Problematic Returns: On the Romanesque in Contemporary French Literature

Lucas Hollister

University of Pennsylvania, hlucas@sas.upenn.edu

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Problematic Returns: On the Romanesque in Contemporary French Literature

Abstract
This dissertation examines the discourse that emerged in the late 1980s positing a "retour du romanesque" in French literature. Through a survey of the scholarly work on the subject of contemporary literature and the romanèsque, as well as a close analysis of three major authors associated with the "retour du romanesque"--Jean Echenoz, Jean Rouaud, and Antoine Volodine--this dissertation aims to provide a fuller account of the modalities, stakes and goals of the contemporary novel. In particular, it seeks to address the question of how the contemporary return to the romanèsque contributes to defining the aesthetic postulates that underpin the last thirty years of French literary production. The broader aim of this study is to interrogate the theoretical positions that might justify alternative readings of a development that could otherwise be considered purely in terms of regression to conservative standards of literary quality. The three authors considered in this study are exemplary of the diverse understandings of the developments of 20th-century literature, and the ways in which these understandings influence decisions pertaining to literary kinship and filiation. Jean Echenoz riffs on the standards of conventional genre fiction, at once sabotaging and renewing its clichés. Jean Rouaud polemically refuses what he sees as a tradition of experimental fiction, and returns to the romanèsque as a literature of slow contemplation and strong axiological positions. Antoine Volodine constructs violent alternate realities, as well as an entire fictional community, in an attempt to sever his literary works from any relation to literary past, present, or future. This dissertation finally argues that these writing projects all point to the need for a theoretical paradigm which would reconcile critical and naive, reflective and immersive reading practices.

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It goes without saying that any shortcomings that this project may have are, regrettably, attributable only to its author.
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Introduction

It is customary to begin a study of contemporary French literature by telling the reader that the French novel (or French literature, or French culture) is definitely dead, or definitely not dead. Like all literary periods, particularly those that precede the arrival of big, arbitrary, round-number dates, the contemporary has its fair share of declinologists. From the left, we hear that mass media and commercialization have eroded the literary values of the modernist novel. From the right, we hear that multiculturalism, identity politics, and valueless postmodernism have destroyed a once proud national literary tradition. So clamorous were these declarations of the death of the French novel, that a new critical cliché took hold, making it de rigueur to begin any study of contemporary literature by explaining that it was not, in fact, dead (littérature pas morte – essai suit).

Now that we are, by most accounts, over thirty years into the “contemporary” period, the yearly arrival of a profusion of new works that call themselves literature and that appear to be written in French seems to announce to us: “reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” If French literature is dead, its death has certainly been of the drawn out, theatrical variety, and its death throes show no sign of hastening toward an ultimate conclusion.

The declinological accounts should not be dismissed outright, however, as they do suggest intriguing readings of contemporary literature. Perhaps the entirety of literary production today is a sort of posthumous literature? The contemporary period is, after all, the quintessential post-period: post-modern, post-historical, post-humanist, post-literary, post-everything. Just as the enduring existence of religions does not mean that God has not died, the continuing publication of literary works is not sufficient to quell anxieties
about the vitality of literature in the contemporary period. Just because a textual practice calling itself literature (sometimes) continues to be a feature of our lives, this does not mean that it is not a zombie literature, a hollow corpse without mind or life, intent on consuming what is left of our mass-media-addled brains. French literature is perhaps not exactly dead, but it is not necessarily fully alive either. Although the theoretical postulates of the “ère du soupçon” are often accused of robbing literature of its relevance to the world and to the individual subject, there is reason to believe that they attempted to preserve a space of vitality for text in the face of the early sign of an impending diminished cultural role for literature.\(^1\) Whatever is to blame, literature in the contemporary period is often spoken of as if it were, in one sense or another, not marked by the maturity and agency that we associate with an adult social existence. It is either dead, without ambition, without future, without meaningful contribution to society; or immature, marked by infantile regression or youthful flights of fantasy (a first definition of the “retour du romanesque”), and, again, without meaningful contribution to society.

What this preamble is meant to suggest is the extent to which the contemporary is a problem period in literature. It is not necessarily unique, in this respect: the novel has known many deaths and rebirths, and if it has indisputably been the dominant literary genre of the twentieth century, it has also been declared moribund innumerable times. One of the pernicious effects of the shortcuts of literary history is that they tend to reduce periods to their dominant aesthetic movements, or to a set of texts that corresponds to current tastes, while forgetting the points of contention, violent dispute, or ambiguity that are inherent to literary communities. Without too hastily viewing the contemporary as

\(^1\) This is, notably, the thesis of Vincent Kaufmann’s excellent study *La Faute à Mallarmé. L’Aventure de la théorie littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).
singular in its anxiety with respect to the role of literature in society, and with respect to
the aesthetic postulates that underpin literary works, we can nevertheless assert that it is a
period of dispute concerning literary forms and the discipline of literary studies. One of
the interesting things about studying recent works, is that readers and scholars are still
very much negotiating the operative critical methodologies that account for contemporary
fiction, as well as attempting to separate, so to speak, the wheat from the literary chaff.

In this vast project of defining the interest of contemporary literature, its aims, its
specificity with regards to tradition, one of the recurrent constatations has been that the
contemporary has witnessed a “retour du romanesque.” This slippery expression seems to
account at once for a general return of character and plot, for the incorporation of ‘low’
genres (particularly, though not exclusively, the polar) into high literature, and for a more
general refusal of the “ère du soupçon.” It will be the project of this study to examine this
discourse of the “retour du romanesque.” Some of the major questions that the present
study will seek to answer will be: how is the romanesque defined by scholars, journalists
and authors of the contemporary period? Who is speaking of a “retour du romanesque”?
Which authors are considered exemplary of this trend? Can the romanesque really be said
to have “returned?” If so, is this a good or a bad thing? Finally, what does this “retour du
romanesque” tell us about the relationship between the contemporary and prior literary
epochs? These are vast questions, but they are essential to an understanding of the
discourses that have arisen surrounding French literature of the past thirty years.

In lieu of an introduction that would be so long as to push limits of what can
reasonably be called an introduction, this study will devote the first chapter to definitional
issues. This chapter will explore a number of often under-problematized notions: the
romanesque as literary designation, the implications of the idea of return, the validity of speaking of the contemporary as literary period, and the usefulness of the delimiting criteria that are “French” and “literature.” If we are to understand what a “retour du romanesque dans la littérature française contemporaine” might mean, we have to scratch under the surface of these well-worn words. The final three chapters will be devoted to author studies that illuminate particular ways in which the romanesque is used in contemporary French literature. The first of these chapters will examine the oeuvre of Jean Echenoz, who is often spoken of as a trailblazer for the “retour du romanesque.” If Echenoz has undoubtedly made great use of the tropes of popular genre fiction, there is some interest in examining the degree to which his fiction maintains an ironic or critical distance from these tropes. Is the contemporary romanesque defined essentially by a postmodernist, ironic relationship to the past? Are there other ways of reading Echenoz’s fictions that would see them as more than just second-degree deconstructions of popular fiction? The next chapter will deal with Jean Rouaud’s surprising recent turn away from biofiction towards the tropes of the historical epic, the adventure novel, and the travel narrative. This turn has been accompanied by a highly polemical account of literary history, seeking to save the novel from the pernicious literary ideologies of naturalism, scientism, and twentieth-century experimental fiction (the Nouveau Roman, the Roman Tel Quel, Oulipo, etc.). While Rouaud’s fiction makes an intriguing case for the romanesque as a kind of ‘slow literature’, breaking from the functionalist discourses that characterize twentieth-century scientific and scientific thought, it is ultimately representative of a broader trend in contemporary literature which seeks to enlist the romanesque in a polemical refutation of various modern and modernist literatures. The
final chapter will deal with Antoine Volodine’s highly original and highly hermetic “post-exotic” fiction. Volodine’s particular brand of speculative fiction, which recuperates that classic feature of the romanesque that is the writing of a counter-world to the world of the reader, aims to sever ties with all literary history and, perhaps, with all literary or human future. It is a dramatic singularity that accepts no discourse of return, and no discourse of the romanesque as renewal of literature. Volodine’s radical pessimism is far from representative of a generation of writers, but it points to a potential use of the romanesque that seeks (perhaps unsuccessfully) to avoid any recuperation in terms of continuity or progress in literature or human existence.

From these studies emerges a partial, but instructive portrait of the contemporary period and its various ways of appropriating or rejecting traditions of romanesque and the discourse of literary return. The contemporary is a problem period, a period in which journalists, scholars, and novelists are constantly looking for the key that would decode what the diffuse literary production of the day is accomplishing or is trying to accomplish. Its novels problematize literary history, and present problematic accounts of literary history. It is a period that celebrates the “fiction fictionnante” of writers like Jean Echenoz, while at the same time remaining wary of their success, their breeziness, their novels which are perhaps a little bit too fun. It is a literature that is searching for literary genealogies, remaking the past by means of erudite readings and subtle points of continuity, as well as by means of gross overgeneralizations and outright ignorance—for literary history is as much a question of non-reading as it is of reading. Contemporary authors can write the way they do because of whom they have read, whom they remember, whom they intentionally imitate or parody, but also because of whom they
have not read, whom they forget, whom they unwittingly imitate. In the middle of these reading and writing practices one finds the assertion of a “retour du romanesque.” This assertion is fraught with theoretical problems, but it is also at the heart of our justifications for what makes literature contemporary rather than modern, and a study which forgets the “retour du romanesque” likely misses one of the essential critical and aesthetic battlegrounds of recent literature.
Chapter 1. Definitional Problems: The “Return” “of” the “Romanesque” in “Contemporary” “French” “Literature”

As the title of this chapter suggests, the only words in the phrase “le retour du romanesque dans la littérature française contemporaine” that do not, to the critical eye, require at least some justification are the articles “le” and “la,” and the preposition “dans.” While the academic obsession with anticipating every possible point of contention runs the risk of becoming overly fastidious or pedantic, in this case a thoughtful analysis cannot be undertaken without clarifying the present study’s understanding of terms that are either ambiguous (le romanesque, retour du or au, the contemporary) or freighted with political or ideological connotations (French, literature, or French literature). For the sake of clarity, this chapter will first examine the definitions and connotations that have amassed around the word romanesque. Next, it will take up the issue of the supposed return of this romanesque, and ask whether there is an important distinction to be made between a “retour du” and a “retour au” romanesque. This will also be the occasion to explain our use of the word literature, which is, of course, notoriously difficult to define. The final section will concern itself with an examination of the use of the term contemporary to refer to a literary epoch. References to “contemporary literature” in the French context are so ubiquitous that scholars often neglect to ask why exactly we use contemporary to refer to over thirty years of literary production, and why anyone needed to delineate a contemporary period in the first place. This will lead us finally to a brief discussion of the issue of the “Frenchness” of these authors, and of the use of French rather than francophone as a delimiting criterion.
What is the romanesque?

As we have already had the occasion to suggest, it is virtually impossible to spend any time studying contemporary French literature (these words again!) without encountering the “retour du romanesque” in one of its guises. It is *de rigueur* to speak of the contemporary as a period characterized by, depending on the wording one prefers, a return to more traditional story forms or “normes romanesques,” by “renarrativisation,” by a “renouveau romanesque,” by a renewed interest in the power of imagination and imaginative story forms, by a celebration of “la fiction fictionnante,” by a “grand retour à l’aventure,” by a “réaffirmation du romanesque,” or, finally, by a “retour du/au romanesque.” This list is by no means exhaustive, but it already gives a good idea of the variety of ways critics have endeavored to say essentially the same thing. But what is this thing that they are all saying? If the *romanesque* and its return are as often as not presented as facts of the contemporary period, clear explanations of what this return and this *romanesque* might mean are surprisingly hard to come by, sometimes even, it should be said, in studies which take the *romanesque* as their primary subject of inquiry. This is not to suggest that all such studies are deficient because they lack a unitary, global definition of the orientation of the “retour du romanesque.” If one can say that such a return has occurred, there is no doubt that it has assumed myriad guises. There is no manifesto that one can refer to for a meaty, definitive answer to the question of the forms and aims of the contemporary *romanesque*. With that in mind, it is, however, important to note that there is a tremendous amount of definitional inconsistency when it comes to the subject of the *romanesque*, and that these inconsistencies often create conflicting
accounts of what the romanèsque is and how it manifests itself in contemporary literature.

As we have already mentioned, one of the most immediate problems with a definition of the romanèsque is that the term is polysemous, referring at once to the genre of the novel (e.g. “la production romanèsque du vingtième siècle”), and to a set of thematic or stylistic features (briefly: adventure, sentimental poeticizing) that characterize a number of different types of novels, but which are not necessarily tied to or limited by the novel as form. In most instances it is easy to tell whether a writer is using the word romanèsque to refer to the genre of the novel or whether she is using it to refer to a set of thematic or stylistic features. There are times, however, when the meaning of the word is less clear. For example, when, in his forward to Des anges mineurs, Antoine Volodine speaks of his narrats as “des instantanés romanèsques,” it is not immediately clear whether he means to refer to some conception of the novel, or to a thematic understanding of the romanèsque. Such moments of confusion are not terribly frequent,

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2 This last point is perhaps somewhat contentious. Le Petit Robert, for example, defines the thematic or stylistic aspects of the romanèsque in relation to the traditional novel: “Qui offre les caractères du roman traditionnel : poésie sentimentale, aventures extraordinaires.” Two points should be made here. The first is that in order to associate the romanèsque exclusively with the novel as form, this form would have to itself be defined; and the definition of the novel has, historically, proved as difficult as it is tempting. The second is that when one considers the precise features of a thematic definition of the romanèsque, there is no reason why they cannot be affixed to certain types of cinema, theater, poetry, or, if one is being bold, music. Therefore, while the romanèsque no doubt derives a number of its connotations from what are understood to be the characteristics of traditional novels, this does not necessarily mean that a study of the romanèsque as thematic orientation should be limited to the novel as genre, or necessitates a broad theory of the novel and its development. It should, finally, be added that recent discussions of the “retour du romanèsque” have not tended to pay much attention to the distinctions that have been made between roman and récit.

but they do arise in the critical discourse on the romanesque. Furthermore, it could be argued that this very confusion at times leads studies of the “retour du romanesque” to blur the lines between analysis of particular thematic features present in prose texts, and theorization of the novel as genre. Jean Rouaud, among others, often passes from romanesque to roman in his polemical account of the transformation of French prose since the nineteenth century. Therefore, although the presence of generic and thematic definitions is not really a problem if one is careful to specify how one is using the word romanesque, it is nevertheless potentially disorienting in cases where both the thematic and the generic meanings could apply.

Just as an understanding of the romanesque as a generic category has the potential to inflect discussion of the thematics of the romanesque, so too does the term’s use in both literary and real-world contexts. If the romanesque is attributable to a particular type of fiction (often, the roman romanesque), people and situations can just as readily be branded romanesque. The most common understanding of this usage is reflected by the Petit Robert’s entry: “Qui contient ou qui forme des idées, des images, des rêveries dignes des romans ; rêveur, sentimental.” The romanesque, in this particular instance, describes a number of quite distinct phenomena. First, it describes real-world situations that seem to have the unrealistic characteristics of particular types of novels; and here one could imagine anything ranging from espionage and political intrigue (“une assassination romanesque”) to turbulent love affairs (“une liaison romanesque”). This elasticity reflects the range of works that fall under the umbrella of the traditional roman romanesque,
which can be applied as easily to a roman rose as it can to a roman noir.⁴ For this reason, the use of the term to describe real-world events tends to connote a certain extravagance and unusualness, while being nevertheless hard to pin down to any precise definition.⁵ At what point, one might ask, does lived experience leave the realm of the routine or everyday and enter that of the romanesque? Faced with such questions, some critics have suggested that the polysemantic romanesque is a privileged space for interrogating the borders between fiction and life, and how the two mutually influence one another.⁶ The issue of the directionality of influence between life and fictional models also points to the possibility of a romanesque outside the form of the novel, that would be attributable both to other artistic forms and to particular sequences of events in the real world, some of which undoubtedly predate the novel as literary form.

⁴ The genre of the roman rose or romance novel is, in French, more frequently referred to under the designation “roman à l’eau de rose.” For simplicity’s sake, I will use the shorter roman rose to refer to novels of the kind published by Delly or Max du Veuzit.

⁵ Erich Auerbach points towards an interesting interpretation of the use of romanesque in real-world contexts when he speaks of the modern understanding of adventure: “When we moderns speak of adventure, we mean something unstable, peripheral, disordered, or, as Simmel once put it, a something that stands outside the real meaning of existence.” Auerbach, Erich. Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953. p. 135. This sense of an intrusion of an ordering (or disordering) of existence that is habitually excluded from our notions of everyday reality seems to correspond very well, in my estimation, to descriptions of real life as romanesque. It also suggests an intriguing reading of the romanesque as referring to situations in which discrete social and economic spheres come into contact. There is an interest in examining how the romanesque often involves a voyage toward the ‘lower’ orders of existence (crime, degradation, corruption) or towards ‘higher’ orders (the rich prince falls in love with the common woman, the princess fantasy, etc.). The frontiers of the romanesque as literary genre are perhaps not entirely distinct from the frontiers that separate social and economic ‘worlds’ in real life.

The second way in which the *romanesque* is commonly used to refer to life outside of novels relates to a particular psychological disposition, sentimental or *riveuse*, that is, in most instances, essentially conceived of as a type of *bovarysme*.

*Le Petit Robert* defines *bovarysme* in the following manner: “Évasion dans l’imaginaire par insatisfaction ; pouvoir ‘qu’a l’homme de se concevoir autre qu’il n’est’ (J. de Gaultier).”

It is this ‘unrealistic’ evasion that is most often emphasized in references to characters or people having a certain “psychologie romanesque.” In one of the most commonly cited examples of this use of the word *romanesque*, taken from Stendhal’s “Le Rose et le Vert,” a woman is described as “très romanesque, romanesque à l’allemande, c’est-à-dire au suprême degré, négligeant tout à fait la réalité pour courir après des chimères de perfection.” This stereotype of the “femme romanesque,” perpetually unsatisfied with the real and chasing idiocies that she has read in (usually poor) novels, is very important to a full understanding of the connotations that the *romanesque* still carries.

There is a prevalent strain of sexist thought which defines the *romanesque* by its (gendered) reader. Such thought surfaces in distinctions such as that which Albert Thibaudet made between, on the one hand, a masculine *romanesque* (concerned with adventure and action), and, on the other, a feminine *romanesque* (sentimental, precious, or romantic). Thibaudet explicitly connects this latter *romanesque* to *bovarysme*: “Le roman romanesque a pour clientèle des femmes à l’imagination faible et à la vie froissée, des Emma Bovary.”

There is much that could be said about such a statement—a statement which makes the

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7 The reference in this passage is to Jules de Gaultier’s famous work *Le Bovarysme*.
8 Thibaudet, Albert. “Le roman de l’aventure” (1919). In: *Réflexions sur le roman*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963. pp. 76-77. It should be noted that Thibaudet returned to the subject of the *romanesque* at numerous times in his career as a critic, and that his opinions on the matter did not remain static.
rather odd assertion that these women have *weak* rather than overactive imaginations\(^9\)— but for our purposes the essential thing is that it defines a particular *romanesque* as both literary tradition and psychological disposition in pejorative, gendered terms.

Furthermore, in much the same way as the elder Madame Bovary looks upon Emma’s reading habits as morally dubious, the act of losing oneself in the romantic realms of the *roman romanesque* has, for Thibaudet, a decidedly suspect character: such novels are really read by women “à la vie froissée.” It is a lamentable, but nearly universal truth that women in the past two hundred years who have sought political, economic or social equality—to say nothing of reproductive rights—have found a certain portion of the population eager to brand them whores.\(^{10}\) While one could charitably read Thibaudet’s statement as denoting pity rather than bourgeois disdain, it is hard not to see this epithet as participating in the tradition of describing women of loose morality as women who lead “des vies agitées.”

What is interesting about this disdain is that the *romanesque*, traditionally a literature with a strong preoccupation with *values*, and a literature that has also been dismissed as completely ignoring real political and social situations to fly off into fantasy worlds, should here find itself accused of promoting “légèreté,” or, at the very least, of appealing to women who are already susceptible to such temptations. These connotations persist to this day. For example, the sign at the entrance to the Jardin Casque d’Or in

\(^9\) This weakness perhaps explains their supposed insensitivity to more subtle literary forms, and their desire for the powerful stimulants of the *romanesque*.

