presents no obstacle to reading—you can read this book without any obstacles, starting on the first page and ending on the last one, which seems normal and reassures everyone. But, at the same time, it is made up of 49 “narrats”—“prose photographs” that respond to one another, two by two: narrat 1 and narrat 49 (the beginning and end) have comparable dimensions and themes, narrat 2 and narrat 48 hark back to the same miserable author, Fred Zenfl, etc. At the center of this mirror-like construction is narrat 25, a fairly long text where Will Scheidmann relates his terrifying birth and his tragic and failed existence as the savior of the world. It’s understood that such a construction respects certain constraints: dimension of the texts, thematic constraints, choice of atmospheres. But, as in a musical construction, the technique is situated behind the object, and only comes into play in order to give pleasure to the listener. I do not make the constraint the *raison d’être* of the book. *Des anges mineurs* has nothing to do with an acrobatic literary exercise. For me, and I hope for my readers, it is an art object destined to enrich those who visit it—to enrich them in images, in emotions, in reflections and in dreams.

JDW: In *Dondog*, the most “linear” of your novels, memory is again at the center of the book. I’d like you to return to what Dondog says about the ethnic cleansing that had victimized his family. He says, “I’ll talk about it when I have completely forgotten it, not before...”

AV: That's it, exactly, yes. For Schlumm, for Dondog and for numerous narrators of post-exotic novels, activating memory is at the origin of all suffering. Dondog has lived his whole life in the camps—amnesiac, in a perpetual present that allows him to deny the pain that came before. This is how he can bear having survived the extermination of his family and his people. In other novels, characters speak up and tell stories to confuse the enemy, to not acknowledge before the enemy what one has really traversed, to not give the names of those one knew in undercover actions, to not surrender any information, to avow nothing. But here, in the case of Dondog, it's a matter of putting fictions and fairy tales into words in order to avoid intimate contact with the unbearable core of memory. It's to himself that Dondog wants to avow nothing, even if his only guilt is not having been killed with the others. At the same time, Dondog, fascinated by the possibility of a resurgence of his pain, plays with his memory. He approaches terrible memories, he wanders nearby in the stories that he invents, he brushes up against them. But there is a moment in this evocation when the fairy tale is no longer possible, when the game becomes too terrible. Then Dondog stops talking. Ethnic massacres cannot be described, the death of Schlumm or that of Dondog's family cannot be put into images. One cannot accept the principle of artistic detachment, one cannot seek political effects in the presence of mass graves. Dondog is coherent with himself, and at that point he stops speaking. And he says, "That's it for fairy-tales."

Dondog is definitely not seeking a "remembrance of things past." He hopes to take revenge, and since he no longer remembers who has hurt him in the course of his life, he latches onto a few names that surface from his past. That is enough for him to compose stories. He dips into our collective memory of the twentieth century and into the imagined memory of his family, and also into the memories of the characters that he invents and who allow him to insert false autobiographical images into his fiction. Thus we are very, very far from a sacred quest, from a respectful attitude toward memory, and this lack of scruples when faced with lies is typical of the post-exotic narrator. On the other hand, since the narrative material that Dondog manipulates is impregnated with all the atrocities that humans have committed in the twentieth century, we are also very far from the purely playful category of imaginative literature.

JDW: This memory is passed on by mouth, by murmur. You write that "his memory needed his mouth in order to function."

AV: Many post-exotic novels are murmured, rather than written. I have explained elsewhere (in *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze*) that the political prisoners who invent these stories and images transmit them from cell to cell by chanting them, by whispering them, sometimes by yelling them. The assemblage of books that I have signed, and for which I am here the “spokesperson,” follow this system of production which itself is part of post-exotic fiction. Often in these books it is a question of listeners rather than readers. Or of interpreters, for the books are spoken, but also repeated, reprised by other voices, with additions and variations that give the prose a particular character, not only in its rhythm, but also and especially in its organization.

Thus *Dondog* is a kind of long monologue. An internal monologue—a mental one, I would say—but which also takes the path of the voice. A concretely voiced monologue. At every moment, Dondog knows that he maintains a discourse, even when he says nothing. Consequently, it is normal that Dondog’s characters and Dondog himself are attentive to their mouths, to their breathing, to the fatigue of their vocal chords, to the resonance or tone of their voice, and so on.

But through the voice there is also this possibility to both trigger the mechanism of memory and to lie about one’s memories, in the knowledge that one is being listened to. Further, in formulating sentences, one can involuntarily lie to one’s memory. For Dondog and for a lot of other characters, as well as for myself, no doubt, speaking is a way to lead memory astray, or rather to suffocate it, to envelop it in words that transform it into an unoffensive object—a little, resonant and derisory thing that no longer hurts.

Dondog’s memory needs his mouth in order to function, but at the same time it is Dondog’s mouth that dominates memory and makes it silent. By externalizing fragments that he claims to be autobiographical, Dondog the amnesiac does not abandon himself to a sincere exploration of his own intellectual remains. On the contrary, he engages an action destined to crush and wipe out the fragments of real memories that still rise to the surface of memory. In *Dondog*, a lot of things are made evident, but as far as this goes, we see the negation of the liberating role of the word. Perhaps it is because Dondog is a very poor shaman, an awkward living person, an untalented dead one. Words come out of him, but don’t help him. In this he is no different from other characters presented by other meta-narrators—Breughel, for example. I remember the beginning of *Le port intérieur*: “The mouth trembles. One would like to no longer speak. [...] To express oneself doesn’t make living easier. One is mistaken. Words, like everything else, destroy...”