\(^{10}\) For a fascinating example of this, see the 1849 article from right-wing pamphlet *L’Union Sociale* entitled “Une Candidate,” in which the presentation of a woman—in this case, Jeanne Deroins, whose name is repeatedly misspelled in the article—for political office is said to be evidence of “une perturbation morale.” The article goes on to say that women of this sort are always women who lead “une vie agitée,” and suggests that the *candidate* is undoubtedly a women of ill-repute, and also perhaps a lesbian. The article also shows drawings of women smoking, with the caption: “à vingt ans tu fumais, à quarante ans tu seras candidate!” *L’Union Sociale*. Periodical. Paris: Paulin et Chevalier. April 15, 1849.
Paris reads as follows: “Amélie Hélie (1879-1933), dite ‘Casque d’Or’, jeune femme romanesque, héroïne du film de Jacques Becker, interprétée par Simone Signoret en 1952.” It is not surprising that whoever thought up this copy decided to avoid writing, “Amélie Hélie, prostituée,” on a sign for a public park. The choice of the word “romanesque” is, nevertheless, intriguing. It would be understandable to call Amélie Hélie’s life romanesque, but unless one considers the decision to leave an abusive pimp for another, less violent gangster to be a sign of extravagance and unbridled sentimentality, it is hard to read this use of romanesque as suggesting anything but a certain loose morality or lifestyle. This is consistent with a reading of the romanesque that understands it as essentially pertaining to a stereotypically lower-class mode of living (and literary style). While the romanesque voyages up as well as down the social ladder, the connotations of the term, in real-life as in literary situations, tend to suggest the delineations between high and low economic and social classes.

While the “evasion” into the roman romanesque is still often considered of dubious intellectual interest and, perhaps, politically retrograde—one flees the real world and its pressing political issues for useless ideal realms, one immerses oneself in story and loses the critical perspective necessary for deeper political understanding—the idea of the romanesque as an immoral literature for women raises the possibility of another interpretation: that these literatures permit imaginative freedom which, symbolically, opposes the real constraints imposed by society. Such a reading would bring the romanesque into dialogue with the utopian drive celebrated by different strains of Marxist thought. If we return to the dictionary definition of bovarysme, we will note that

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11 Amélie Hélie (or Élie) was a prostitute who was at the center of a gang war in Paris. Her story was published serially in the journal Le fait divers in 1902, and, later, made into a popular film.
this particular understanding of the *romanesque* signals both the prevalent negative connotations attached to a form of “pensée romanesque,” and the potentialities of such forms of thought to break with realism or the real and conceptualize other modes of expression or existence. It is this duality of the *romanesque* that renders sweeping statements about its political or ideological orientations problematic. It is easy to brand the *romanesque* in its different manifestations as a simple or heavy-handed moralizing literature, as lowbrow entertainment inattentive to style or to the materiality of text, as a bourgeois divertissement severed from any consideration of the actual world. What the sexist view of the *romanesque* as immoral literature or thought hints at, however, is the other face of this literary tradition: the *romanesque* as utopian vision that seeks to define new modes of existence, the *romanesque* as axiological literature that brings into sharp focus the hypocrisies of the real social world. The importance of the axiological dimension of this tradition (or these traditions) has been signaled, notably, by Thomas Pavel; and although twentieth-century French literature has often been suspicious of formulations of broad or universal values, the moral visions emanating from these thematic extremes, the sense of the *romanesque* as essentially a value literature continues to influence the manifestations of the “retour du romanesque” in the contemporary period. As these examples make clear, the polysemantic nature of the word *romanesque* must be considered not only because it is a potential source of confusion (between

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12 Madame Bovary is, again, particularly remarkable for its delicate and sustained reflection on these two dispositions of a particular type of romantic thought. An inability to reconcile the mercilessness of the novel’s descriptions of weak-minded sentimentality, and the sympathy of its depiction of the desire to escape the oppressiveness of mundane bourgeois life, has led more than a few readers and critics to opt for either overwhelmingly positive or negative reactions to Emma.

generic and thematic definitions), but also because the connotations that attach themselves to the *romanesque* in literary and real-world contexts tend to cross the boundaries between these supposedly discrete realms.

In addition to the complications arising from these different uses of the word *romanesque*, the variety of definitions of the *romanesque* as a set of thematic characteristics of fictional texts must also be taken into account. Perhaps the most complete definition of the conventional understanding of the thematic characteristics of the *romanesque* is provided by Jean-Marie Schaeffer. According to Schaeffer, the *romanesque* typically displays four features which are, despite the term’s muddled history, representative of a more or less general consensus on how it is to be understood. These elements are:

1. The importance accorded to affectivity in the causal chain of the diegesis.
2. A representation of actantial typologies that focuses on extremes, whether positive or negative.
3. A saturation of events in the story, and the potential to extend the story quasi-indefinitely.
4. A form of mimesis which sets the story world off as a counter-model to the world in which the reader lives.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Schaeffer, Jean-Marie “La catégorie du romanesque.” In: Declercq and Murat (ed.), *op. cit.* pp. 296-301. Alain Schaffner notes that Schaeffer seems to have taken these criteria more or less wholesale from Anne Souriau’s article “Romanesque,” in *Vocabulaire d’esthétique* (ed. Étienne Souriau). Paris: PUF, 1990. p. 1245. Cf. Schaffner, Alain. “Le romanesque mode d’emploi.” In: Asholt, Wolfgang and Marc Dambre (ed.). *Un Retour des normes romanesques dans la littérature française contemporaine.* Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010, pp. 51-65. The reader might also notice that Schaeffer’s features correspond very closely to what scholars like Northrop Frye have discussed as the tradition of *romance*. While the use of *romanesque* in a text written in English does have a number of drawbacks from the perspective of style, the application of the English term *romance*—which carries its own set of secondary connotations—to the
This four-part definition has the benefit of accounting for the majority of texts habitually designated as romanesque. There remains the question of whether all four of these features must be present, and to what extent, for a work to be considered romanesque. As Thibaudet’s distinction between the sentimental and the adventure novel suggested, there exist different strains within the tradition of the roman romanesque, some of which disproportionately privilege or refuse elements of this global definition. As the present study aims not only to discuss a few of the uses of the romanesque in the contemporary period, but also to examine the shifting forms that the discourse of the “retour du romanesque” has assumed in the past 35 years, the primary aim of these analyses will not be to identify particular novels as romanesque or to use this definition to parse out authors who should or should not be considered in this light. Schaeffer’s definition is broad enough to encompass a number of dissimilar literary projects, and, in most cases, the question of whether an author’s oeuvre is or is not romanesque is less interesting than the question of how authors define their relationships to particular traditions of the romanesque, and to various discourses asserting its return in contemporary literature.

In addition to Schaeffer’s definition, which best reflects, in my estimation, the conventional understanding of what constitutes the thematics of the romanesque, a number of additional theorizations or postulates concerning the term have emerged in scholarly discourse. Among the definitions of the romanesque that depart from more conventional understandings of its thematic properties, Roland Barthes’s proclamations

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French context is also not without its dangers. I have opted, therefore, to speak of the romanesque rather than romance in the present study.

15 Although the point is perhaps somewhat obvious, it should not go unremarked that such a blanket definition of the romanesque accounts for basically all of the major traditions of genre fiction in the twentieth century. As we shall soon see, the question of the “retour du romanesque” is tied up in issues of what constitutes high and low literature.
on the subject surface relatively frequently in scholarly discussions. If I have chosen to speak of proclamations as opposed to a definition, it is because Barthes’s comments are disseminated throughout his oeuvre. There is no definitive text that one could isolate as fully encapsulating Barthes’s theory of the *romanesque*. However, when one traces Barthes’s comments on the subject through his work, the broad contours of a Barthesian definition of the *romanesque* become visible.\(^{16}\) For our purposes, the important features of Barthes’s *romanesque* are, first, that it is a practice which, if perhaps discernible in the traditional novel or *roman romanesque*, is in fact related to the *scriptible*: “le scriptible, c’est le romanesque sans le roman, la poésie sans le poème, l’essai sans la dissertation, l’écriture sans le style, la production sans le produit, la structuration sans la structure.”\(^ {17}\)

It should already be clear from this statement that Barthes has a very particular understanding of the *romanesque* that does not refer at all to the (highly readable) *roman romanesque* in its traditional manifestations. In a later interview, Barthes would offer further explanation for this idea of a *romanesque* detached from the form of the novel:

> Le romanesque est un mode de discours qui n'est pas structuré selon une histoire ; un mode de notation, d'investissement, d'intérêt au réel quotidien, aux personnes, à tout ce qui se passe dans la vie. Transformer ce romanesque en roman me paraît très difficile parce que je ne m'imagine pas élabordon objet narratif où il y aurait une histoire, c’est-à-dire essentiellement pour moi des imparfaits et des passés simples et des personnages psychologiquement plus ou moins constitués. C’est ce que je n’arriverais pas à faire et c’est en quoi le roman me paraît impossible. Mais en même temps, j’ai une grande envie de pousser dans mon travail l’expérience romanesque, l’énonciation romanesque.\(^ {18}\)

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\(^{16}\) While the number of articles and books that discuss subjects pertaining to Barthes and the *romanesque* is extensive, an excellent short analysis can be found in: Macé, Marielle, “Barthes romanesque.” In: Gefen, Alexandre and Marielle Macé (ed.). *Barthes, au lieu du roman*. Paris: Desjonquères/Nota Bene, 2002. pp. 173-194.


Such statements have led scholars such as Michael Sheringham to speak of Barthes in the context of a “romanesque du quotidien,” which would be characterized by fragmentation and discontinuity, which would refer to a process of writing the everyday without recourse to characters or story in the mode of the traditional roman lisible.\(^1\) If this definition of the romanesque points to intriguing practices in contemporary literature, it is nevertheless almost diametrically opposed to the conventional understanding of what constitutes the romanesque as a thematic disposition.\(^2\) When one hears talk of a “retour du romanesque,” one is unlikely to think of an interest in everyday life expressed in a fragmentary style without recourse to characters or plot. Any broad equation of the “retour du romanesque” with Barthes’s statements on the subject is thus likely to produce an account of this new romanesque that makes it highly Nouveau Roman-\(\text{esque}\).\(^3\) As we shall soon see, one of the major features of many of the calls for a “retour du romanesque” is a refusal of the Nouveau Roman and other types of “littératures modernes.” This refusal could even be said to be fundamental to the very act of positing the existence of a contemporary period in French literature. Therefore, if Barthes’s writings on the romanesque are of obvious interest, they are at once too idiosyncratic and too focused on the generic rather than the thematic romanesque to reflect the vast


\(^{2}\) This is understandable when one considers that Barthes’s definition of the romanesque is based more on a generic than on a thematic understanding of the word. This romanesque is an orientation or a form of interest in the real which is at the heart of novelistic practice, but which refuses the structure of the novel (because, as Barthes said, “J’aime le romanesque, mais je sais que le roman est mort”).

\(^{3}\) For example, Sylvie Loignon’s reliance on Barthes’s definition leads her to overemphasize fragmentary, deconstructive, or ironic modes of the contemporary romanesque, while ignoring equally if not more prevalent modes of “écriture romanesque” (in ‘serious’ literature) that do not resort to such practices at all. Her contention that the romanesque returns in the contemporary period in a sort of deliberately degraded form does deserve closer attention, however. Cf. Loignon, Sylvie. “Romanesque : le retour de flamme, ou comment faire l’amour avec J.-P. Toussaint ?” In: Mura-Brunel, Aline (ed.). \emph{Christian Oster et Cie : retour du romanesque.} Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. pp. 25-34.
majority of writing on the subject, and should be distinguished from formulations of a “retour du romanesque” in the contemporary period.

Before moving from a discussion of definitions to a discussion of uses or usefulness, a few words should be said about another important distinction that has been made within the various traditions that comprise the romanesque. For Jean-Marie Schaeffer, there is a difference between, on the one hand, the roman romanesque, and, on the other, what he calls the roman du romanesque. Whereas the roman romanesque is a first-degree story containing in some dose or another the elements that we have already mentioned, the roman du romanesque is a characterized by an ironic treatment of these elements: “Contrairement à la représentation romanesque, cette représentation du romanesque implique en général une distanciation (souvent ironique), donc une dissonance entre l’auteur et le personnage.”

The question of how irony inflects traditions of the romanesque is of prime importance to an understanding of the supposed return of these traditions in the contemporary period. While for a number of authors, including Jean Echenoz, irony is an important component of a literary project that interrogates “écriture romanesque,” the forms that this irony assumes are not always consistent. Irony can express itself in more or less corrosive or affectionate forms, and scholars of contemporary literature too often take the shortcut of justifying, in a sense, the potentially problematic “retour du romanesque” by assuring the reader that it retains or has learned from the suspicious or ironic modes of the Nouveau Roman or the textualist avant-garde. For many novels of the contemporary period, it is too simplistic to respond to the accusations of frivolity or conventionality (the charge: romanesque in the first degree) by suggesting that a particular novel is merely a sly reflection on literary tradition.

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(the Defendant pleads *roman du romanesque*, Your Honor). There is undoubtedly a strain of the contemporary *romanesque* that privileges the self-reflexive over the supposedly naïve. These instances of self-reflexivity, however, quite often do not share the same aims as those espoused by the anti-novels of the sixties and seventies.

Alain Schaffner has proposed an intriguing reading of *roman romanesque*/*roman du romanesque* distinction, arguing that the tradition of the *romanesque* can actually be defined as a dynamic of differentiation in which refusal of what has constituted the *romanesque* operates to renew the *romanesque*. The traditions of the *romanesque* would, in this view, cease to be monolithic agglomerations of stereotypes to be recuperated or ironically refused; and would instead be seen as textual practices which have, since the beginning, constituted themselves by means of agonistic relations to their own supposed essential features. Such a view suggests the potential to move past the opposition between the *roman du romanesque* and the *roman romanesque*, and opens up the possibility of a fundamentally ambiguous fiction that would be at once ironic and admirative, or which would not be defined only on the basis of its first or second-degree treatment of its own generic topoi. In the cases of Jean Echenoz, Jean Rouaud, and Antoine Volodine there is not great deal to be learned by placing them on one side or the other of the *roman romanesque*/*roman du romanesque* divide. Rather, their fictions, like so many in the contemporary period, utilize a variety of distancing strategies while also elaborating what might be called first-degree, immersive stories.

In addition to the question of what the *romanesque* might be said to be, exactly, the issue of the “retour du romanesque” is only interesting to the extent that one can offer compelling reasons for why the *romanesque* should return. While it will remain the
opinion of the present study that conclusions on uses of the *romanesque* should remain highly context specific, a few words on some of its traditional functions, as well as on some of the explanations for its purported return, might help clarify the stakes of this contemporary *romanesque*. One of the traditional features of the *romanesque* that we have already alluded to, but which is of prime importance to any consideration of its “retour”, is its status as an axiological literature. As with most characteristics of the *romanesque*, this axiological orientation can be viewed in a positive or in a negative light. The various critiques of humanism that have emerged in twentieth and twenty-first centuries in literature and philosophy have cast legitimate suspicion on any affirmation of a transcendental or universal value system. Even the less stridently anti-humanist scholars have signaled the potentially problematic status of traditions like courtly romance as a literature of aristocratic self-affirmation. Auerbach, for example, has this to say about courtly romance:

> The courtly romance is not reality shaped and set forth by art, but an escape into fable and fairy tale. From the very beginning, at the height of its cultural florescence, this ruling class adopted an ethos and an ideal which concealed its real function. And it proceeded to describe its own life in extrahistorical terms, as an absolute aesthetic configuration without practical purpose.  

As this passage suggests, to the extent that such literatures present culturally specific and class-specific values in idealized forms, they tend to render universal and eternal what is in fact social and contingent. This passage also makes explicit that this particular *romanesque* is a (politically suspect) literature of *evasion*, “an escape into fable and fairy tale.” These critiques will follow the *romanesque* in its various guises right up to the

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24 While such problems can be signaled in general terms, specific examples from these traditions are always liable to nuance or contradict such accounts.
present day, and for good reason: when one examines the real social and economic conditions surrounding the production of various idealized axiological fictions, it is easy to come to the conclusion that their primary function is mystification.

The axiological dimension of the traditions of the *romanesque* should not, however, be reduced uniquely to the function of mystification, offering unreal worlds in place of real social analysis, and promoting particular cultural and class values as universal human values. There is, of course, an important current of Marxist thought which celebrates the utopian impulse to imagine other worlds and social configurations. If the counter-model to the world of the reader can be an escapist fairy tale, it can also just as easily be an alternative existence—utopian, dystopian, or somewhere in between—that challenges the status quo. Volodine’s violent alternate realities—which emerge from the violence of the twentieth century but which do not have systematic recourse to direct representation of twentieth-century history—spring immediately to mind, but Rouaud’s representation of historical distance in *L’Imitation du bonheur*, and Echenoz’s characters’ fantastic trajectories and voyages are also aimed at provoking reflection on political, social, and aesthetic questions. Just as the *romanesque* can be accused of escapism, it can be seen as an instrument for the promotion of revolutionary utopian thought. Just as it can be dismissed as a literature that aims to hypostasize as ideals contingent class values, it can be celebrated as a moral literature that attacks the underlying hypocrisy of a society that never conforms to its supposed values and moral

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25 Cf., among other examples, Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2005. This analysis is particularly interesting for its distinction between utopian science fiction and the fantasy novel (in which magic plays a central role), and the political orientations of each tradition.
codes. Jean Rouaud renews with traditions of the *romanesque* for several reasons, but one of the major ones is his desire to find a form that welcomes a not-particularly-modern celebration of justice and love. Echenoz, on the other hand, plays with the axiological schemata of the quest in order to suggest an axiological emptiness in the contemporary world, not in a denunciatory, conservative manner (the world has abandoned values), but in an epistemological sense: it now seems impossible to imagine how universal values would be identified or affirmed in any meaningful way.

What I have referred to as the duality of the *romanesque* comes back time and again when one tries to interpret the orientation of its supposed “return” in the contemporary period. The *romanesque* is a simplistic, bourgeois moralizing literature; the *romanesque* is a vital moral voice that opposes the ravages of end-times capitalism. The *romanesque* is breezy entertainment devoid of intellectual interest; the *romanesque* is a depository of archetypical narrative structures that give form and meaning to human existence. The *romanesque* is commercialized fiction aiming to displace more serious literature; the *romanesque* is self-consciously ‘low’ fiction aiming to destabilize calcified, academic, ‘high’ literature. If it might be satisfying to opt for one of these positions over the other, the reality of such a polymorphous category is that it is never only one of these things. What such oppositions suggest, however, is the readiness with which the

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26 It was this potentiality that Jean-Patrick Manchette had in mind when he called the *polar* “[…] la grande littérature morale de notre époque.” Manchette, Jean-Patrick. *Chroniques*. Paris: Rivages, 1996, p. 31.

*romanesque* lends itself to polemical formulations of its aesthetic and political orientations. Given the broadness of the category, it is tempting—and perhaps, at this time, vitally important—to view the *romanesque* from a distance, to break it down into manageable traditions and writing communities, and to interrogate these communities on the terms of their individual projects. What the discourse of return often seeks to impose, however, is a monolithic historical view that pushes writers and critics into camps, and creates an atmosphere of polemical opposition. Many of the *uses* of the *romanesque* are tied up in the issue of how one positions oneself with respect to the idea of return and the conceptualizations of literary history that the idea implies.

**Problematic Returns: Or, Why do We Say that the Romanesque Has Returned?**

It is hard to hear the expression “le retour du romanesque dans la littérature française contemporaine” without wondering whether it is not referring to a non-existent event. If the prodigal *romanesque* is now back, when exactly, one might ask, did it *leave*? So much is said about the *romanesque*’s return that it is sometimes forgotten how little we hear talk about its departure. But to read the press on the contemporary novel, one has the impression that sometime in the early sixties a group of stodgy structuralists and experimental novelists loaded up a clipper ship with swashbucklers and pirates, mad scientists and aliens, dashing spies and brutal hit-men, fainting ladies with ripped bodices and rugged (yet brooding and sensitive) men, dragons and ogres, princes and princesses, explorers and cannibals, and sent them off to more favorable climes (“world” literature). Might it not instead be affirmed that even during the heyday of the Nouveau Roman or
the apex of the influence of journals like *Tel Quel*, the roman esque remained, statistically speaking, what it has been for the past two hundred years or more, which is to say the dominant thematic orientation of French fiction? Although the sixties and seventies are often spoken of as though they were characterized essentially by the so-called “experimental” works of the Nouveau Roman and the Roman Tel Quel, it should not be forgotten that the Nouveau Roman was really only comprised of a handful of novelists whose identification with the group often varied over the years, and that *Tel Quel*, for all its supposed influence, always had fairly small print runs.\(^{28}\) Even if one pushes aside best-sellers and focuses on “serious” literature, a number of authors spring to mind who were critically well-regarded in the sixties and seventies, and who did not abandon the roman esque in one form or another: Patrick Modiano, J.M.G. Le Clézio, Michel Tournier, Jean-Patrick Manchette, Georges Perec or Jacques Roubaud, to name just a few. And even if one asserts that, despite this presence of the roman esque in some forms of serious literature, it was nevertheless discouraged by the major writers of the influential Nouveau Roman and *Tel Quel* movements, one would still have to explain the often roman esque characteristics of the novels of these very writers. Alain Robbe-Grillet makes abundant use of the tropes of detective fiction, Claude Ollier and Jean Ricardou could be seen in one light as writers of a peculiar form of science fiction, and Jean-Pierre Faye wrote novels which could also be attached to the traditions of the polar or the roman sentimental.\(^{29}\) What all of these examples demonstrate is that if one is going to

\(^{28}\) Cf. Forest, Philippe. *Histoire de Tel Quel*. Paris: Seuil, 1995, p. 301. Forest is, however, quick to assert that although *Tel Quel* operated from the margins of the publishing and academic worlds, its influence should not be understated.

\(^{29}\) Philippe Forest remarks somewhat disparagingly that, of the writers of the *Tel Quel* group, Faye “se donne les postulats esthétiques les moins aventurieux.” *Ibid.*, p. 221. He adds on the subject of Faye’s novels that, “Traités sur ce mode conventionnel que Faye précisément réfute, leurs thèmes pourraient servir
argue that there has been a “retour du romanesque,” the notion of return cannot be affirmed without reservations.

When one scratches under the surface of these declarations of a return, it becomes clear that any semi-coherent theory of a “retour du romanesque” requires two fundamental presuppositions: first, that this return is a return in “high” or “serious” literature; and, second, that the middle period was characterized by a some form of refusal or depreciation of the romanesque. The former point is important because it brings us to one of our problem words: literature. Anything but a passing consideration of the question of what is and is not qualifiable as literature runs the risk of leading to a protracted—even interminable, one fears—discussion of deficient definitions. As many scholars have noted, descriptive definitions of literature as a category tend to be, at best, partially satisfying. While a number of people have endeavored to explain what literature is (or, more often, what it definitely is not), for our purposes, two perspectives are of particular importance.30 The first tends to measure literature by its degree of self-reflexivity or by its avowed or implicit adoption of an autotelic disposition, while the second views literature as a social and institutional product: literature is constantly defined and redefined by reading communities, the popular press, academic institutions, and publishing houses. The first of these definitions matters because it grounds the importance given to self-reflexivity in our working understanding of what separates serious literature from frivolous or naïve fiction. If the contemporary era abounds in

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refusals of the supposedly sterile self-reflexivity of the Nouveau Roman or textualist avant-gardes, it has nevertheless retained a certain preference for works that avow their status as intertextual collage or as reflection on their own constitution as text. One of the great contradictions of scholarship on the contemporary period is its tendency to assert that literature has moved beyond the Nouveau Roman or the Roman Tel Quel, but then to judge this literature by importing many of the standards of literary judgment developed in this prior period. Hence the temptation to say that the novels of the “retour du romanesque” are really romans du romanesque and not, heaven save us, romans romanesques. What such a distinction tends to do, however, is privilege highly complex self-reflexive literature to the detriment of other literary forms, including novels that might be at once first-degree and intelligent; for surely there are ways of thinking with literature that do not always pass directly through second or third-degree treatments of a work’s form or thematic influences. While every author considered in this study engages with literary history and aesthetic genealogies, incorporating in one way or another a second-degree treatment of their own fictional practice, they also, as we shall see, explore the potentialities of immersive, first-degree fictional engagement. In other words, the second-degree strategies of these authors are not turned systematically towards an unmasking of the pernicious rhetoric of mimesis in the arts or towards a denunciation of forms of popular divertissement.

31 This celebration can take several forms. A novel can be considered serious because it presents a fable of the status of the novel. It can be serious because it adopts a postmodernist aesthetic of collage, impurity and blending of high and low cultures (a blending, which, paradoxically, authorizes a celebration of the work as “high” literature). It can be serious because it avoids the supposed traps of mimesis and representation, portraying instead its own status as textual production, and, depending on the case, denouncing the lie that underpins realist fictional modes. What all of these stances have in common is a privileging of self-conscious or second-degree fictional modes. A less precise formulation of this idea resurfaces in the frequently encountered assertion that a writer is “careful,” “pays attention” or “reflects” on his own fiction.
One of the most conventional ways of escaping the problematic terrain of what is and is not “literature” is to argue that with postmodernism these distinctions between high and low ceased to be operative. The “retour du romanesque” could then be said to be essentially a postmodernist literary movement, effacing the boundaries that separated low and high; and it has, indeed, been hailed as such. It is very reasonable to suggest that many of the works of the “retour du romanesque” blend low and high, and implicitly or explicitly challenge elitist modern aesthetics. This should not lead us, however, to equate the “retour du romanesque” with the postmodern and to assert that the contemporary period has put the high/low distinction behind it. While several of the reasons for this will be explained in our discussion of the contemporary as literary period, one important reason derives from a consideration of literature in social and institutional terms. For if, following in the wake of cultural studies, postmodernist studies, and some branches of structuralist literary studies, it is now more acceptable to be a scholar of what are perceived as low literary forms (comic books, genre fiction, etc.), this does not mean that the high/low distinction has ceased to matter in the contemporary period. Whatever might be said about the blending of high and low in recent literature, it remains a fact that publishing houses, literary prizes and academic institutions continue to operate in ways

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32 If anything, one could argue that despite blanket declarations about the death of literature as a concept or about the mixing of high and low in postmodernist aesthetics, our disciplinary prejudices on this matter too often go unanalyzed. The middlebrow as an under-read corpus in postcolonial studies was, for example, the subject of a very interesting article by Chris Bongie: “Exiles on Main Stream: Valuing the Popularity of Postcolonial Literature.” *Postmodern Culture*. Vol. 14, No. 1 (Sept. 2003). While postcolonial middlebrow literature has, since the publication of this article, received more attention, the topic of the middlebrow remains undere xplored in its implications for French studies as a whole. The unease that still sometimes accompanies the passage of an author from critical darling to enormous popular success—one might recall some critics protesting that *L’Amant*’s sales could only be attributed to the public’s misunderstanding of its subversive textual practices—suggests that we are not yet done with the high/low distinction. The seminal sociological study of this topic is Pierre Bourdieu’s *La Distinction : critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).
which render the literary landscape if not fully transparent (there are always liminal cases), at the very least broadly intelligible in terms of a distinction between serious novels and popular fiction. In many ways, Roland Barthes’s famous proclamation that “la littérature, c’est ce qui s’enseigne, un point c’est tout,” could be seen as more satisfying than other ways of defining seriousness or literariness.33 For if there is no doubt that contemporary literature of the sort published by the major purveyors of “littérature blanche” has made great use of the tropes of genre fiction, this does not mean that it does not continue to be perceived as ‘high’ while other literatures with less austere title pages often fall into the ‘low’ category. Literature may mean nothing more than what is taught, what is published by prestigious publishers, and what is given literary prizes by committees who often have very close relationships to such publishing houses, but this does not mean that it is an imaginary construct or that it cannot reasonably be distinguished from forms of ‘low’ literature. Similarly, to speak of a “retour du romanesque” is to speak of a trend in serious fiction that sees many authors explore the conventions of genre fiction, but not necessarily to speak of a trend which eliminates the distinctions between the two entirely. Every author in this study has at one time or another been published by the Éditions de Minuit, and it is this conjugation of a certain pretention to literary seriousness (even in a ludic form) and the tradition of the romanesque, that constitutes their principal interest of the present study. We say literature, therefore, because to not say it would give an inaccurate view of the conditions of literary production and consumption in contemporary France, conditions which still very much distinguish between serious and popular literature.

If we return to the question of the existence of a literary middle period where the *romanesque* is supposedly, in some sense or another, marginalized or considered trivial, we find that there are some reasons to lend credence to such a view. As is often the case with generalizations that span large swaths of literary production, the danger of gross oversimplification is evident. One of the reasons that the discourse of return tends to be so polemical and problematic is that its argumentation often relies on simplistic formulations that consider only the most extreme positions taken during the sixties and seventies. The complex and often doubt-filled progression of literary and theoretical projects of the *Modernes* is thus frequently boiled down to a doctrine of total literary auto-referentiality, of total refusal of subject and world as domains of interest, of total privileging of signifier over signified in texts entirely denuded of plot and character. And if the nasty internecine squabbles that characterized this literary generation as much as any other are highlighted in disparaging histories of *Tel Quel* or the *Nouveau Roman*, these lines of conflict are too often forgotten when it comes time to consider the aesthetic and theoretical positions of the period. There can be no doubt that a particular set of postulates derived from a number of texts of the period is directly antithetical to the tradition of the *romanesque* as we have defined it. Notably, the anti-humanist stances of

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34 As we will soon have occasion to discuss in more detail, the fact that modernism and postmodernism, structuralism and poststructuralism are not always rigidly distinguished in the French academy creates a significant source of confusion for a scholar wishing to compare broad categories of aesthetic endeavor. Rather than use the term *modernism*, which suggests a genealogy going back to at least Baudelaire and Flaubert, I will attempt to encapsulate what French critics sometimes refer to as the aesthetic of *les Modernes*, under the blanket term of *the modern*. This designation will refer to post-World War II avant-garde literary movements like the *Nouveau Roman* and the *Roman Tel Quel*, as well as to the major structuralist and post-structuralist theoretic currents which were in vogue in the 1960s and 1970s.

35 It will be recalled, for example, that many prominent New Novelists denounced what they saw as a “terrorisme ricardolien” at a 1982 colloquium. Cf. Forest, *op. cit.*, p. 229. That this may be seen as a sign of the changing theoretical winds is also of interest to our study, but it should not be ignored that the houses of these “experimental” novelists and theorists have often been divided against themselves.
many major theorists tend to undermine the axiological schemata that ground the actantial extremes (heroes and villains) of the *roman romanesque*, and which, moreover, are often seen as its primary literary function. While the issue is complicated by the habit that theorists have of going back and making every writer a poststructuralist or a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, it can be affirmed that the traditions of the *romanesque* fall, broadly speaking, into the category of the *lisible*. For this reason, it might be said that if the *romanesque* never really went away, many of its classical forms were subject to particularly sharp critique by authors, critics and theorists ranging from Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, to Jean Ricardou and Roland Barthes. What all of these theorists have in common is a notion of attention to text that refuses literary works that, in a sense, *have* to be read quickly and for story, literary works that become boring and unbearable if they are read in any other way.36

When one considers the points of contact between the present generation and various writers of the generation of the *Modernes*, it might be suggested that the declaration of a “retour du romanesque” often serves as a kind of dog-whistle argument. What is meant, when one speaks of this return, is a refusal of a number of theoretical positions that characterized the Nouveau Roman and the textualist avant-garde, some of which seem at best tenuously related to the actual traditions of the *romanesque*. For example, the “retour du romanesque” is often related to a return not only of the “world,”37 but also of the *subject*. It is not clear that the literary representation of the self

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36 Most of the writers of the contemporary *romanesque* in ‘high’ literature would undoubtedly be sympathetic to this stance. If a scattered few writers claim that they are interested in making text into a pure window onto story, more often one hears talk of a desire to be attentive to both story and writing.

37 A word which, since the “Manifeste pour une 'littérature-monde' en français,” now must be understood in two related senses: representation of the world (refusal of a particular tradition thought to be severed from the real), and the ‘world’ finding representation in a post-national understanding of francophone
should have much to do with the idea of the *romanesque*, but because it was one half of Ricardou’s critique of the dogma of representation-expression, it has often been associated with the “retour du romanesque.” The fact of the matter is that neither the subject nor the “world” was ever gone. That they were often considered always-already textual, as subjects to be discovered, created, dissolved and recreated in a process of textual exploration, does not mean that they somehow disappeared from the map. The most common way in which writers of the contemporary *romanesque* are ‘saved’ from accusations of *naïveté*—the argument that they are conscious of the presence of text as a mediating factor—is also an argument which relates their supposedly new textual practices to the traditions of the Nouveau Roman and the Roman Tel Quel. It should not go unnoted that every author included in this study has at one time or another been seen as influenced by the Nouveau Roman or by tel quelians like Julia Kristeva. In Echenoz’s case, Alain Robbe-Grillet himself said that the so-called “nouvelle école de minuit” was a group that had learned the lessons that the Nouveau Roman sought to impart. Likewise, numerous critics have seen Jean Rouaud as a literary descendent of Claude Simon. Antoine Volodine’s fiction is also frequently discussed in reference to theorists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Julia Kristeva. As Fieke Schoots aptly noted quite

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literary studies. That these two ideas are so intimately related in the manifesto is perhaps problematic. The declaration of a post-'French’ paradigm in literature in this manifesto is instrumentalized for a polemic that is in some senses highly France-specific.

38 Robbe-Grillet stated that the novelist in the eighties could adopt two stances, and that the “nouvelle école de minuit” opted for the latter: “Two possible stances remain. One could revert to earlier positions out of cowardice or fear, recoil before the dizzying unknown and pretend to have heard nothing; this is the famous ‘return’ to which many have resigned themselves. Or, conversely, one could confront the void: float for an indeterminate time in a weightless state, without a revolutionary project but also without nostalgia for the past—short-winded, perhaps, but at least bright-eyed, staring unblinkingly at a landscape in ruins.” Robbe-Grillet, Alain. “The French Novel: From *Nouveau* to New.” *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4515 (Oct. 13-19), 1989, p. 1130.

39 However, the issue of how this influence cohabitates with Rouaud virulent polemic against the Nouveau Roman has not been sufficiently addressed.
some time ago, whether this “renouveau romanesque” is perceived as antagonistic to the Nouveau Roman or as a continuation of its literary project often depends on the sympathies of the critic.40

This critical vacillation indicates the difficulty of offering a coherent explanation for works that often seem to incorporate antithetical aesthetic orientations (suspicion and naïveté) in their writing practices. As the forward to a recent volume on contemporary literature put it:

Parler de retour c’est créer le trouble. Les générations précédentes ont clamé si fort la nécessité de la table rase que l’on se sent quelque peu honteux de revenir à des modèles éprouvés. Mais, à l’évidence, ce retour – de la fiction en l’occurrence – n’est en rien une régression ni une reprise du même. Il est plutôt un pari que fait la modernité pour assouvir le désir de fable d’une époque sans renoncer aux expériences autrefois tentées et aux soupçons largement justifiés.41

The authors are undoubtedly correct to note that the term “retour” immediately summons problematic connotations. They are perhaps having it both ways, however, when they suggest that the contemporary “retour de la fiction” retains suspicion while satisfying the public’s thirst for stories.42 What this vision ignores is the potential incompatibility of the most violent forms of theoretical suspicion with any writing that represents a more or less intelligible fictional universe inhabited by more or less individuated characters who participate in a more or less coherent plot. As we have already mentioned, for many theorists, such novelistic forms were undeniably dead, and, for this reason, writers of

42 The use of “fiction” here is also problematic. While the connotation of fiction, in this instance, refers to something like what some critics call “la fiction fictionnante,” it is even more improbable that there could ever have been a period without fiction than that there was a period without the romanesque.
such novels could be seen as, at best, anachronistic or, at worst, retrograde. It is sometimes forgotten that there was a time when some of the very best minds in the field of literary studies could legitimately wonder whether the whole tradition of representational fiction would soon be definitively left behind, seen as nothing but a thing of past.\textsuperscript{43} If speaking of a “retour du romanesque” is an eminently problematic undertaking, it at least attempts to point to a trend which sees a recuperation of the types of representational stories that a very particular strain of anti-mimetic thought in the previous generation refused.\textsuperscript{44}

It is in this very specific context that it makes sense to speak of something like a “retour du romanesque” or a “retour du signifié.” Even if the romanesque never really went away, even if it is found in various guises in the works that this return often defines itself against, the range of uses of the romanesque in more or less traditional representational novelistic forms in the contemporary period belies some of the bolder speculations of theorists of the prior generation. It makes sense to speak of the eighties as a period which saw a shift in novelistic practices and, to some extent, in aesthetic postulates, and the term “retour du romanesque” accounts for this shift fairly well. This does not mean, however, that all the different shapes that this affirmation of return has

\textsuperscript{43} For example, Gérard Genette concludes “frontières du récit” with a reference to the then-recent novels of Philippe Sollers and Jean Thibaudeau: “Tout se passe ici comme si la littérature avait épuisé ou débordé les ressources de son mode représentatif, et voulait se replier sur le murmure indéfini de son propre discours. Peut-être le roman, après la poésie, va-t-il sortir définitivement de l’âge de la représentation. Peut-être le récit, dans la singularité négative que l’on vient de lui reconnaître, est-il déjà pour nous, comme l’art pour Hegel, une \textit{chose du passé}, qu’il faut nous hâter de considérer dans son retrait, avant qu’elle n’ait complètement déserté notre horizon.” Genette, Gérard. “Frontières du récit.” In: \textit{Figures II}. Paris: Seuil, 1969.

\textsuperscript{44} That the refusal of the romanesque involved a way of thinking about mimesis and representation is too often ignored in affirmations of the “retour du romanesque.” Many of the critical inconsistencies in the accounts of what this new romanesque is or is not trying to accomplish can be seen as stemming from a grafting of the critical conventions of anti-mimetic thought onto a literature that perhaps no longer presupposes the central postulates of this tradition of conceptualizing referentiality in literary works.
taken are equally justifiable. A careful analysis of the discourse of return reveals three major currents of argumentation that are adopted in affirmations of a “retour du romanesque.” The first emphasizes continuity, and suggests that the *return*, at least in its most interesting form, blends the theoretical projects of the *Modernes* with the (perhaps market-driven) demand for more readable, plot-driven fiction.\(^\text{45}\) As we have already suggested, this view can be accused of ignoring the potentially insurmountable theoretical obstacles to marrying these two projects; although here, as is often the case, it really depends on the writer and on the specific theoretical lens. This view is important because it suggests the enduring vitality of the theoretical and aesthetic concerns of the *Modernes*: the contemporary period would not be a *refusal* of the prior period, but rather a particular kind of continuation of it. For this reason, this current could be branded a *modern* (as opposed to contemporary) return to the romanesque. Rightly or wrongly, every writer in our study has been interpreted in this light at one time or another. The other two currents, conversely, emphasize rupture and rely on the notion that the theoretical and artistic practices of the Nouveau Roman and *Tel Quel* groups hit an impasse or ran out of steam.\(^\text{46}\) Once this idea has been accepted, a division between the two currents can be established on the basis of the rhetorical violence or lack thereof that each mode of argumentation adopts. There is both a polite “retour du romanesque” and a vengeful or polemical “retour du romanesque.” The first is comprised of authors who tend to suggest that they are writing after rather than against the Nouveau Roman or the textualist avant-

\(^\text{45}\) In many cases, it is not only contemporary writers who would refuse such visions of continuity, but also many of the proponents of the Nouveau Roman or Roman Tel Quel, who have been quick to brand contemporary literature a regression that seeks to pass off breezy, marketable fiction as serious literature.

\(^\text{46}\) As we shall soon see, this idea is essential not only to certain ways of thinking about the “retour du romanesque,” but also to the elaboration of a coherent definition of the contemporary as distinct literary period.
garde. In this camp, one finds formulations that emphasize boredom and the desire to try something new, and even, sometimes, a kind of blissful and unselfconscious ignorance. If Jean Echenoz spoke recently in an interview about beginning his career at “un moment où le roman est en assez mauvais état,” his statements with regards to the Nouveau Roman are generally marked by politeness and respect. He is not a writer who expounds upon the “terrorism” of the prior generation, or who speaks of his novels as aimed at discrediting a set of fallacious theoretical and aesthetic stances. The polemical or vengeful return to the romanesque, on the other hand, tends to characterize the prior generation as having undertaken a campaign of intellectual terrorism seeking to discredit all fictional works that did not conform to their rigid understanding of what constituted modern or aesthetically and theoretically rigorous textual practices. As Alain Buisine explained it, this return to the romanesque “est à la mesure de la violence, de l’intransigeance, de l’exclusion et de l’excommunication théorique dont il fut ‘victime’.” Fighting fire (both real and imagined) with fire, many of the loudest proponents of a “retour du romanesque” view their efforts as nothing less than a kind of war to reestablish the right to write stories again. This polemical “retour du romanesque” has taken many different forms in the past thirty years. Its rhetoric is immediately apparent in Michel Le Bris’s calls for a “littérature voyageuse” or in his decision to choose for topic of one of the earliest Étonnants Voyageurs festivals “Le grand retour de l’aventure.” It crops up again in the theoretical works of the writers of “La Nouvelle

47 “Loin avec Jean Echenoz.” Interview with Laura Adler. France Culture (Radio/Internet), (Sept.) 2012.
49 Michel Le Bris is the founder of the Étonnants Voyageurs literary festival, which has for over twenty years united a number of writers and scholars for discussions on a variety of themes, many pertinent to the question of the “retour du romanesque” (1991 – “Le grand retour de l’aventure,” 1994 – “Sur les pas de
Fiction,” and their calls for a return to a literature that privileges imagination and fiction.\textsuperscript{50} It is present as an undercurrent in many conservative critiques of mid-twentieth century French theory.\textsuperscript{51} Finally, it is a sometimes overlooked aspect of the “Manifeste pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français.” It is this polemical return of the romanèsque that characterizes Jean Rouaud’s recent novels, essays, and critical writings. While much could be said in defense of les Modernes as they are portrayed by these various groups, for our purposes it is not the extension of this polemical discourse, but rather its longevity that is cause for some concern. It could be argued that the rejection of a tradition that saw its most vibrant period in the sixties and seventies have grown louder rather than quieter as the years go by. It may have made sense to speak of a “retour du romanèsque” in the eighties. Does it still make sense to do so thirty years later? As our discussion of Jean Rouaud will make clear, we should not accept without reservations an affirmation of a

\textsuperscript{50} Although, like Jean Rouaud, their particular vision of literary history rejects more stridently Emile Zola and naturalism than it does the Nouveau Roman and the Modernes. The relations between this group and various currents of aesthetic practice are highly complex, and cannot be fully explicated here. In many ways, they are exemplary of a paradoxical literature that distinguishes itself from the Modernes, while borrowing more or less wholesale many of the theoretical postulates that justified the Nouveau Roman. It should finally be noted that here, as elsewhere, the emphasis on fiction as an element that has in some way returned is highly imprecise.