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JDW: *Dondog* takes place between life and death, in that space described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

AV: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or the *Bardo Thödol*, is one of the referential works that vibrates behind a number of the books I have signed. I spoke about it earlier, à propos of *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons*, *leçon onze*, and à propos of shamanism. It is a splendid text, with several superimposed levels. I love it for its poetry, for its images and for the strangeness of its construction, which mixes instructions for reading, the text, commentaries and notes on the commentaries. The content is in keeping with the form. It proposes as a principle that one is going to speak to the dead person for weeks while he wanders in *bardo*, in order to put him back on the right path and in order to exhort him not to be born again. It's incredibly captivating, and everything is in play: death, survival, the magic of words, existence. When you mix that with the wanderings of my extremist or nihilistic characters, you get fascinating novelistic situations.

Bardo Thödol, as a sacred text, is scarcely present in *Dondog*. I simply allude to the monks whom Dondog would have run into in a work camp, and who would have taught him the BA-BA of the Book: after death, he will have a bit of time, and he will recover an intact memory, very clear. This perspective suits Dondog. He seizes this minimal information in order to tranquilly await liberation by death, with the idea that after his death he will finally be able to give meaning to his existence, to find those responsible for his ordeals and chastise them. This is a completely personal, free interpretation of *Bardo Thödol*. It is superimposed upon Dondog's other beliefs and other atheistic skepticisms.

Since you haven't fallen asleep yet, I'd like to add a few words on the notion of *bardo*. In Asiatic religions and in shamanism, it's a matter of a floating, intermediary world that can be reached through shamanic trance, meditation, and especially during and after agony. I've already touched on this today, and I'll return to it in order to stress the fact that in my books I use an understanding of the phenomenon that is, I suppose, completely heretical. *Bardo*, as encountered in numerous post-exotic texts, is a black space where opposites are abolished—that is, life and death are the same, as are present and past, the imaginary and the real, and so on. The borders disappear between you and me, between author and character, between author and reader. Obviously this is a gold mine for a novelist. For novels in general, but of course for all the post-exotic narrators, most often placed in a situation of trance or agony or waking dream. The writers or story-tellers whom I present do not deprive themselves of going to that black space to organize

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their little novels. I rarely use the word “trance,” but I often speak of “journey.” One could also speak of a plunge—a plunge that takes place from the first page to the last, and which the reader can accompany, since it is sign-posted by the prose and the images.

In order to read *Dondog*, it's not necessary to admit the existence of the intermediary world, with its fluid logic, its magical displacements, its slippages from one place to another. But accepting to travel intuitively is a good way to approach the book. From the moment you understand that in post-exoticism, dying means nothing, that after death one continues to speak and to act as though no border had been crossed, and also that one can die several times in different ways, from the moment you admit that as a logic, you can travel easily in my books.

JDW: In conclusion, I would like to return to the question of the writer in the post-exotic regime. From the beginning of your work, your characters—and *Dondog* is in this lineage—radicalize the notion of writer and literature, toward a silence, toward a speech that is going to stop speaking.

AV: It's funny that you use the term “post-exotic regime,” which immediately makes me think of expressions linked to the milieu of incarceration: *strojii rejim*, for example—*régime sévère*, a classification that meant condemnation to prison and the camps.

So, the writers of the post-exotic “regime.” They are numerous. First of all, those who are presented as such, like Fred Zenfl in *Des anges mineurs*, or Lutz Bassmann in *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze*, always in a state of great physical and mental distress: without readers, without listeners other than a few insects or a few ghosts who only appear because they evoke them. In *Dondog*, one sees the character of *Dondog* in the camp where he proclaims himself in charge of cultural activities, attempting to exist through literature in a universe that denies his existence. He organizes theatricals without an audience, standing in for all the absent actors; he slips his works (a few pages on newsprint) inside the literary classics in the camp's library, but no one ever borrows them. One could expand from there on the lamentable, pathetic status of the post-exotic writer: he proposes a speech and images that he cannot transmit via the usual editorial channels; he invents worlds, but no one pays any attention to him, no one listens to him. His murmur, born in the prison system, does not reach any audience. Even his peers (other narrators, in the body of each book taken individually, or other meta-narrators, if you take into account the post-exotic edifice in its entirety)

experience difficulties hearing him, locked away as they are in their own imprisoned misfortunes, deafened by their own calamities. This essential post-exotic writer is often reduced to inventing a “readership” which, out of humility, he associates with his own perception of himself: sub-human, *Untermensch*, a small and negligible animal.

The post-exotic writer, in such conditions for creation of his discourse, has a tendency to survive thanks to self-denigration and the black humor of the camps, and thanks to a mental process in the course of which all reference systems tend toward zero, without any lowering or questioning of the values that found them. I mean that everything is lived in a paradox: continuing to discourse from a point where any discourse is useless and ridiculous, while attributing to words both a very great power (for propaganda, for agitation, for transport into habitable fictions, for evasion, for transformation of the past and the present, etc.) and an obscure and contemptible, even clown-like function most of the time.

This is why, with so much emphasis, post-exotic writers talk and talk about the end of their speaking. With them, I construct an edifice that is both despairing and humorous. In their company, I murmur or groan unceasingly, I transmit their speaking as best I can. And in sum, it is true—we are moving toward silence, toward the sentence upon which will close both our last book and the post-exotic novelistic edifice: “I stop speaking.” This is our itinerary.

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