\textsuperscript{51} Although many of the theories which broadly associate traditional narrative forms with various reactionary ideologies can be accused of oversimplification, it should not be forgotten that the Modernes elaborated their fictional and theoretical projects in an intellectual environment where the proponents of a “littérature romanèsque” were often, if not always, politically reactionary. For example, Jean-René Huguenin, who wrote in 1956 that “La haine du monde arabe doit nous relever, nous dresser, nous brûler,” saw the romanèsque as the appropriate literature for Frenchmen who shared his political views: “[les Français] ont dit non à Faye et aux Éditions de Seuil, à Bresson et à Vadim, aux intellectuels de gauche et à l’impuissance, à l’ennui, à l’indécision, à la mauvaise conscience. Ce qu’on attend de la politique on l’attend aussi du roman : de grandes aventures, de la passion, le goût de vivre. Je suis sûr, je suis passionnément sûr que je parle le langage de demain.” Cited in Forest, op. cit., p. 101. Contemporary critics who call for a “retour du romanèsque” must be alive to the danger of inadvertently (or intentionally) speaking Huguenin’s language of tomorrow.
return of the romanesque that arrives some twenty five years after the romanesque was first stated to have come back.

It is perhaps anxiety over the increasing staleness of a call for a return of or to the romanesque, as well as over the problematic regressive connotations of the word return itself, that has led to the proliferation of alternative ways of speaking of a “retour du romanesque.” At a recent panel on precisely the subject of the “retour du romanesque,” the participants—Muriel Barbery, Wesley Stace, Jean Rouaud, Stéphane Audeguy, and Jean-Claude Lebrun—expressed some reservations about the term “retour du romanesque.” Audeguy declared, quite reasonably, that he was personally bothered by the notion of return, and did not see his novels as efforts to restore a lost tradition: “Paul Bourget ne me manque pas.” Jean-Claude Lebrun then suggested several alternative formulations: “reconnaissance du romanesque,” “reprise en compte du romanesque,” and “réaffirmation du romanesque.” One could ask whether any of these formulations really avoid the problems that return seems to raise, for they all retain the prefix “re-” and its implication of a backward motion and a repetition. While it would be easy to avoid such connotations by speaking of the uses of the romanesque or of an affirmation of the romanesque in contemporary fiction, in the case of this particular panel, such formula would miss the point. Wesley Stace spoke of writing story as a kind of revenge that one takes upon ‘Theory’, while Rouaud made it clear that his novel L’Imitation du bonheur

53 The same applies, in my opinion, for the potential to distinguish between a “retour du romanesque” and “retour au romanesque.” While several critics have found this distinction important—and it is undisputable that in one case there is more agency reflected than in the other—it is not clear that the two need to be rigidly distinguished. The important thing, in my estimation, is to be clear about where and how the discourse of return is being affirmed. That some writers willingly see themselves as returning to prior models while others see this return as something to which they are subjected is taken for granted.
(2006) was precisely interested in a retrospective vision of literature in the past forty years. Whatever name one gives it, therefore, readers should be aware that, for many writers, *return* is essential to their vision of an “écriture romanesque” as a polemical refusal of a particular theoretical and aesthetic tradition. It would be hasty to suggest that the popularity of the *romanesque* among ‘serious’ writers of the contemporary period is entirely attributable to a desire to violently affirm their rejection of the prior literary period. The longevity of the discourse of the *romanesque*’s return, however, can reasonably be interpreted in this light. We keep asserting that the *romanesque* has returned because the *romanesque* is a convenient rhetorical tool that can be used to express one’s distaste for other literary forms.

One of the principal arguments of this study will be that we have reached a point where it is much more productive to identify the uses of various traditions of the *romanesque* in contemporary literature than it is to affirm that the *romanesque* has returned. One of the ironies of the discourse of return is that it tends to take aim at formalism and structuralism while at the same time promoting a vision of the *romanesque*’s return that recalls great formalist theories of literature.\(^4\) The *romanesque* is undoubtedly important to contemporary French literature, and it does make sense to speak of a shift in literary practices in the early eighties that, in one light, might be spoken of as a *return* of certain traditional thematic elements. As the contemporary period grows ever longer, however, it becomes clear that the *romanesque* must be

\(^4\) Here I am thinking primarily of the work of Northrop Frye. It is not uninteresting to such a view that this is not the first time that the *romanesque* has ‘returned’. There was already a “retour du romanesque” in the early twentieth century that opposed naturalist and symbolist literature. On this subject, cf. Raimond, Michel. *La Crise du roman. Des lendemains du Naturalisme aux années vingt*. Paris: José Corti, 1985. And: Rivière, Jacques. *Le Roman d’aventure*. Paris: Éditions des Syrtes, 2000 (original publication date: 1913).
detached from the polemical discourses that continue to laud its return as a salubrious antidote to supposedly less interesting forms of literature. There ought to be room in the literary world for writing adventure and for the adventure of writing. What the most polemical accounts of the romanésque’s return tend to do, however, is define the contemporary in too narrowly exclusive terms. It is vital for the continuing vitality of research on the contemporary romanésque that it leave behind the simplistic and problematic views of literary history that tend be associated with current declarations of the “retour du romanésque.”

On the contemporary in French literature

As we have just seen, since the term “retour du romanésque” entered the critical discussion, there has been a lively debate concerning how to understand the notion of return and the concept of the romanésque. The idea of the contemporary as literary period or aesthetic orientation is, however, often presented without much in the way of justification or definitional clarity. This designation, occasionally qualified with “extreme” in the case of very recent literature, has gained such broad currency in French literary studies as to be accepted more or less wholesale as synonymous with post-1980s fiction (which means, of course, that the contemporary now spans some thirty odd years). So common is it now to publish books discussing “contemporary” literature, that it might easily be overlooked that until relatively recently the term was seldom used in literary contexts, where “modern” was in almost all cases preferred. Before the eighties, one was

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often said to be the contemporary *of* another writer, but one’s writing would be *modern* rather than contemporary. With the critique of modernity and various modernisms, which began in America near the middle of the twentieth century and gathered steam in various European literatures and academies as the century wore on, the need for a new designation for current literary works became abundantly clear. After all, to write of modern postmodern literature would be at best inelegant and at worst downright confusing. This observation points immediately to one of the central issues of the contemporary as literary designation, which is that of its relation to modernity, modernism and postmodernism. As Lionel Ruffel aptly notes in his introduction to the volume of collected essays entitled *Qu’est-ce que le contemporain*, the fact that “contemporary” has now almost completely supplanted the term “modern” as the pertinent aesthetic category for current French literary practices demonstrates that to speak of contemporary literature is already, in a sense, to say *post-‘modern’* (though not necessary *postmodern*).\(^56\) A brief overview of the history of the uses of “contemporary” in literary contexts is sufficient to demonstrate that the contemporary as literary-temporal designation should not be affirmed unproblematically; and if this periodization is undoubtedly useful for understanding French literature, we must be clear about what exactly it implies.

There are several ways of theorizing the contemporary. The most common understanding of the contemporary sees it as referring only to a period of time, and seeks

then to describe works falling into this period thematically or generically. This type of periodization presupposes in some sense a split from a prior period, and a thoughtful analysis of contemporary literature must therefore consider the issue of how the contemporary enters into relation with the modern, and how in turn this relation might position the contemporary with respect to postmodernism. The affinities of the writers of the new romanesque are wide ranging and diffuse, and if these writers are each other’s contemporaries, they do not all relate to their time period in the same fashion. This analysis will conclude that despite a great deal of semantic murkiness surrounding the term, it is useful at the present time to speak of the contemporary as a literary period which differs in a variety of manners from the dominant literary and theoretical trends of the 1950s to the 1970s.

Although a distinction should be made between minimal historical definitions of the contemporary, which treat it as a time period and attempt to establish descriptive typologies of its literature, and more exclusionary theorizations of the contemporary, which attach the term to a unitary literary movement or theoretical posture, this division should not suggest a value judgment which would oppose an insufficiently problematized minimal definition with a more nuanced exclusionary definition. On the contrary, many of the most impressive studies of French literature of the past thirty years adopt a big-tent, inclusionary perspective on the contemporary. Additionally, many of the issues that are raised by more prescriptive theories of the contemporary are addressed in a very insightful fashion by the descriptive histories of the period. This is certainly the case with Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier’s magisterial La Littérature française au présent, a

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57 For the sake of simplicity, unless otherwise indicated I will use “contemporary” as a temporal designation encompassing French literature from the late 1970s to the present.
work of such comprehensive scope and academic rigor that one would be hard pressed to define a category of contemporary French literature that it does not examine at the very least obliquely.\textsuperscript{58} As is befitting a work of this stature, its thematic categories are the broadest, with the contemporary partitioned under the headings of Self, History, and the World.\textsuperscript{59} None of the other descriptive accounts of the contemporary display as much ambition with respect to scope of inquiry, and they thus, appropriately, often choose more restrictive, local categories of reference. But even in works focusing on smaller niches of the contemporary French literary scene, there is a great deal of overlap when it comes to definitional categories. For example, Bruno Blanckeman’s \textit{Les Fictions singulières}, Bruno Blanckeman, Alina Mura-Brunel and Marc Dambre’s edited volume \textit{Le Roman français au tournant du XXIe siècle}; Barbara Havercroft, Pascal Michelucci and Pascal Riendeau’s edited volume \textit{Le roman français de l’extrême contemporain : Écritures, engagements, énonciations}; and Roger Godard’s \textit{Itinéraires du roman contemporain} all underline the importance of autofiction and other forms of biofiction in the contemporary period.\textsuperscript{60} One could deduce from this that fictions of the self constitute the dominant movement of this period, and such an assertion would certainly have its merits. However, there is no shortage of other generic or thematic categories applicable to contemporary

\textsuperscript{58} It is important for our particular study that Viart and Vercier justify the decision to publish a second edition of this work by suggesting that a number of important authors and movements were not included in the first version, and that they had, notably, not given enough attention to the \textit{romanesque} in contemporary literature. Cf. Viart, Dominique, and Bruno Vercier. \textit{La Littérature française au présent : héritage, modernité, mutations}. Paris: Bordas, 2008. p. 5.

\textsuperscript{59} It is not accidental that these subjects of inquiry correspond more or less exactly with some of major battlefields of structuralist and poststructuralist theory, as described, for example, by Antoine Campagnon. See: \textit{Le Démon de la théorie : littérature et sens commun}. Paris: Seuil, 1998. As we have mentioned, the justification for the assertion of a contemporary period in French literature is tied to the idea of the return of certain repressed elements of the prior literary epoch.

\textsuperscript{60} Bruno Blanckeman and Barbara Havercroft’s edited volume \textit{Narrations d’un nouveau siècle} (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013) was published too late for me to consider it for this work.
fiction. Warren Motte and Roger Godard have, in separate books, described the
contemporary in terms of minimalism or “critical novels.” In *Les Fictions singulières*,
Bruno Blanckeman complements his discussion of “fictions de soi” with sections on
“fictions vives” and “fictions joueuses,” with the latter category corresponding more or
less exactly with Havercroft, Michelucci and Riendeau’s category of “écriture du jeu.”
There are many theorists of the contemporary who emphasize an essayistic turn in
contemporary French fiction, and, in particular, the profusion of erudite, historically-
oriented works of fiction.\(^{61}\) The issues of spaces or geographies, as well as questions of
genealogy are also potential rallying points for recent fiction. As these thematic divisions
suggest, the concerns of contemporary French novelists are wide ranging, and the
scholarly community is constantly negotiating the major definitional features of this
literature.

These accounts of the contemporary period in French literature help determine the
thematic or generic allegiances of the authors considered in this study, as well as
illuminate the literary world that they are writing in or against. As we have already
mentioned, the authors of the new *romanesque* do not, broadly speaking, fit into neat
categories of classification. The most consistent allegiance shared by the various authors
of recent *romans romanesques* is that of a refusal of auto- or bio-fiction.\(^{62}\) But even in
this particular case, there is not total consensus—while Antoine Volodine can easily be

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\(^{61}\) Dominique Viart has written extensively on this issue. Havercroft, Michelucci and Riendeau’s edited
volume also chooses “l’écriture des idées” as one of the four major movements in contemporary literature.
A more general consideration of the essay form in twentieth-century France can be found in:

\(^{62}\) As this sentence suggests, there is a great deal of terminological debate surrounding the wide variety of
different approaches to writing about the self. The points of divergence and conflict between various types
of writing of the self are often overlooked by popular denunciations of autofiction. Cf. Viart, *op. cit.* And:
Blanckeman, *Les Fictions singulières, étude sur le roman français contemporain*. Paris: Prêtexe éditeur,
2002 for a more nuanced discussion of this issue.
situated on the opposite end of the spectrum from autofiction, *L’imitation du bonheur* is one of the only novels by Jean Rouaud that is not primarily concerned with questions of family and regional identities. If we were to associate each author in the present study with the definitional categories established by the major descriptive accounts of the contemporary period, the results would be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>DEFINITIONAL CATEGORIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jean Echenoz</td>
<td>Minimalism (Motte), Critical novels (Motte), Écrire le monde (Viart), Roman ludique/Roman indécidable (Blanckeman), Fictions joueuses/écriture du jeu (Blanckeman) (Havercroft, Michelucci, Riendeau), Fiction(s) en question (Blanckeman, Mura-Brunel, Dambre).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Rouaud</td>
<td>Sentiment d’illégitimité (Viart), Renouveau de l’ampleur romanesque (Viart), Autobiographie (Viart), Sociologie (Viart), Fictions de soi (Blanckeman), L’Histoire (Blanckeman, Mura-Brunel, Dambre), Légitimités (Blanckeman, Mura-Brunel, Dambre).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antoine Volodine</td>
<td>Écrire l’Histoire (Viart) (Blanckeman, Mura-Brunel, Dambre), Écrire le monde (Viart), Fictions vives (Blanckeman).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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This incomplete list takes into account only a few of the major works which attempt to categorize the contemporary period as a whole, without considering associations developed in monographs or by the authors themselves (Volodine’s “post-exoticism,” for example). What we can ascertain from this partial snapshot of the various identifications attributed to the authors in question is that these writers are seen to occupy very different spaces within the contemporary scene, and that, from a descriptive standpoint, the contemporary is hardly a homogenous literary period within which we can situate writers unproblematically. The definitional categories listed above evoke rupture with a certain
autarchic literary aesthetic, but they also suggest zones of conflict within the contemporary itself. Indeed, the authors under consideration are as likely to affirm their differences with their contemporaries as they are to reject the strictures of the prior literary epoch.

If the concept of return presupposes a relation to tradition that is alternatively recuperative and dismissive, the assertion of a contemporary literary period, by virtue of its status as a periodization, also carries with it the suggestion of rupture (with everything that cannot be said to be “contemporary”). The relation to tradition being one of the central concerns of the present study, a characterization of the contemporary in terms of its points of conjunction and disjunction with previous modes of literary practice is essential. As with any periodization, one must in this case deal to a certain extent in generalizations. Writers do not live and die within the neat boundaries of conventionally accepted literary generations, and for every affirmation of a broad shift in practice there are numerous exceptions to be found. For example, the contemporary period is widely associated with the decline of the textualist avant-garde; yet while the cultural zeitgeist has shifted dramatically since the ‘theory boom’ of the sixties and seventies, many of the big names of the time continued to publish well into the years that we now associate with the decline of their literary cachet, and their work has not been without influence on a new generation of writers.  

63 Among the major authors of the Nouveau Roman and Tel Quel groups that continued to publish in the contemporary period: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon (who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1985), Claude Ollier, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva. As far as the influence of the Roman Tel Quel is concerned, Philippe Forest, Stéphane Zagdanski, and Bernard Lamarche-Vadel are relevant examples of the continuing vitality of this current of literary production. The writers who have avowed the influence of Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and especially Simon are too numerous to name, and sometimes include, paradoxically, some of the most militant partisans of a “retour du romanesque.”
recent literary production is that it is a space of contention where radically heterogeneous literary practices stake their claims for relevance. Among such positions are still to be found the once-dominant literary, political and theoretical movements of the mid-century, including new avatars of formalist and avant-garde fiction as well as various specters of Marx and attempted revitalizations of the great ideological movements of the twentieth century.

With this essentially contested and heterogeneous nature kept firmly in mind, we can assert that the contemporary period is for many theorists characterized by a paradoxical rupture with the modernist aesthetics of rupture. Dominique Viart makes explicit this break with modernity, affirming that “Alors que la modernité se posait volontiers comme ‘esthétique de la rupture’, le contemporain, au contraire, s’affiche comme un temps de la reliaison.” For Viart, the three major attitudes towards classical heritage are classicism, which emphasized imitation; modernism, which emphasized rupture; and, finally, the contemporary, which emphasizes reading:

S’il est un trait qui définit parfaitement la littérature contemporaine (et, à certains égards, explique que l’on ait pu parler à son endroit de ‘postmodernité’), c’est bien son renouement avec le dépôt culturel des siècles et des civilisations. Elle entre en dialogue avec les livres de la bibliothèque, s’inquiète de ce qu’ils ont encore à nous dire – des circonstances qui ont suscité leur venue.

64 One notable exception to this particular view is Jean Bessière’s contention that the contemporary is nothing less than a complete departure with all forms of literary tradition of the past two hundred years. We will examine Bessière’s theory in more detail shortly.
65 Viart and Vercier, op. cit., p. 74.
66 Ibid., p. 20. It should be noted that for Viart this orientation to the past based in reading extends to the canonical works of the project of modernity as well. Bruno Blanckeman echoes this position, stating that contemporary fiction “n’entend pas plus brûler le passé que le faire renaître de ses cendres. Elle laisse les figures romanesques se développer en arborescence depuis de multiples souches de tradition enchevêtrées” (op. cit. 2002, p. 7).
While we might question the specificity of a notion like reading to define this particular generation’s attitude toward the past (has any generation of writers not been defined by reading in some sense or another?), Viart is certainly correct to suggest that a sense of reconnection with certain aspects of literary history is a key feature of contemporary literatures. This idea of reaffirming a lost connection is of particular importance because it will be a major subject of contention with respect to the progressive or regressive status of the contemporary literary period. Another feature of this passage to which we should be attentive is the manner in which it evokes a link between the contemporary and the postmodern, while at the same time suggesting that postmodernism might be insufficient in accounting for the French context. This question is of primordial importance to the elaboration of a theory of the contemporary literary epoch.

The break with the aesthetics of the modern—often viewed in a positive light by proponents of contemporary literature, who view it as an opening of discursive possibilities or as the efflorescence of a postmodernist aesthetic—is also at the center of a number of more or less vitriolic critiques of the contemporary as literary designation and as cultural-political era. Bernard-Henri Lévy, for example, has taken aim at defenders of the new “openness” of 1980s French literature, arguing instead that it is “une période assez noire et plutôt décourageante. Oui, une période de régression, de réaction tous azimuts, de conformisme culturel et d’obscurantisme politique. Tout le contraire, si vous préférez, de cette ‘grande lessive’ des idées dont nous parlent les hebdomadaires.” Mireille Calle-Gruber echoes the opinion that the contemporary period manifests symptoms of a decline in the publication of books with real literary concerns:

67 Cited in Forest, op. cit., p. 589.
Plus inquiétant : une certaine régression est aujourd’hui sensible dans la grande édition; il n’y a guère de formes nouvelles en littérature et les grands écrivains actuellement sont ceux qui poursuivent une œuvre qui s’est affirmée dans les années 50-70. Mais quel éditeur de nos jours saurait être le lecteur puis le médiateur d’une forme inédite ? Les revues sont en difficulté financière, déficitaires pour la plupart ; les critiques littéraires sont uniformes, rendent compte des mêmes livres, ne rendent pas compte des mêmes livres. La médiatisation éditoriale en cette fin de siècle opère ainsi une censure d’autant plus déleterre qu’elle est aveugle : sans critères, sans responsabilité. 68

Calle-Gruber is far from alone in her diagnosis of the decline of editorial independence. 69

Many contemporary critics (or critics of the contemporary) would add that recent years have seen an increasing dominance of television and film as outlets of fictional production, with the effect that authors are pressured to market themselves on talk shows or to write books that can be adapted to these more popular formats. 70 We should not be too quick to dismiss such views as elitist scolding; while many of the most polemical proponents of a “retour du romanesque” are quick to speak of the “terrorism” of the Modernes, too often they ignore the potential for market forces to operate a more subtle coercion that would push writers to produce more conventionally readable novels. For critics of the decline of the modern inherent in the concept of the contemporary, such

68 Calle-Gruber, op. cit., p. 61. Calle-Gruber’s particular affinities for the literature of the 1950s-1970s is evident in her choice of authors to represent the contemporary period. She emphasizes the importance of postcolonial and francophone literature, of feminist literature, and of certain formalist or ouliopian writers (Jacques Roubaud, Renaud Camus, as well as the big names of the Nouveau Roman), while entirely ignoring the “Nouvelle École de Minuit.” Jean Echenoz, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Christian Oster, and the rest of the so-called minimalist authors seem, in her estimation, beneath criticism, and do not make even a token appearance in this particular account of the history of French and francophone literature.
70 Gone are the days where the prestige and, in particular, the marketability of movies was assured through adaptation of literary works. It is more common now for a book to become a best-seller because of its adaptation to the big or small screen, and even the works of ‘serious’ literary authors like Pascal Quignard are often promoted through some variation on the formula “Now a major motion picture!” On the subject of the cultural influence of television, cf. Bourdieu, Pierre. Sur la télévision – Suivi de L’Emprise du journalisme. Paris: Liber, 1996.
observations provide further evidence of the general regressive nature of contemporary artistic production.

In keeping with this critique of the contemporary as rejection of a certain modern posture, Philippe Forest turns the tables on the champions of the contemporary as a series of positive ‘returns’, asserting that this supposed innovation is nothing more than a retrograde abandonment of that for which art and literature once stood. In keeping with this critique of the contemporary as rejection of a certain modern posture, Philippe Forest turns the tables on the champions of the contemporary as a series of positive ‘returns’, asserting that this supposed innovation is nothing more than a retrograde abandonment of that for which art and literature once stood. Forest’s immediate focus is not on the changes in the editorial world or on the rise of television and film as cultural forces, but instead on the unproblematized dissemination of a completely uncritical sense of the contemporary which flatly ignores rather than surpasses the central questions of the “ère du soupçon”. For Forest, the contemporary is a perniciously innocuous, whitewashed modernity which has abandoned the negativity, the critical impulse at the core of the modern project. Forest’s argument takes as its starting point a minimal definition of the contemporary, which holds that the term asserts only the banal fact of being born or being alive at roughly the same time. He then contends that the term cannot really find a positive orientation until one develops opinions on one’s situation within the world, in relation to one’s coevals: “[…] chaque génération, et chaque individu en son sein, doit penser et repenser pour son compte tout le temps de

71 In addition to his article “Décidément moderne: Sept notes dans les marges d’un essai en cours,” from which I will draw my primary citations on Forest’s theory of the modern and the contemporary, Forest also consistently characterizes the contemporary in terms of decline and regression in his essay Le Roman, le Réel. Un Roman est-il encore possible ? Saint-Sébastien-sur-Loire: Éditions Pleins Feux, 1999.

l’Histoire afin d’en faire émerger une figure du contemporain qui lui soit propre.”

To put this another way, the contemporary does not find any meaning until one does the work of constructing a personal and/or generational artistic genealogy, of considering the identifications and, especially, the antagonisms and divisions that give contour to one’s artistic endeavors. Forest finally advances that the modern impulse, largely abandoned by critics and artists of recent years, must be rekindled, must operate as negation of the contemporary’s negation (of the modern project). It is interesting to consider how Forest’s framing of the argument shifts the focus from the contemporary as “retour” after a formalist or textualist “détour” to the contemporary as “détour” awaiting a new “retour.” This is highly typical of a movement in criticism that seeks to depict the contemporary as a sort of anti-modernity, as a regressive period needing to be overcome by the still-relevant project of modernity.

Viewed in this light, the *retour du romanesque* is but another sign of the regression of French literature toward more conservative standards of literary value.

This is perhaps the moment for us to leave aside for an instant the issue of how to negotiate the distinction between the contemporary and the modern, and to embark on our own détournement into the province of more conservative literary criticism. For if a sizable

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contingent of the contemporary’s detractors choose to oppose it for love of the modern aesthetic, this group remains far smaller than that of the more right-wing critics who, mostly for very different reasons, find cause for recrimination in the state of contemporary French literature. In this vein, a number of critics have argued that the contemporary period has been witness to a literary decline. A full enumeration of the critiques of the conservative camp would be outside the scope and interest of this particular project, but it is instructive to consider a few of the dominant rhetorical positions that emerge from them. Often, such critics draw a parallel between the decline of the great French novel and the rise of various navel-gazing literatures, first the self-referential Nouveau Roman, and then later the quintessential nombriliste genre that is autofiction. They are also numerous in attacking multiculturalism, as well as any literature with more or less explicit ties to identity politics or communautarisme, which they see as obscuring questions of ‘real’ literary value (when not endangering French democratic ideals). The postcolonial francophone novel does not always fare well in their evaluations—and postcolonial studies fare, perhaps, even worse. Their critiques of the increasing role of television and the media in determining literary success frequently focus on how such programs emphasize authorial identity, cultural difference or the socio-economic status of the author rather than literary content. In short, from the conservative side of the political spectrum emerges an entirely different mode of critique of contemporary literature, which offers an alternative reading of cultural decline. Our analysis will not rely on such critiques in forming its understanding of the contemporary romanesque. However, when discussing a subject such as the romanesque which has so
often itself been accused of being the tool of a reactionary agenda, it is important to keep in mind what actual conservative criticism is writing about the contemporary.

If we return now from this brief digression to the question of the modern, postmodern and contemporary, we might remark that an attempt to clearly delineate the contemporary from the modern is quickly muddled by the unresolved issue of how these two terms are to be understood in relation to postmodernism, which is widely considered one of the major theorizations of Western literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Alain Robbe-Grillet (with the exception of his earliest novels), Claude Simon, and Philippe Sollers—writers who are clearly championed by the proponents of a modern literature at the expense of what is widely understood to constitute contemporary literature—are all authors who, in the Anglo-Saxon context, have been associated with postmodernism. To what can we attribute such semantic murkiness? In fact, the complication stems from a particularity of the French academic tradition which has it that the modern and postmodern are not always rigorously distinguished, and that the latter is often subsumed by the former. As Geert Lernout suggests in his article “Postmodernism in France,” if the French have supplied many of the major theorists of postmodernism, the term itself is not used as much in the French context as in American or British

75 An exhaustive definition of the fiercely-contested term postmodernism is well beyond the scope of the present inquiry. By way of a short overview, we might stress the wide popularization of the term following Jean-François Lyotard’s work La Condition postmoderne, in which he argues, grosso modo, for the postmodern as a posture of suspicion with respect to modernist master narratives (“grands récits”). To this one could add a suspicion of liberal humanism (the autonomy of the subject, the transparency of language, mimesis in the arts, the idea of progress, the existence of eternal truths). The postmodern chooses instead to celebrate a certain form of ‘weak thought’, “prizing playfulness above logic, irony above absolutes, paradoxes above resolutions, doubt above demonstration” (Suleiman, Susan Rubin. “The Politics of Postmodernism after the Wall.” In: Bertens, Hans, and Douwe Fokkema (ed.). International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1997, p. 52). In place of the ideas of rupture, progress or innovation, postmodernist art favors placing heterogeneous time periods together through the practices of pastiche, quotation and collage. Its temporality is that of the present instant; its conception of the subject favors notions of alterity and impurity.
universities. Lernout offers the following explanation for this situation: “The reason for this neglect of the term postmodern is simple: for domestic use the term ‘modern’ is quite sufficient to describe the same phenomena that are elsewhere called postmodern.” This accounts for what might have been confusing uses of moderne by Philippe Forest or Mireille Calle-Gruber—and, indeed, Lernout’s assertion makes sense in the context of the myriad critiques in France of modernes, critiques that focus on theorists whom Americans might refer to as postmodern or poststructuralist.

Were it a hard and fast rule that the modern and postmodern were consistently conflated, and that this particular sense of moderne could be consistently contrasted with the contemporary—which, remember, is a more or less explicit replacement for “modern” as a literary-temporal designation—a clear picture of the contemporary would indeed be very easy to come by. The problem is, of course, that if to say contemporary is always already to say post-modern, it is certainly not rigorously understood to mean post-postmodern. As a temporal designation, the contemporary refers to post-1980s literature, and while the postmodern begins much earlier—in the late 1950s by some accounts—it certainly does not die out with the literature of the 1980s. If there is semantic overlap between modern and postmodern in the French context, and if the contemporary is defined in opposition to the modern, how do we explain the frequent contention that the 1980s represent the apex of postmodernism in France? There are, in fact, a number of


77 Lernout cites Jean-Paul Aron’s Les Modernes, which focuses on theorists from the 1945-1984 period.
theorists who argue that the contemporary period is essentially characterized by postmodernism in literature. Jean-Louis Hippolyte, for example, has based his argument on the essential “fuzziness” of contemporary French fiction in theories of postmodern literature, while Lionel Ruffel sees the period in terms of a conjunction of three major influences: the American, the postcolonial and the postmodern (or: the conservative French critic’s unholy triumvirate). Anne Cousseau brings her definition of the postmodern into step with an understanding of the contemporary as rupture with modernism, asserting that postmodernism is essentially a mode of questioning the limits of the modernisms of the sixties and seventies. This restores the integrity of the separation between the contemporary and the modern, while at the same time restoring the confusion with regards to the relation of the modern to the postmodern. One might be forgiven for wondering if the search for the lines of demarcation between the modern, postmodern and contemporary does not amount to an endless theoretical chasing of one’s tail.

If the tortuous journey from one understanding of the relation between the contemporary and the postmodern to the next has a lesson to impart, it is that definitional inconsistency is the rule when it comes to the oft-used terms modern, postmodern and contemporary. This should not, however, lead us to abandon this terminological paradigm. Rather, we should approach our understanding of contemporary French literature with two basic facts in mind. First, that the contemporary as periodization is a priori a post-modern periodization, and that as such it cannot be conflated with the

80 Cf. Cousseau, Anne. “Postmodernité : du retour au récit à la tentation romanesque.” In: Blanckeman, Mura-Brunel and Dambre (ed.), op. cit. p. 360. This definition is consistent with an understanding of postmodernism as a late-modernism rather than an anti-modernism.
literary schools and theoretical positions that came to prominence in the period spanning the 1950s to the 1970s. If one were to abandon the idea of a departure from the modern, the contemporary period would have no justifiable means of distinguishing itself from prior literary epochs, and an entirely new periodization would need to be established. Second, that because the modern and postmodern are not always rigorously distinguished in France, French postmodernism, if such a thing exists, can neither be simply understood as a critique of structuralism, nor easily equated with the theorists that are called *modernes* (for the reasons stated above). It follows from this that the contemporary should not be unproblematically assimilated with postmodernism; other definitional categories are necessary to seize its specificity. Too many of the heroes of postmodern theory see their stars wane in the contemporary period for such a straightforward equivalence to be established.81 Faced with the aforementioned problems, it is clear theories of the contemporary in French fiction should avoid assertions of a broad identification with postmodernism.82 This is not to say that certain accounts of the postmodern are without interest to the study of contemporary French literature. On the contrary, there are many ways in which postmodernism can be seen as a useful paradigm for an examination of the “retour du romanesque,” which in some instances bears striking similarities to the postmodern return to storytelling, exemplified by John Barth’s “novels

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81 This is also the primary justification for not attempting to resolve this problem by moving the contemporary period back to 1968. There are very good reasons to assert that already in aftermath of 1968 there was a broad return to the story, to the character, and so on, with authors like J.M.G. Le Clézio, Patrick Modiano, Michel Tournier and J.-P. Manchette coming into prominence. If defining the contemporary in terms of the shift from the Nouveau Roman to the Roman Tel Quel, the novels of the Oulipo group, and the various new *romans romanesques* being written would have the advantage of making the contemporary map more seamlessly onto the postmodern, the decline from the 1980s onward of the textualist avant-garde, as well as the gradually diminishing prestige (and, more concretely, the deaths) of many of the big theorists of the 1970s suggests that this periodization would raise a new set of problems.

82 Dominique Viart also argues that the postmodern is less adapted to the French context than to countries like the United States, Spain, Italy, and England. Cf. Viart and Vercier, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
which imitate the form of the novel.”83 For Marc Gontard and Rachael A. Criso, among others, Jean Echenoz is essentially a postmodern author, while Jean-Louis Hippolyte reads Volodine’s fictions as reflective of a postmodern conception of the subject. There are thus numerous points of overlap between the interests of the present study and the work that has been done in various theories of literary postmodernism. The implications of these connections must, however, be studied without recourse to an overarching theory of the contemporary in France as postmodernist literary epoch.

Before bringing this analysis of the contemporary to a close, some attention should be paid to the recent publications of Jean Bessière, which elaborate without a doubt the most radical affirmation of the singularity of contemporary literature currently to be found. If Bessière’s often convoluted style makes a summary of his positions a difficult task, his argument for the specificity of a particular kind of contemporary literature must at the very least be accounted for, even if we will ultimately reject his theoretical framework. Bessière begins with the contention that a new paradigm must be developed in the face of an increasingly stale critical vulgate, comprised most often of a mix of references to Bakhtinian dialogism, to the reflexivity of the novel, and to postmodernism.84 Bessière widens the scope of his critique by arguing that beyond the current fads in theory, one can characterize all critical interpretations of the novel of the past two hundred years as having adopted, beneath apparent aesthetic diversity, the same

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basic model.\textsuperscript{85} This model is an interpretative mode based in the duality of \textit{case and type}, of \textit{singular and paradigmatic}: in all traditional forms, whether one speaks of realism, modernism or postmodernism, the fortuitous or the specific textual representations of the novel in some sense become exemplary, become analogies of various types of human experience.\textsuperscript{86} Bessière calls all novels of this type \textit{novels of the tradition of the novel}.\textsuperscript{87} This same approach grounds the division of works into genres or movements (which suppose the passage from the singular to the paradigmatic), and, with his refutation of this “critical vulgate,” Bessière expressly opposes all typologies or descriptive approaches to literature. The tradition of the novel is, for Bessière, aesthetically diverse, yet constant in its anthropological and cognitive perspective, which is that of the “anthropoïésis of individuality.”\textsuperscript{88} Whether one approaches a book from the perspective of Barthes or from the perspective of Auerbach, whether the book in question was written by Balzac or Sollers, the traditional novel is, in this model, always a representation of the \textit{human}, a privileged representation of individuality, a manner of identification with a reading of world and man.\textsuperscript{89} In other words, whether aiming for presence or dispersion, the novel of the tradition of the novel has been consistent in its characterization of itself as a sort of total experience. As this overview suggests, Bessière’s theory asserts a unity

\textsuperscript{85} It should be noted that Bessière seems to affirm a more or less total unity of critical approach and novelistic practice, and his critique is applied to both the modes of interpretation and the novels of the past two hundred years. His analysis thus authorizes the critic to pass from questions pertaining to the novel to questions pertaining to critical writings without any shift in perspective.

\textsuperscript{86} Cf. Bessière, \textit{Le roman contemporain}, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{87} “Romans de la tradition du roman.”

\textsuperscript{88} Cf. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 51. One could be forgiven for being someone confused by the appearance of the term \textit{anthropoïésis}, which is not commonly employed in literary studies. Bessière uses \textit{anthropoïésis} to refer to anthropological-artistic stances, or ways in which literature identifies and creates human subjects.

\textsuperscript{89} Bessière argues that the passage from realism to textualism traces essentially a movement from a minimal problematicity of the figuration of humans and situations to the indifferentiation of man based in an equation of man and language. In the latter case, the perspective is still one of a representation of the human, even if the human has become \textit{écriture}. 
within the tradition of the novel that transcends formal or thematic dissimilarities. Appropriately, Bessière’s subsequent characterization of the contemporary does not rely on formal or thematic rupture, choosing instead to define the contemporary as characterized essentially by a new mode of thought, by new semantic and cognitive perspectives, based in a new anthropoïesis of transindividuality.

Bessière’s theory of the contemporary novel is made particularly difficult to understand by the fact that many of the traditional tools for explaining novelistic practices, and in particular descriptive and typological interpretations, are dismissed as irrelevant. Listing the contemporary novel’s themes will not help us understand it. One must characterize it instead in terms of its disposition towards the culturally heterogeneous contemporary world. Faced with this diversity, the contemporary develops its opposition to the traditional novel (and critical vulgate) through the adoption of a new form of universal perspective. This universality is of the most paradoxical sort, being grounded in relativist intentions. The contemporary novel cannot be said to be universal in the sense of an overarching value system (Western liberalism, Humanism, etc.), of an authority which is universally imposed. Rather, it is universal because of its absence of pretention to totalization, its absence of authority. It is contemporary because

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90 Bessière does, nevertheless, give concrete examples of the sorts of novels he has in mind. His points of reference are, among others, Salmon Rushdie, W. G. Sebald, Carlos Fuentes, Éric Chévillard, and Hubert Haddad.

91 If Bessière does generally forgo thematic periodization, he does nevertheless quite conventionally locate the contemporary in the past thirty years. He usually refers to this period as characterized by internationalization, an increasing complexity of sites and times, an increasing plurality of co-present worlds, and the simultaneous coexistence of diverse cultures, diverse times and diverse histories (which do not always include one another or make themselves mutually intelligible). It should be noted that if Bessière does periodize, his theory is nevertheless exclusionary. Not all novels of the past thirty years can be called contemporary, in the way that Bessière understands the term.

92 While Bessière does not align himself with postmodernism, he uses a very postmodern methodology, constructing a theory which is a constellation of paradoxes.
it can belong to many worlds and many places, presenting total equality of access and application while at the same time preserving difference. The contemporary novel is, for Bessière, essentially meta-discursive: it mediates discourses, acts upon or reinserts itself into extant social representations, offers the opportunity for pragmatic consideration of the question of agency, and, finally, operates in the world without imposing any sort of realist aesthetic. The contemporary novel is not judged on its ability to recreate (or refuse to recreate) the world, but is conceived rather as a thought experiment rendering pertinent various engagements and decisions, identifications and justifications of actions. The finality of this process is the creation of communities, of connections between people that do not repress difference; the novel is literally a lieu commun or common place, bringing people together not because of the content of its discourse, but because it is a space that authorizes agreements, disagreements, questioning of discourse itself.

This overview of Bessière’s complex theoretical formulation of the specificity of the contemporary is of necessity somewhat schematic, but it offers at the very least a glimpse of what is undoubtedly the most radical proposition for the distinction of the contemporary—so radical in fact, that it is ultimately impractical to consider adopting it. Numerous arguments could be advanced that would call into question this idea the contemporary as absolute rupture with two hundred years of literature and theory. For

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93 This is achieved, according to Bessière, by shifting the focus away from the question of mimesis (or anti-mimesis). The contemporary novel does not ask the question of how literature does or does not interact with reality, choosing instead to interrogate the problematicity of human action and agency. The reader of the contemporary novel does not identify or disidentify with its representations (or absence of representations), but rather encounters a (meta-) discursive action which can be pragmatically applied to a wide variety of social discourses.

94 It is important that the applicability of the contemporary novel is in no sense coextensive with its represented worlds. The contemporary novel is not an interpretation, and it is not there to be interpreted. Its universality is based in its status as a discourse that is available to the widest range of uses by the greatest number of people and cultures.
starters, the particular orientation he attributes to the contemporary novel can also be applied to a number of traditional novels.\(^{95}\) Furthermore, his theory, which despite its originality still very much adopts the posture of ‘who is best at not saying’, is in some ways not really so radically different from certain modernist or postmodernist critical stances. It is highly debatable whether the consideration of the roles various literatures play in national contexts and, especially, whether the elaboration of typologies is really of no further use.\(^{96}\) As the reader will no doubt have deduced from this account of Bessière’s theory, any application that it might have to the present study would require a reading that runs against the grain of Bessière overall framework, for a discussion of the *romanesque* supposes precisely the sort of thematic and typological analysis that Bessière refuses.\(^{97}\) Furthermore, Bessière’s thesis negates any sense of return. Its model is so firmly rooted in the idea of a rupture with tradition that even if certain formal or thematic elements could be shown to have returned in the contemporary period, this fact would be wholly inconsequential to the new paradigm of contemporary literature.

This overview of the contemporary as literary period may be accused of raising more questions than it solves. Unresolved points of conflict pertaining to a periodization are, however, in my view, less pernicious to a study of contemporary literature than a wholly unproblematized reliance on critical commonplaces. This interrogation of the

\(^{95}\) On this note, *le principe de la pertinence* elaborated by Thomas Pavel (1988, p. 183), is similar in many respects to Bessière’s own understanding of pertinence, but without being rigidly located within the confines of the contemporary.


\(^{97}\) This reading against the grain may prove, however, instructive, particularly in the case of Antoine Volodine. While Bessière does not mention Volodine in his book, his characterization of the contemporary novel in terms of a search for the largest possible anthropological pertinence is very much applicable to Volodine’s project.
return of the *romanesque* in the contemporary period does not have the pretention of resolving once and for all the issue of what the contemporary really signifies. It does, however, depend upon a certain number of assumptions about this period, the most important of which is that the contemporary is a period where the question of the specificity of its own literature often passes through an interrogation of the notion of a “retour du romanesque.” This discourse on the “retour du romanesque” affirmed a renewed interest in older forms of literary practice, while rejecting some of the central tenets of the previous literary epoch.\(^98\) This particular orientation toward the past has resulted in conflicting accounts of how the contemporary situates itself (or should situate itself) with respect to slippery designations like the modern and the postmodern. It is possible that, as time goes on, we will begin to find periodizations that are more satisfying than the current minimal definition of the contemporary, which now covers at least thirty years. The moment has perhaps not yet arrived, however, where we have sufficient distance from the literary and political movements of the contemporary period to assert with more confidence smaller temporal divisions. The understanding of the contemporary that we will use going forward will suppose, therefore, that it is always in some sense post-modern, and sometimes postmodernist, without ever being completely one or the other. It is my contention that this definition of the contemporary is at once precise and elastic enough to permit a nuanced examination of the return of the *romanesque*.

Although this discussion of the contemporary as a literary period has not explicitly raised the issue of the pertinence of speaking of French rather than francophone

\(^98\) Cf. The introduction to Viart and Vercier’s *La littérature française au présent* for an excellent enumeration of the reasons a critic might be justified in asserting that the contemporary constitutes a new aesthetic movement.
literature in a study of the “retour du romanesque,” it points to many of the reasons why it might be advantageous, at least initially, to limit one’s analysis to the French context. One of the most important reasons for this decision is that the points of theoretical and aesthetic contention that arise when one considers the “retour du romanesque” refer to a tradition that, fairly or unfairly, is often viewed as highly France-specific. When Harold Bloom or Camille Paglia rail against the pernicious influence of “French” thought on American criticism, or when the “Manifeste pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français” celebrates a post-national paradigm in francophone literature as a return of the world against the stale, navel-gazing literature of France, it is clear that Frenchness, in literature, has acquired a particular set of connotations which are at the center of a variety of calls for a “retour du romanesque.” It is undoubtedly true that the “retour du romanesque” has in no way been limited to writers who are born in France, or to writers who consider themselves in some way or another as part of a closed or self-sufficient French tradition in literature. On the contrary, it has sometimes been explained as describing essentially the increasing popularity of different forms of francophone literature. It does, however, in my estimation, make sense to speak of the “retour du romanesque” as a term that loses specificity as one broadens the scope of inquiry beyond the (admittedly porous) boundaries of French and francophone literature. 99

None of the writers considered in the present study has expressed any interest in renewing some outdated notion of the Great French Novel or the French Exception, and they all avow influences that stretch well beyond the borders of France. Robert Louis

99 It is not clear that it would make any sense, for example, to speak of a “retour du romanesque” in American or in Latin American literature; and if such a thing could be shown to have happened, one would have to modify one’s analysis to account for the aesthetic and theoretical concerns that are specific to different reading and writing communities.
Stevenson is a major touchstone for both Jean Echenoz and Jean Rouaud; and the latter has also, obviously, been a major proponent of a conception of contemporary francophone literature that severs its ties with the French nation. Antoine Volodine, for his part, consistently denies that his works belong to any definable national literary culture whatsoever, opting instead to fabricate a ‘foreign’ literature that is written in French.100 This does not mean, however, that there is nothing to be learned from an analysis which considers their relations to particular strains of French literature and critical thought. The idea of a “roman romanesque,” the discourse of return and the definition of a contemporary period are all tied to particular French literary, academic, editorial and theoretical communities and traditions. To speak of a “retour du romanesque” is often to propose a pejorative view of a supposedly “French” tradition or to advocate for a literary project that takes its cues from a variety of non-French literatures. A close examination of the writers of the new romanesque is thus of interest to the formulations of a post-national literary paradigm. There are, however, both practical and methodological reasons to limit the present study to authors who are, in some sense or another, French, and whose writing projects adopt amicable or in oppositional stances with respect to French literary and theoretical traditions.

If it is only with a profusion of reservations and provisos that one can speak of a “retour du romanesque dans la littérature française contemporaine,” the problematic status of these terms points precisely to their engagement with some of the most contentious issues in the French literary scene today. The romanesque raises a number of important questions, including that of the interest of plot-driven narratives as opposed to

a certain view of the “aventure d’une écriture,” of the relations between text and world, of the extent to which literary conventions are pure cultural constructions or reflections of cognitive universals, and of the foundations for a distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature. The discourse of return involves the construction of aesthetic and literary-theoretical genealogies, a refusal of certain traditions and a recuperation of others, and a conception of literary history that can either be interpreted as progressive or as regressive, as teleological or as cyclical. The contemporary as literary period, meanwhile, points to the problematic process of delineating literary generations, and of accounting for broad trends in the diffuse artistic production of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is no authoritative definition, no central movement, no manifesto that can be pointed to for ultimate clarification of what is meant by the “retour du romanesque.” What the novels considered in this study suggest, however, is the ways an exploration of the traditions of the romanesque has been essential to the process of defining literary practices in the contemporary period, and of arguing, in a sense, for their status as contemporary, as vital, current, and of the present moment.
Chapter 2. Jean Echenoz, or How and When to Return to the Romanesque

A search for a single point of origin for the diffuse novelistic production that marches under the banner of the return of the romanésc is bound to be fruitless. The romanésc is too widely dispersed, too protean, too vital to imaginative fiction to ever be seriously considered absent from literature, or to ever be associated with a revival under the auspices of the literary production of a single author. The assertion that Jean Echenoz is the writer whose work ushered in a new era of romans romanéscs (or romans du romanésc) in the French literary world cannot, therefore, be more than a half-truth. With that in mind, this assertion might still be considered a highly instructive half-truth, and one which has some heuristic validity when interrogating the various guises that the romanésc assumes in literature of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. If there are a number of reasons to object to the sort of reasoning that would have it that at the beginning of the contemporary period stands Echenoz, and that the romanésc in the French novel thereafter bears the mark of his literary genius, he is also undoubtedly an author whose work signals many of the major thematic tendencies, theoretical issues and stylistic features that characterize the romanésc in recent French literature. Although it might seem that the points of contact between Echenoz’s fiction and the traditional roman romanésc are so numerous as to make this exercise somewhat tedious, his literature is in many ways surprisingly corrosive to the modes of expression that are habitual to the romanésc. If Echenoz helps to bring the romanésc back, we must ask what form this new romanésc takes. Critics have alternatively proposed that Echenoz’s novels are minimalist, impassive (impassibles), postmodern(ist), or sociologically
inflected (novels of postmodernity). An understanding of Echenoz’s recuperation of the *romanesque* demands that the category be explained in relation to these other ways for defining the broad contours of Echenoz’s fictional project. It will finally be the contention of this chapter that Echenoz’s innovations in the *romanesque* stem from a number of productive tensions or points of contradiction. The co-presence of dissimilar fictional orientations and drives produces a new *romanesque* which is concerned at once with formal experimentation or play and with a description of modern life. Echenoz finally engages with a tradition of axiological literature in order to draw sharper attention to the absence of values in a contemporary society defined essentially by emptiness.

*Echenoz and the “Effet de Romanesque”*

Echenoz’s first novel, *Le Méridien de Greenwich*, published in 1979, is itself often treated as a sort of meridian marking a transition between different literary periods. ¹⁰¹ Since this novel, his work has been both critically and commercially successful, and his novels have consistently been perceived as catalysts for the return of the *romanesque*. Echenoz is, by almost all accounts, a key figure of the renewal of the *romanesque* in the ‘high’ literary novel. Indeed, Gianfranco Rubino is far from alone in asserting, on the subject of the “retour au récit,” that, “L’écrivain le plus représentatif de cette tendance, celui qui l’a valorisée, est sans doute Jean Echenoz.”²⁰² Widely read, abundantly

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commented by critics and academics, translated into over thirty languages, the work of Jean Echenoz certainly has all the outward signs of a literary consequentiality. With all of this taken into account, an argument for Echenoz’s status as writer of a certain new romanesque risks kicking down open doors. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there is virtual unanimity among scholars of French literature in associating him with the return of the romanesque in one of its definitional guises or disguises (postmodernism, renarrativization, return of the story, etc.). However, as we shall suggest in a moment, there are structural, thematic, and stylistic aspects of his novels that seem to undermine many of the traditional configurations of the roman romanesque. Rather than merely affirming that the association of Echenoz with the return of the romanesque is an evidence, we should thus ask the question of precisely what relations can be established between these novels and the archetypal expressions of traditional story forms. Such an examination will permit us to better understand the ways in which many of Echenoz’s novels depart from tradition; after which we might avoid situating his work too quickly on either side of the dichotomy between traditional novels and parodic rewritings of the

Houppermans, Christine Jérusalem, Jean-Claude Lebrun, Warren Motte, Aline Mura-Brunel, Jean Rouaud, and Antoine Volodine, among others.


traditional novel. For the fact is that if Echenoz is one of the writers who can be said to be
most emblematic of the return of the roman esque in the contemporary period, he is also
undoubtedly one of the writers who most forcefully challenges our definitions of the
term, explores its potentialities, breaks up its calcified habits, riffs on its standards, at
once disfigures and embellishes it; in short, makes it new again.

It is important to remember that after the extreme experimentations of the Tel
Quel generation, the standards for what constituted a “traditional” novel were fairly
minimal, and a writer like Echenoz could be said to have effected a return to tradition
merely by dint of his use of named, individuated characters in a fairly coherent plot.
Behind this recourse to more traditional modes of characterization and plotting, however,
lies a renewed concern for creating engaging, propulsive, and even, if properly
understood, immersive fictional narratives; with the caveat that, in the contemporary
period, engaging literature might also mean a certain kind of ironic, 2nd or even 3rd-
degree literature. But to return to the aspects of Echenoz’s writing that most immediately
tie him to the roman esque, a number plot elements recall immediately the major
components of the traditional roman roman esque.

First among these elements is the prevalence of extreme forms of action. Even as
the majority of Echenoz’s characters seem to suffer from a sort of ennui or general
lethargy, they typically find themselves thrust headlong into a breathless series of events:
violence (beatings, murder by gun, murder by knife, murder by freezer truck, murder by
precipitation from cliffs and bridges, cult sacrifices, kidnappings of all sorts), sex (in bed,
in the ocean, on the beach, in outer space, in the afterlife), larceny and heists (of
mysterious and powerful machines, of state secrets, of rare animals, of priceless art),
criminal activity of all sorts (prostitution, drug smuggling, arms dealing, fabrication of false identities), schemes and various forms of manipulation (powerful secret societies, mutiny, worker uprisings, espionage). Related to these forms of action which proliferate in Echenoz’s fiction is his reliance on the voyage as a sort of motor to drive plots forward. We have already suggested that there is an important tradition of the romanesque built upon various forms of social and geographical distance. In addition to a number of more or less accessible exotic locales (Malaysia, Australia, India, Peru), Echenoz’s characters also visit geographical extremes that are the classic locations of adventure and science fiction novels (the desert island, the north pole, outer space). Borrowing the term from Michel Tournier, Echenoz himself has taken to labeling his novels “géographiques,” and the the voyages of classic adventure novels return in surprising forms in his ludic fictions. The representation of social extremes is also a persistent feature of Echenoz’s novels, and his marked preference for the ‘low’ (criminals, the homeless) over the ‘high’ (aristocrats, princes and princesses) corresponds to his preference for the noir and spy genres as opposed to fantasy or fairy-tale worlds.

In addition to the presence of major thematic elements that immediately recall the tropes of adventure novels and various forms of genre fiction, these novels make

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105 The topic of the voyage in Echenoz has been the subject of much critical interest. Perhaps the most complete treatment of the topic is found in: Jérusalem, Christine. Jean Echenoz : Géographies du vide. Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2005.
108 Extravagant billionaires, rich art collectors and tycoons do make appearances in Echenoz’s novels, but they are much less frequent than the ‘lower’ elements of society. In a similar fashion, these novels give more time to descriptions of the banlieue or poor suburbs than to rich neighborhoods, which get rather more laconic descriptions. This is a first suggestion of the ways in which Echenoz breaks with the tradition of the romanesque as a literature of aristocratic self-affirmation.
abundant use of genre clichés, as well as unlikely and obviously contrived coincidences. On this subject, Christine Jérusalem has proposed a critical term—*l’effet de romanesque*—which is highly instructive to understanding how such well-worn tropes and unrealistic coincidences function in Echenoz’s fiction. Contrasting the term to Barthes famous *effet de réel*, Jérusalem suggests that Echenoz’s novels demonstrate an *effet de romanesque*, defined in the following manner: “Il vise l’adhésion du lecteur à l’aspect invraisemblable du récit. L’effet de romanesque, c’est ce à quoi on ne croit pas mais à quoi on fait semblant de croire.” I would emphasize the adhesion to unrealistic aspects of the text over the idea of pretending to believe, for the very act of identifying and reading a text as fiction presupposes that one will not believe the story one is reading (as one might when reading history, journalism, or religious writing). Rather than pretending to believe, the reader of Echenoz’s novels is constantly provoked to dismiss as irrelevant the very issue of belief or believability. With that in mind, Jérusalem is right to suggest that Echenoz’s fictions insistently confront the reader with clichés, stereotypes, and unbelievable situations; a confrontation which provokes a sort of critical distance and then immediately proceeds to nullify the critical effect by re-engaging the reader in the patently artificial—but highly entertaining—story. For example, in *Le Méridien de Greenwich*, when Byron Caine lights the fuse to the bomb that will destroy the island (and him), one is surprised to read that: “[…] contre toute expérience et toute vraisemblance, il s’endormit.” Likewise, the mutiny in *L’Équipée malaise* is described in these terms: “C’est de la mutinerie, ça n’a pas d’autre nom, c’est iréaliste. C’est

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109 Cf. Barthes, Roland. “L’effet de réel.” *Communications*, 11, 1968, pp. 84-89. The ‘reality effect’, for Barthes, refers to the use of insignificant details or elements of the realist text that serve no function other than to signify the text’s status as “reality.”


111 *MG*, p. 225.
complètement irréaliste.” The improbable coincidences in Echenoz’s novels are so frequent as to defy enumeration. This frequency, in addition to the manner in which the author explicitly underlines their improbability, indicates that they function precisely as so many effets de romanesque, simultaneously drawing attention to the unrealistic aspects of the story, and inviting the reader to delight in the unreal, to identify with the text’s ironic treatment of its own story.

The romanesque of Jean Echenoz is not confined to the thematic level, it also permeates the narrative dispositions and style of his novels. With a few exceptions, Echenoz’s novels are characterized by a great deal of narrative fluidity, often passing from the first to the second to the third person in the space of a few paragraphs. Likewise, the focalization of the narrative tends to vary a great deal, and the reader sometimes gets the disorienting impression that the narrator alternately knows more or less than he should. Les Grandes Blondes begins, for example, with a rather unusual second person narration, “Vous êtes Paul Salvador et vous cherchez quelqu’un,” in which the pronoun’s slippery role as ‘shifter’ is highlighted by the sudden abandonment of the identification of “vous” with Paul Salvador: “Vous, le jour dit, seriez présent à l’heure dite au lieu convenu. Mais vous n’êtes pas Paul Salvador qui arrive très en avance à tous ses rendez-vous.” The narrative then quickly settles into a variable third-person which will, throughout the course of the story, be abruptly interrupted by instances of the second person designating either a generic reader, or identifying the reader with a character in

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113 For example, there are times where it seems that Demilo is narrating third-person portions of Nous trois and speaking of events of which he should have no knowledge. Conversely, Echenoz’s narrators often combine seeming omniscience with surprising admissions of ignorance à la “je n’en sais rien.”

114 GB, p. 7. Nous Trois is also exceptional for its narrative acrobatics.
the story. Bruno Blanckeman comments on these aspects of the narrative by underlining the manner in which they permit a certain kind of *romanesque*:

Quelle qu’en soit ailleurs la modalité, cette défection des positions narratives centrales, ou simplement stables, favorise le surgissement de l’improbable, du non attendu. Elle presse à l’insolite, au trouble, à la perplexité. Elle suscite le suspense dans la mise en perspective du romanesque. La stylistique en accentue l’effet : la phrase invente un cours souple et vif, à bonds et à rebonds, en zigzags et sinuosités, en expansion déliée.\[^{115}\]

In addition to his perspicuous appreciation of the function of this destabilized narration, Blanckeman’s characterization of Echenoz’s style also highlights its importance to the elaboration of a textual rhythm that may be complementary to, but that often contradicts, supersedes, and even takes center stage from the thematic content of the novels. It frequently seems that it is style—swollen metaphors, alarming and bizarre prosopopoeia, arresting meter and rhyme schemes, humorous zeugma—that constitutes the central domain of the *élan romanesque* in Echenoz’s novels. To return to the subject of narrative, it is significant that Jean Echenoz justifies these shifting narrative positions either by referencing their efficacy for propelling the story forward, or by referencing their function in keeping the reader alert and engaged. This is not the first time that we will have occasion to suggest that a particular technique in Echenoz’s novels is reminiscent of the Nouveau Roman and other forms of experimental literature, but ultimately does not have the same literary finalities in mind. Rather than aiming to expose convention or explore the nature of textuality, Echenoz’s experiments are concerned primarily with the experience of the reader, with an emphasis on pleasure and excitement. Echenoz makes this distinction very clear when asked the question of the function of the second person in his novels: “Les parti pris systématiques de la seconde personne, tels qu’on les trouve


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chez le Butor de *La Modification* ou le Perec d’*Un homme qui dort*, ne m’intéressent pas en tant que systèmes.”¹¹⁶ Instead, Echenoz insists that he uses the second person, “[…] par souci de bouger. Pour avoir un regard d’ensemble. Pour fuir tout projet formaliste précis. Par souci rythmique aussi.”¹¹⁷ In addition to the concern for movement, which relates quite obviously to the roman-esque and its rapid, action-packed stories, the reference to the desire for “un regard d’ensemble” points to the influence of cinema. As we shall see, Echenoz’s novels derive a good deal of their originality from a productive blend of source materials from both popular fiction and cinema.

*Echenoz and the Romanesque – Genre Fiction, Cinema*

If Echenoz’s fictions were so immediately identified as belonging to a broad shift back to the roman-esque, it is undoubtedly in large part because of their avowed debts to genre fiction. This relation to the popular novel—which, depending on the lens one adopts, could be considered one of re-writing, of homage, of parody or, more tenuously, of deconstruction—defines what I consider to be Echenoz’s first period, spanning *Le Méridien de Greenwich, Cherokee, L’Équipee malaise, Lac*, and, to a lesser extent, *Nous trois.*¹¹⁸ In these novels, Jean Echenoz participates in a larger trend in French literature of the last twenty years of the twentieth century which saw genre fiction in general, and in particular detective fiction, progressively lose its ‘low’ fictional stigma to be increasingly…

¹¹⁷ *Loc. cit.*
¹¹⁸ This should not suggest however that the model of genre fiction disappears after these novels. As Christine Jérusalem rightly notes, “La réécriture des sous-genres roman-esque constitue le ciment le plus visible de l’œuvre.” Jérusalem, *op. cit.* (2005), p. 8. It is merely the case that the subsequent novels are less explicitly grounded in a particular paraliterary genre.
welcomed into ‘high’ literature. Petr Dytrt has suggested that the contemporary
generation found paraliterature appealing for the following reasons:

Pour retrouver le récit et pour y réintroduire la représentation dans sa
totalité, le roman a eu besoin d’un espace de travail approprié qu’il a
justement trouvé dans les genres de la littérature populaire. Celle-ci s’est
rêvélée comme un dispositif propice, car doté d’éléments de la narration
que le modernisme s’est acharné à évincer du récit romanesque. Les
genres de la littérature populaire ont ainsi été un dispositif idéal, puisque
les éléments qui les constituent – le personnage avec ses côté [sic]
physique et psychique, l’histoire et son déroulement mouvementé,
l’espace, etc. – ont servi de base de construction que l’on ne pouvait pas
considérer pourtant comme innocents. A la différence du roman réaliste, le
dispositif paralittéraire, vu son haut degré de codage générique, dispense
l’espace diégétique de l’interdit d’objectivité tout en se posant comme une
relation de faits ‘réels’.

The argument that paraliterature appealed to this generation for the manner in which it
seemed to reestablish a relationship with the real while avoiding the discredited
postulates of realism is highly evocative of the theoretical confusion of a period which
seemed intent on casting off some of the more restrictive constraints of the prior literary
epoch (auto-referentiality, the death of the author, the death of the subject and literary
character), but did not necessarily possess a counter-theory that would justify an
unproblematic return of these repressed elements of traditional literature. In Dytrt’s
account, genre fiction seems to operate as a sort of back-door entrance to a literature
which interrogates the lived world. In this case, the obvious artificiality of the discourse
in a sense dispenses the author from having to explain how literary referentiality actually
functions. As an aside, it is interesting to note that if the intervening years have seen a

119 Cf. Blanckeman, op. cit. (2002), p. 47. In a recent interview, Jean Echenoz commented on his first novel
by saying of the seventies, “C’est un moment où le roman est en assez mauvais état. […] On allait chercher
du côté des littératures dites mineures.” “Loin avec Jean Echenoz.” Interview with Laura Adler. France
Culture (Radio/Internet), (Sept.) 2012.
120 Dytrt, Petr. Le (Post)moderne des romans de Jean Echenoz. De l’anamnèse du moderne vers une
good deal of research devoted to rehabilitating the notions of representation and mimesis, and in particular to elaborating a definition of mimesis as a basic process of cognitive modeling that is one of the canonical modes of human learning, these new theories have not necessarily entered the critical or academic mainstream, which continues to trot out the same anti-mimetic arguments that were common currency forty years ago, even as it celebrates a literature that explicitly states its renewed interest in the real. It is for this reason, I would propose, that so many of the “returns” of the contemporary period tend to be declared (the world, the subject, the author are back!) rather than justified. It is not that justifications are lacking, but rather that they often seem to have gone unread.

While Echenoz has stated in interviews that he sees his fictional practice as at least in part derived from lived experience and pertaining to the contemporary world, his appropriation of paraliterature seems as much concerned with exploring and appropriating the aspects of the roman romanesque that fascinated him as a child as it does with reinserting the real into literary fiction. In an interview in which he describes his fiction as a combination of hommage and pillage, Echenoz says that to write his first

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121 In particular, mimesis is again and again used to mean surface isomorphism or reference to an actual thing in the real world, a definition which corresponds neither to its use in classical Greek philosophy, nor to the definitions put forth by theorists like Kendall Walton or Jean-Marie Schaeffer.

122 On the subject of mimesis, I would signal for particular mention the work done by Christopher Prendergast (The Order of Mimesis, The Triangle of Representation), Kendall Walton (Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts), Stephen Halliwell (The Aesthetics of Mimesis), and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (Pourquoi la fiction ?). Although I personally have some misgivings about it, fictional worlds theory—in particular the work of Thomas Pavel (Unvers de la fiction) and Marie-Laure Ryan (Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media)—has also offered one theoretical paradigm within which to understand how fictional reference operates with respect to the lived world. Christine Montalbetti (Le Voyage, le monde et la bibliothèque) has many perspicuous ideas on the problems of fictional and non-fictional referentiality. Richard Walsh’s rhetorical theory of fictionality (The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction) is of considerable interest as well. It is the unfortunate case that many of the recent French contributions to theories of mimesis and literary reference are not widely known outside the French academy.
novels, “j’ai cherché dans les fascinations de lecture de mon enfance.” Indeed, even if it is certain that Echenoz’s novels are concerned with a description of modern society, this description exists in a state of uneasy cohabitation with the literary material of the roman romanesque. Here, as elsewhere, there is a great deal of tension between what might seem like mockery or a general critical impulse with regards to the source material constituted by popular fiction, and a sort of playful, ultimately loving riff on genre. It is difficult to do away with the idea that this literature is born at least in part of a critical impulse, but Echenoz has always taken pains to emphasize that his literature is neither parody nor deconstruction: “[...] c’était à la fois un jeu et un hommage à des genres soi-disant mineurs – mais surtout pas des parodies, en aucun cas.” As we have already had the opportunity to suggest in our comments on the effet de romanesque, the particular power of these novels may lie in the way in which they compel the reader to constantly move between distance and immersion, between self-conscious reflection on the commonplaces of popular literature and recognition of the enduring validity of old forms, between focus on the adventure that is written and emphasis on the pleasure of the adventure that is writing, without ever opting definitively for one over the other. Echenoz does not rediscover the romanesque and transplant it unproblematically into the soil of

124 Echenoz, Jean. “Dans l’atelier de l’écrivain.” Interview with Geneviève Winter, Pascualine Griton and Emmanuel Barthélemy. In: Je m’en vais (re-edition). Paris: Minuit, 2001. p. 243. The tension between the critique and appreciation of popular fictional forms is present at the level of story as well. At times, the seductive and pleasurable aspects of such fictions are underlined, as with the story of “Les Trois Lanciers de Bengale,” told by Paul to Vera in Le Méridien de Greenwich. At other times, stupidity, unoriginality and unreflective libidinousness characterize the romanesque—as is the case, for example, with the comic books read by the ape-like hired muscle in Lac, or with the soap operas and popular novels enjoyed by Jouve’s lachrymose wife in Les Grandes Blondes. It is not irrelevant for this last example that Echenoz has tended to model his fictions on what Albert Thibaudet called the ‘masculine’ romanesque (adventure, actions) rather than on the ‘feminine’ romanesque (pathos, sentiment).
contemporary literature; his romanesque grows from a number of productive tensions between contradictory influences and drives.

Of all the attempts to offer an explanation of the conflicted relationship between Echenoz’s novels and their paraliterary models, the analogy with jazz, suggested by the author himself, strikes me as the most apposite. In an interview with Olivier Bessard-Banquy, Echenoz opines that:

*Le travail que j’ai pu effectuer à un certain moment sur les genres a peut-être quelque chose à voir avec le standard, soit un thème devenu classique indéfiniment repris par toutes sortes de musiciens qui ont trouvé là une unité mélodique, harmonique, séduisante, intéressante, fertile, et chacun va le traiter à sa façon en le magnifiant et en le sabotant à la fois. […] Saboter pour dilater, c’est une formule que je ferais bien mon programme. Ou détruire pour embellir.*

In this description of an aesthetic program that beautifies through destruction, the tension between appreciative and critical stances is perfectly encapsulated. Moreover, the jazz analogy, which would see Echenoz as a musician riffing on the standards of popular literary genres, accounts for these strange novels which cannot be said to reproduce the same old genre fictions readers have been accustomed to for many years, but which by the same token cannot exactly be said to leave behind or critically subvert such fiction.\(^\text{126}\)

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\(^{126}\) It should be noted that if the jazz analogy is operative primarily for what I consider to be Echenoz’s first period, some of his later novels can still be read in terms of a sort of musical concern for language. *Au Piano*, for example, blends thematic content and style with its use of enallage in a paragraph describing Max’s errors at a concert: “[…] une deuxième fausse note vers la mesure 200, je dérape toujours au même endroit dans le final, mais là encore c’est pris dans le mouvement, il n’ont toujours rien vu […]” (*AP*, p. 18). The will to create a literary text that is modeled upon music is not without its resonances to some of the major theoretical positions of the (post)structuralist period. Roland Barthes used music to explain the functioning of the classic Balzacian novel (cf. *S/Z*, “Partition”), but would also propose the ideal of text as music as the antidote to representational, *readable* literature in “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein.” In: *L’Obvie et l’Obtus*, Paris, Seuil, 1982. For an alternative viewpoint that considers the tradition in Classical Greek philosophy of considering music as a *mimetic* art, cf. Halliwell, *op. cit.*, ch. 8.
It is not, however, only the musical and the literary domains that are pertinent to Echenoz’s fictional practice, but also, to a large extent, the cinematic. It is indisputable that the romanesque as thematic fictional orientation is most prominent in the major studio film. Today, a teenager is more likely to have been exposed to a film adaptation of Jules Verne’s novels than to have read them. The same could be said of any number of writers of romans romanesques, whether in the genre of mystery, legal thriller, spy novel, noir, or fantasy. It is therefore appropriate that Jean Echenoz’s interest in the romanesque as fictional orientation should be directed toward cinematic as well as literary sources, for in the contemporary period, it is cinema that is “le vivier du romanesque le plus débridé.”\footnote{Méaux, Danièle. “Le miroir des écrans.” In: Jérusalem and Vray (ed.), \textit{op. cit.} (2006), p. 168. Jean Rouaud has also commented on the ways in which cinema welcomed the romanesque in a period where it was ostensibly refused by serious authors.} In many cases, the noir for example, the archetypal works of genre are as often filmic as literary.\footnote{It could actually be argued that the great contemporary expressions of the romanesque, the ones that have the biggest fan followings—Star Wars, Star Trek, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, to name a few—tend to express themselves as trans-generic fictional universes spanning books, films, cartoons, tv shows, video games, music, paintings and posters, toys and even invented languages. This has to some extent always been true—the major myths have found expression in many media—but the scope of available modes of dissemination has expanded the expressive possibilities of these constellations of popular fiction considerably since, say, the Middle Ages.} In this manner, in the same way as \textit{Le Méridien de Greenwich} can be read as a rewriting of the Robinson myth and a riff on the standard of \textit{L’Île mystérieuse}, \textit{Les Grandes Blondes} is a sort of reflection upon and perversion of the major scenes and themes of classic Alfred Hitchcock films, notably \textit{Vertigo}.\footnote{In the same fashion, \textit{Au Piano} can be read as a sort of parody of or homage to \textit{Ghost} and \textit{Heaven Can Wait} (the Warren Beatty rather than the Ernst Lubitsch version).} Just as music is, for Echenoz, an inspiration both on the level of narrative (dispersion, riffs) and on the level of style (improvisation, heterogeneity, collage), so too is cinema utilized both as a
source of schemata which are highly romanäsque, and as a model for style and narrative economy. As Jean-Claude Lebrun aptly notes of Echenoz:

Ses fréquentes allusions et références à des productions, connues et moins connues, du septième art ne relèvent d’aucun hasard: il doit au film une partie de sa culture, beaucoup de sa sensibilité, un sens de la brièveté des dialogues, du zoom sur le détail, des musiques d’accompagnement, des changements de plans, des jeux de mouvements propres à la caméra; toutes choses dont s’est emparé son mode d’écriture.\textsuperscript{130}

A good deal of this cinematic style can be attributed to Echenoz’s indebtedness to the tradition of behaviorist, hardboiled detective fiction, from the early American masters of the genre to Jean-Patrick Manchette.\textsuperscript{131} When Manchette writes in his \textit{Chroniques} of his project to produce “une écriture extérieure, non moralisante, antipsychologique, essentiellement descriptive, cinématographique,” he could just as easily be describing Echenoz’s novels as his own.\textsuperscript{132} It was not, however, just Manchette and the American behaviorist writers who experimented with cinema as a literary aesthetic. The Nouveau Roman, with Robbe-Grillet’s ciné-romans and its reputation as an “école du regard,” is also often considered a major movement in the interrogation of the boundaries between textual and iconic media. One could broadly characterize the history of twentieth-century experimentations with cinematic literature as divided between, on one side, experimentations which—in a manner typical of the aesthetic regime of art—use cinematic writing to draw attention to the inherent features of textuality; and, on the other, literary forms which try to exploit the conventions of cinema in order to replicate in textual form the efficiency and excitement of cinematic narrative.\textsuperscript{133} Echenoz would,

\textsuperscript{132} Cited in Houpermans, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 30.
at first glance, appear to fall into both camps. The first chapter of *Le Méridien de Greenwich*, for example, cultivates confusion by cycling, in a manner that is highly reminiscent of the Nouveau Roman, through a number of ekphrastic paradigms, first suggesting that the recounted events are elements of a painting, then alternately suggesting that they are part of a story (récit) or a novel, before finally settling on their status as a film. All the while, elements of the text—the presence of temporal deictics, in the case of the painting; the presence of the conditional tense, in the case of the film—suggest the incongruities of considering this narration as anything but purely textual. These are but a few of the aspects of this first chapter that point to the influence of the Nouveau Roman, and it should come as no surprise that Jérôme Lindon, upon reading this first novel, felt comfortable declaring to Echenoz that his work was obviously situated in the legacy of this movement. However, in this same novel there are definite evocations of a viewer perspective that are clearly intended to serve the interests of narrative efficacy rather than to underline the particularities of textual expression:

Le lendemain matin, le téléphone sonna dans l’obscurité. Il fallut un moment pour que le noir fût dissipé par une lampe de chevet équippée d’une ampoule de quarante watts, dont la lueur étiriquée éclaira le bord d’un lit et les alentours de ce lit, encombrés de livres, de journaux, de vêtements en désordre et de mégots, et enfin l’occupante de ce lit, dont on ne distinguait lorsqu’elle décrocha que le bras et le profil gauches, assez nettement cependant pour qu’on pût reconnaître Vera.

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134 In this tradition one could signal the presence of a number of obscure works like Henri Decoin’s *Quinze Rounds* and, more interestingly, Irène Nemirovsky’s *Films Parlés*. Raymond Queneau’s *Loin de Rueil* could also be read in this light.


136 *MG*, p. 87. Echenoz’s books abound in examples of this technique of creating images that are in a sense delineated by an imaginary camera position and confined by an explicit viewer perspective. Often, the technical vocabulary of the cinema is invoked to highlight this aspect of the fiction.
It is one of the conveniences of textual representation that it is not confined at all by the limits of our sensory perceptions (it can see in complete darkness, hear what is inaudible, etc.); and this reference to what can be distinguished in the weak light strongly suggests, therefore, a cinematic perspective. What comes through in this passage is a fascination with the power of images and, to a certain extent, with the experience of viewing a film, which Echenoz attempts to transpose into textual narration. It is this experiential aspect that Echenoz himself highlights when asked about the influence of cinema on his writing, stating that “l’efficacité avec laquelle le cinéma s’empare d’une fiction m’intéresse énormément.” Just as he distanced his use of the second person from “tout projet formaliste précis,” choosing to emphasize instead how such shifts allowed him to engage the reader and propel the narrative forward, so too the cinematic element in his writing is associated with a desire to appropriate the narrative efficacy of film. Whether the ekphrastic games that recall the Nouveau Roman represent a sort of compromise between propulsive genre fiction and formalist experimentation, or whether they are simply vestigial stylistic reflexes is a question which we will leave in suspension. For the moment, it is enough to suggest that whether the focus is on the 7th art or on genre literature, Echenoz’s relation to popular entertainment finally points to a profound desire to rehabilitate and experiment with a wide variety of archetypal forms of the romanesque.

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137 It is interesting to note that the effet de roman'esque applies equally to a certain cinema-effect which draws attention to the presence of cinematic stereotypes without invalidating them or installing a relation of critique to the source material. Cf. MG, p. 151 – “À l’aéroport de Roissy, fit-elle d’une voix précipitée, comme elle l’avait bien souvent vu faire au cinéma. [¶] Le chauffeur mit son compteur à zéro, le feu passa au vert et le taxi démarrâ souplement, également tout comme au cinéma.”
139 A question to which a third response is also possible: that Echenoz plays simultaneously with both the roman'esque and the deconstruction of the roman'esque.
Echenoz is interested in producing fictions which constantly recall genre archetypes and the *topoi* of cinema.

*A Problematic Romanesque: Voyage, Initiation, and the Hollow Center*

If the aspects of Echenoz’s fictional practice that are characteristic of the *romanesque* seem at first blush to be numerous, it is instructive that when one considers the more systematic definition of the romanèsque proposed by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, one finds, as Dominique Viart quite rightly suggests, that such an analysis actually reveals a number of discontinuities with the traditional expressions of the *romanesque*. Schaeffer’s four features of the *romanesque* are, it will be recalled:

1. The importance accorded to affectivity in the causal chain of the diegesis.
2. A representation of actantial typologies that focuses on extremes, whether positive or negative.
3. A saturation of events in the story, and the potential to extend it quasi-indefinitely.
4. A form of mimesis which sets the story world off as a counter-model to the world of the reader.

In his article entitled “Le divertissement romanesque, Jean Echenoz et l’esthétique du dégagement,” Viart notes that of the four features, only the third really applies to Echenoz’s fictions, and even in this case it applies almost *too* well: “de fait, les romans d’Echenoz saturent la diégèse, mais cette saturation est discordante, affolée, plus proche finalement d’un romanèsque picaresque, sans orientation, proliférant, que du romanèsque soutenu et plus organisé des siècles ultérieurs.”

And if Echenoz’s fictions do tend to

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have endings that are open rather than conclusive (*Cherokee*, for example, ends, “Bon, dit-Fred, qu’est-ce qu’on fait, maintenant?”), they are not really the same as the typical endings of serialized novels, where the characters seem perpetually poised to embark on new adventures. Even the melancholy ending of *Le Grand Meaulnes*—“Et déjà je l’imaginais, la nuit, enveloppant sa fille dans un manteau, et partant avec elle pour de nouvelles aventures”¹⁴¹—preserves the spirit of the *romanesque* and its pursuit of a more fulfilling mode of existence, something which cannot be said for *Lac, L’Equipée malaise, Nous Trois* or, particularly, *Je m’en vais* and *Au Piano*. Indeed, these latter novels imply above all that while life (or afterlife) may go on, such life does so without any hope of an improved situation, of anything really new ever happening. As for the question of affectivity, Echenoz takes as one of the founding principles of his novelistic practice the refusal of “tout ce qui est de l’ordre du pathos;” an aspect of his writing which we have already suggested ties him to the tradition of the so-called ‘masculine’ *romanesque*.¹⁴² Indeed, there is something decidedly lukewarm about Echenoz’s protagonists, who often spend the majority of their ‘adventures’ mired in boredom, malaise, or indifference. The question of extreme actantial typologies is equally problematic in Echenoz’s fictions, for if there is definitely a representation of behavioral extremes, they tend to express themselves rather stochastically, and are finally inadequate to the formation of solid

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¹⁴² Echenoz, Jean. Interview on the television program *Du jour au lendemain* (November, 1995). Cited in Schoots, *op. cit.*, p. 213. Dominique Viart also notes, a propos of this first category, that Echenoz’s fictions do not really obey the principles of causality. While this is an important observation when one considers the importance of causality or *conjointure* to other theories of the *romanesque*, it seems to me that in Schaeffer’s model, the causality of the diegesis is more implied as a habitual structuring element of most narrative fictions than it is put forward as a definitional feature of the *romanesque*. It is far from certain that strict causality is a necessary condition for the *romanesque*.
axiological readings or to the construction of psychological typologies.\textsuperscript{143} In terms of the creation of a counter-world to the world of the reader, it is indisputable that Echenoz multiplies unusual or fantastic locales (outer space, the North Pole, the afterlife), and represents a variety of actions with which most readers are unlikely to have much direct experience. It is equally true, however, that Echenoz systematically emphasizes the \textit{banality}, the familiarity of the putatively or traditionally exotic. In a manner that recalls the discovery that the world in Pantagruel’s mouth is inhabited by peasants cultivating cabbage, the desert island in \textit{Le Méridien de Greenwich} abounds in artificial constructions (which deny any reading of exoticism or return to pure nature) and European flora, including, significantly, cabbage.\textsuperscript{144} In what could be read as a simultaneous critique of the stereotypes of a certain literature of exoticism and of the effects of globalization, all spaces in Echenoz’s novels seem to tend towards a sort of banal uniformity.\textsuperscript{145} The lesson is akin to that found in Baudelaire ("Amer savoir, celui qu’on tire du voyage!"), except that in Echenoz’s writing even the afterlife, as described in \textit{Au Piano}, is devoid of any nouveauté. The choice between heaven and hell comes down to the choice between a kind of immense RV park (heaven), which has too many papayas and where boredom is the major problem, and a slightly altered version of Paris (hell), where all of the essential features remain more or less the same; a choice which

\textsuperscript{143} My analysis of this subject is indebted to Viart’s commentary in “Le divertissement romanesque,” in: Jérusalem and Vray (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 247. While the presence of stereotypical gangsters and the like lifted from genre fiction would seem to suggest the presence of such actantial typologies, such characters almost never play according to type in Echenoz’s novels.

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{MG}, p. 97.

\textsuperscript{145} The most striking example here is the manner in which, in \textit{Je m’en vais}, Ferrer’s sexual escapades with a young Eskimo woman ironically replicate, in a frigid climate, the commonplaces more readily associated with an idealized Tahitian society. For a more in-depth discussion of exoticism in the work of Jean Echenoz, cf. Jérusalem, \textit{op. cit.} (2005), pp. 40-49.
renders even more pessimistic the question, *enfer ou ciel, qu’importe?*\(^{146}\) Finally, Christine Jérusalem is justified in suggesting that, “Aucun espace – pas même l’espace intersidéral de *Nous trois* – ne peut plus apporter le sentiment du dépaysement. Les fictions de Jean Echenoz déroulent des lieux de nulle part qui se fondent dans la même uniformité aliénante.”\(^{147}\)

This devaluation of the experience of traveling casts serious doubt upon the status of the voyage in Echenoz’s texts. If no knowledge, no new experience is finally possible as a result of the voyage, then its traditional justifications in the thematic economy of the *romanesque* seem subject to a rather sharp implicit critique. The idea of the voyage as initiation, as trajectory which is productive of meaning, which both confirms the singularity of the voyager (as in the quests of courtly romance) and justifies the axiological motivations of the quest, is replaced by an endless turning in circles wherein the voyage is reduced to a simple period of movement linking two more or less identical states of existence.\(^{148}\) *Je m’en vais* begins and ends in the same apartment, with the same eponymous proclamation; *Au Piano* begins and ends at the Rue de Rome, with Chopin missing his chance at love a second time; *L’Equipée malaise* represents the repetition of roughly the same love triangle across two generations; *Le Méridien de Greenwich* and *Cherokee* both end with the suggestion that the machinations that underlay the intrigue

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\(^{146}\) It is not insignificant that this is precisely the title of the film that Meyer imagines could be made of his adventures with Lucie Blanche in *Nous Trois*, where neither the earthquake (opening into the center of the earth, or hell) nor the voyage to space (*le ciel*) seems to unlock a feeling of *significance* (see, for example, the description of the view of Earth, *NT*, p. 200; or the observation that the instruments of their spaceship allow them to see cows in great detail, *NT*, p. 202). I do not think it is overreaching to suggest that Echenoz had in mind the Baudelairian intertext while writing his descriptions of the ultimately banal locales that heaven and hell end up being.

\(^{147}\) Jérusalem, *op. cit.* (2005), p. 43.

will in a sense be rebooted; *Un An* sees its protagonist return to her point of departure.\(^{149}\) The voyage as metaphor for life finds, in Echenoz’s work, an essentially pessimistic expression. Christine Jérusalem sums up Echenoz’s position succinctly: “Le voyage est désormais impossible. Il est remplacé par une errance qui n’apprend rien au héros.”\(^{150}\) If there could be any doubts as to the dissolution of the notion of the voyage as *initiation*, they would be quickly dismissed after a reading of the scene from *Je m’en vais* where Ferrer, having crossed the Arctic Circle, is “initiated.” It first appears that the crossing of this symbolic line will be of some significance: “Le jour où l’on franchirait le cercle polaire, on fêterait normalement le passage de cette ligne. Ferrer en fut prévenu de manière allusive, sur un ton goguenard et vaguement intimidant, empreint de fatalité initiatique.”\(^{151}\) It soon becomes abundantly clear, however, that this feeling of intimidation is completely unfounded:

> Ce matin-là, donc, trois matelots déguisés en succubes firent irruption en hurlant dans sa cabine et lui bandèrent les yeux, l’entraînant ensuite au pas de charge dans un lacs de coursives jusqu’à la salle de sport tendue de noir pour l’occasion. On lui ôta son bandeau : sur une estrade centrale siégeait Neptune en présence du commandant et de quelques officiers subalternes. Couronne, toge et trident, chaussé de palmes de plongeur, Neptune interprété par le chef steward était flanqué de la rongeuse d’ongles dans le rôle d’Amphitrite. Le dieu des eaux, roulant des yeux, somma Ferrer de se prosterner, de répéter après lui diverses naiseries, de mesurer la salle de sport au double décimètre, de récupérer un trousseau de clefs avec les dents au fond d’une bassine de ketchup et autres innocentes brimades. Tout le temps que Ferrer s’exécutait, il lui parut que Neptune injurait discrètement Amphitrite. Après quoi le commandant se fendit d’un petit discours et remit à Ferrer son diplôme de passage.\(^{152}\)

\(^{149}\) It should be noted that Jean Echenoz does not exclusively write circular narratives. *Les Grandes Blondes*, intriguingly, has a sort of Hollywood ending, while *Lac* seems to peter out without any particular concern for symmetry.


\(^{151}\) JV, p. 32.

\(^{152}\) JV, pp. 32-33.
The humorous elements of this passage are so numerous, the absurdity of this initiation is so patent, that an extended analysis of its ironic treatment of the subject matter is hardly necessary. What is important is that the text simultaneously casts doubt upon the voyage as initiation, and upon the very idea of initiation itself. If it never seems like the characters in Echenoz’s books learn anything, accede to any higher state at all (social, financial, political, spiritual, amorous or relational); if even the rare occasions when they do ‘get the girl’ or become rich seem precarious or devoid of greater significance, it is precisely because the universes of these novels are empty of any sense of meaningful social or personal development of the sort that might be confirmed by informal or codified initiations and rites of passage.\(^{153}\) Sex, death and coming of age are all treated more or less flippantly in Echenoz’s oeuvre. In this sense, they depart sharply from the particular strand of the romanesque which treats the quest as a “fated and graduated test of election; [...] the basis of a doctrine of personal perfection through a development dictated by fate.”\(^ {154}\) The voyage turns out to be incapable of confirming the singularity of the questing individual, or of serving as rite of passage which would identify a coherent set of social expectations and organize a progressive approach to the stages of life.

This absence of meaningful action as a possibility for the characters of these novels is but one of the traditional sources of significance that is, in a sense, hollowed

\(^{153}\) Since the publication of Arnold van Gennep’s seminal *Les Rites de passage*, the ethnographic and sociological literature on the subject of rites of passage and initiations is abundant. Such forms of meaning were also obviously of prime concern to various avant-gardes, especially those of the first half of the twentieth century. The treatment of the initiation in *Je m’en vais* could be seen as another way in which Echenoz’s novels ironically reread the classics of both the popular novel and of modernist or avant-garde literature.

\(^{154}\) Auerbach, *op. cit.*, p. 136. Along the same lines, this refusal of character development and initiatory structures can be read as a repudiation of the tradition of the *bildungsroman*. Cf. Jérusalem, *op. cit.* (2005), p. 146.
out in Jean Echenoz’s particular recasting of the *romanesque*. With perhaps a few evocative exceptions—Paul Salvador’s happy ending with Gloire Abgrall in *Les Grandes Blondes*, for example—the characters of Echenoz’s novels seem destined to fail in their quests for fulfillment, either because they are unworthy of succeeding or because the very objects that support the *romanesque*, around which the quests and intrigues are constructed, are finally elaborate hoaxes or mirages of meaning. Echenoz’s novels almost all have hollow centers. The lynchpin of the intrigue so often ends up being an ultimately insignificant MacGuffin that one can read this aspect of Echenoz’s fiction as constituting a sort of literary program. It is also highly atypical of traditional expressions of the *romanesque*, and raises yet again the question of whether Echenoz is writing *romans romanesques, romans du romanesque* or critical *anti-romans romanesques*. Standing at the polar opposite of the knights of the *Quête du saint graal*, Echenoz’s characters are cut off from the realm of ultimate spiritual and personal enlightenment (even if they are sometimes under the mistaken impression that their quests have such finalities). The prototypical Echenozian novel of the hollow center is without a doubt *Le Méridien de Greenwich*, where a variety of rival factions battle to the death for control of a mysterious machine with the name of “projet Prestidge.” In one breathless passage, Echenoz enumerates the possible functions of this object which could endow it with significance commensurate to the blood that is being shed to obtain it:

> Avaient ainsi couru des rumeurs concernant une énergie de synthèse, un moteur autarctique, on avait parlé de domestication bactérienne, de réduction de la masse, de fission de l’atome, d’idiome informatique, de

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155 The name “prestidge” is an obvious nod to the Latin *praestigium* (“illusion” or “delusion”), evoking deception in the manner of a magician’s prestige. It also plays on the sense of prestige as value or status rightly or wrongly attributed to an object or person.
documents volés aux uns, de microfilms confiés aux autres, de recyclage des déchets, d’arme absolue. Foutaises, pensa Gutman.¹⁵⁶

What Echenoz is implicitly suggesting in this passage is that any of these options would, in a pinch, do for the elaboration of an adventure novel or thriller—and it is precisely this easy justification for the story that is refused to the reader. The machine is, in the end, nothing but a hoax, and its only real use in the novel ends up being to block a door to prevent would-be aggressors from entering.¹⁵⁷ The center of the entire plot ends up being totally hollow, “Au double, triple jeu, succéda l’absence de jeu.”¹⁵⁸ Some form of this hollow center technique can be found in all of Echenoz’s subsequent novels, including to a lesser extent his most recent biofictional works. In Cherokee, there is no final recuperation of the fortune or of the love interest; in L’Equipée malaise, Pons fails to secure the rubber plantation, while Paul fails to seduce his love interest; in L’Occupation des sols, maternal absence is the central theme; in Lac, the documents that the spies are fighting over turn out to be completely insignificant; in Nous Trois, the space mission seems highly unlikely to accomplish anything, while the protagonist is again abandoned by his love interest; in Les Grandes Blondes there is fulfillment, but the project itself—a televised special on tall blondes—is completely vacuous; in Un An, the entire reason for Victoire’s flight from Paris ends up being based on an erroneous assumption; in Je m’en vais, the protagonist does obtain a treasure of enormous financial value, but like all the rest of the art in the book, it is without any personal significance; in Au Piano, amorous fulfillment is suggested, but ultimately unattainable, even after a second attempt in the

¹⁵⁶ MG, p. 208.
¹⁵⁷ This door is perhaps a wink to the famous door in Raymond Queneau’s Le Chiendent, another novel which builds an elaborate story around what is finally nothing but a hoax.
¹⁵⁸ MG, p. 220. It is also significant that in the end the center is literally destroyed, as the island and the machine go up in a ball of fire.
afterlife; in *Ravel*, the meaning of the musician’s life is cruelly taken from him as his mind deteriorates to the point where he is unable to recognize even his own music; in *Courir*, Émile’s sporting achievements are constantly trivialized through contrast with the vastly more important political upheavals that are their backdrop; in *Des éclairs*, the Tesla-like inventor finally fails to achieve his major goal of a perpetual energy machine (a failing for which we might forgive him, however…). Complementing the hollow centers that are found in Echenoz’s books is a commensurate magnification of the margins: details, comparisons, stylistic flourishes, and digressions are all given unusual attention. We will comment on this phenomenon in more detail shortly. For the moment we will limit ourselves to the observation that the hollow center provides yet more evidence for the argument that if the *romanesque* can be said to return in Echenoz’s novels, it is in the form of a *drôle de romanesque* which subverts or perverts many of the habitual features of genre fiction.

Any number of incidental details could be added to this brief outline of the manners in which these novels seem to subvert the *romanesque* which they are supposedly contributing to rehabilitating, but particular attention is warranted when considering the subject of causality. Although Gilles Declercq and Michel Murat’s theory of the *romanesque* as the product of the intersection of *conjointure* and *aventure* is too limited to encompass the spectrum of fictions which could be designated as *romanesque*, it is nevertheless the case that a number of the canonical expressions of this sort of literature rely on a high degree of logical causality in their narrative structures.\(^{159}\)

Echenoz, on the other hand, often seems much closer to André Gide’s proto-avant-gardist

prescription: “ne jamais profiter de l’élan acquis — telle est la règle de mon jeu.”

Christine Jérusalem succinctly sums up the ways in which Echenoz’s novels disrupt the traditional pacing effects of the *roman romanesque*:

Le texte est animé par des forces antagonistes qui arrêtent l’avancée du récit (pauses descriptives, intrusions du narrateur), qui la font zigzagger (construction par montage alterné) ou encore qui la neutralisent (incomplétude des fins romanesques). L’Écrivain privilégie la structure trouée et étoilée : la continuité narrative est brouillée par une logique de déconstruction et de fragmentation.

While this is to some extent a question of pacing and rhythm, it is also one of agency and meaning. The persistent *randomness* that permeates the narrative suggests at once the absence of an overarching system of meaning within which to situate the actions (a fact which is reminiscent of the famous death of *métarécits de légitimation*), and the absence of agency on the level of the individual character. In the end, one of the consequences of the proliferation of *effets de romanesque* is the foregrounding of the artificially imposed nature of narrative, resulting finally in a story where “Les situations se succèdent sans raison véritable, se multiplient sans répondre à un ordre de nécessité organique.”

This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why conspiracy, plotting and manipulation abound in the novels—they permit a narrative economy in which the characters’ lack of control over their own destinies is highlighted. As Dominique Rabaté concludes, “la force cohésive et déterminatrice des actions qui règle la vitesse de la narration ne relève d’aucun ordre qui lui donnerait un sens absolu ou unique. Tous les actes de Victoire ou...

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163 It should be emphasized that these very plots are most often stripped of any definite motivation, and even when they are motivated by money or some abstract play for power, they do not have the telltale signs of broader Marxist or anti-capitalist critique, as they do, for example, in the Manchette’s novels.
de Max échappent à leur volonté propre.” At times it is the randomness of coincidence or happenstance encounters that implicitly suggests the characters’ lack of agency, at others the arbitrary nature of the narrative is more or less explicitly underlined, as is the case with the orders given to a mercenary in Le Méridien de Greenwich: “[…] débarquer dans l’île, tirer sur quelqu’un, voir ce qui se passerait et agir en conséquence.” It is in this arbitrariness governing the majority of plot developments in Echenoz’s novels that the refusal of strict causality is finally related to Echenoz’s hollow center technique. The absence of stakes and the absence of agency combine to suggest a universe in which characters are perpetually in movement, but forever doomed to standing still, a kind of end of history (or postmodern emptiness) where characters mime the movements of their literary ancestors without possessing their dynamism or intelligence, and where the world that they live in seems empty of any goal that is really worth pursuing. Many things happen to the characters in these novels, but it is not always clear why they happen or whether any broader significance can be attributed to such occurrences. Bruno Blanckeman is undoubtedly justified in asserting that, in these fictional worlds, “l’inessentiel déborde, au détriment d’un ordre de signification légitime.” This is an

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165 MG, p. 165-166.

166 On the relative lack of dynamism or intelligence displayed by Echenoz’s characters, cf. Dytrt, op. cit., p. 140: “Tel qu’il se constitue dès sa naissance comme genre de la modernité littéraire, le roman policier paraît incliner vers le goût ‘d’une rationalité positiviste qui prend volontiers ses cautions du côté de la science’ [Dubois, Le Roman policier ou la modernité]. Sa version contemporaine apparaît, par contre, comme possédée d’une envie de divorce avec la scientificité de ses personnages. Le détective est effectivement un imbécile qui manque pratiquement de toutes les facultés qu’exige son métier.”

important aspect aspect of Echenoz’s romanesque, and one which highly suggestive of
the novel’s views on contemporary life.

We have already suggested some of the ways in which Echenoz endeavors to
promote a propulsive narrative (abundant action, cinematic techniques, effet de
romanesque, etc.). Equally important are the manners in which the narrative apparently
repulses the significant moments of the story, in which the “élan acquis” is cut short.
Echenoz’s novels abound in derisive asides that empty the novel of pathos (but also of
other forms of gravity and seriousness): one need think only of the astonishing
description in Nous Trois of an earthquake that destroys Marseille. This scenario requires
very little extra help to be considered suspenseful and moving, especially considering that
all of the major characters of the novel are threatened with death. The seriousness is,
however, quickly sucked out of the catastrophe via a number of incongruous stylistic
flourishes. When one reads of “le fracas des rombos, retumbos, bramidos,” the absurd
sonorities obscure any relation of pathos to what the text is describing.\footnote{168}
Likewise, sympathizing with the victims is difficult when their plight is described in such humorous
terms: “Certains serrent contre eux quelque objet sauvé de justesse, imprévisible objet qui
est leur passeport autant que leur fox-terrier.”\footnote{169} As a tidal wave adds to the carnage, the
narrative casually comments on the destruction of ships in the harbor, “adieu Céphalonie,
bye bye Double Nelson,” before the wave finally subsides, “lentement, comme se laisse
dévoiler une statue, se déshabille une strip-teaseuse paresseuse.”\footnote{170} Incongruities, absurd
details and inappropriate comparisons render this earthquake highly humorous, but they

\footnote{168 NT, p. 69. The playful recourse to Spanish also clashes with the apparent gravity of the described events. For a reader who is not familiar with these Spanish terms, they might be read as sort of jocular onomatopoeia.}
\footnote{169 NT, p. 71.}
\footnote{170 NT, p. 73.}
certainly do not create the sort of suspense and emotional engagement that a scene of
catastrophe or near death would typically solicit in a roman romanesque. This
observation leads to the issue that is perhaps most central to determining whether
Echenoz’s novels are romans romanesques, romans du romanesque, or some unusual
hybrid of the two: the issue of the persistent use of distancing effects in Echenoz’s
fiction.

A Problematic Romanesque: Irony, Parody, Homage?

One particularity of the critical reception of Jean Echenoz’s work is that even as he has
been hailed as one of the major writers of the “retour du romanesque,” a tendency in the
contemporary novel which broadly speaking can be said to break from the anti-novel and
the principles of literary modernism, he has also been celebrated as a writer who operates
a critique of traditional literary forms, a critique which would seem to reestablish the
severed link to the Nouveau Roman. While critique can, in theory, be part of a process of
renewal, similar to the way in which one might cut the dead growth off a plant to permit
it to better grow, the particular interaction in Echenoz’s fiction between distancing effects
and recuperated elements from the traditional roman romanesque is often hard to
interpret. Many critics argue that Echenoz is still very much in the critical tradition, and
would therefore be a writer of romans du romanesque. Olivier Bessard-Banquy suggests
that reading Echenoz’s novels as traditional romans romanesques is finally impossible:
“Mais alors même que l’on croit débuter la lecture d’un roman d’aventures baigné par le
souvenir de Conrad ou Stevenson transparaissent déjà les fondements du travail de sape
romanesque perpétuellement à l’œuvre chez Echenoz.” This passage suggests that if the *romanesque* has returned, it is precisely as object of a “travail de sape” or sabotage which would draw attention to its artificiality and naïveté. Bessard-Banquy goes on to speak of a “jeu de la dérision” and of Echenoz’s project to “saboter le roman de l’intérieur.” Petr Dytrt concurs that “La déconstruction du genre opère en effet en réseau et oblige le lecteur à porter son attention sur le jeu qui régit le plan métatextuel […] De cette manière, le lecteur est systématiquement conduit à effectuer une ‘lecture critique’, celle du second plan.” Such proclamations seem to cast very serious doubt upon the extent to which Echenoz could be interpreted as anything but a writer of the anti-*romanesque*, and, consequently, call into question a whole critical tradition which has seen his fiction in the light of a renewal of old forms. Whether one considers Echenoz’s distancing techniques to be sarcastic repetitions in the ironic tradition or genre parodies aiming to disparage the clichés of the *romanesque*, there is significant textual evidence for reading Echenoz as an essentially negative writer. There are also, however, very good arguments for being suspicious of a reading of Echenoz’s novels that would emphasize their critical, parodic functions.

In many ways, it is easy to see the justifications for the argument that Echenoz is essentially a writer who effects a critique of the *romanesque*. For example, the abundance of intertextual references in Echenoz’s fictions, which could be said to signal his indebtedness to the traditions of genre literature, can also be read as so many indicators of the text’s status as agglomeration of clichés, stereotypes, and narrative commonplaces.

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One might even associate his novels with theories of intertextuality and argue that in signaling their status as a patchwork of citations or prior codes, Echenoz’s texts draw attention to the vertical axis of reading and to meaning as a performance of textual codes. However, as is the case for many of the features of postmodernist writing that continue to appear in the texts of Echenoz, the use of intertextuality in these novels seems to be divorced from any underlying postmodernist theoretical program. Far from an illustration of the nature of literary signification, Echenoz’s abundant references tend to be orientated toward the establishment of relations of influence and literary kinship. In his comments on intertextual references and literary models, Echenoz repeatedly returns to the concept of affective affinity, rather than any theoretical reflection on literary expression as such. On the subject of Flaubert, Echenoz speaks of “un rapport affectueux, affectif,” while he comments on a list of writers that have been important to him by stating : “Soit un environnement de romanciers pour la plupart, avec tout ou partie de l’œuvre desquels j’ai entretenu, ou j’entretiens encore divers liens passionnels, intimes.” While such relationships do not strictly preclude the consideration of Echenoz’s works in terms of semiotic theories of intertextuality, the emphasis, here as elsewhere in Echenoz’s

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176 Echenoz, Jean. “Un musée imaginaire.” Le Quinzaine littéraire, No. 532 (May 16-31), 1989: p. 13. While it is certainly not unique to Echenoz to conceive of his relation to his favorite authors in terms of affective affinity, the introduction of this personal, human element is not without its controversial side when one considers the prestige that a certain theory of an authorless literature has had in the last half century. Echenoz’s framing of the issue in terms of an intimate, emotional relationship recalls Georges Perec’s description of the books he rereads: “[…] ce plaisir ne s’est jamais tari : je lis peu, mais je relis sans cesse, Flaubert et Jules Verne, Roussel et Kafka, Leiris et Queneau ; je relis les livres que j’aime et j’aime les livres que je relis, et chaque fois avec la même jouissance, que je relise vingt pages, trois chapitres ou le livre entier : celle d’une complicité, d’une connivence, ou plus encore, au-delà, celle d’une parenté enfin retrouvée.” W ou le souvenir d’enfance. Paris: Denoël, 1975. p. 195.
discussions of his fiction, does not seem to point in the direction of such conceptualizations of literature.

In the same manner, the references to cinema, the frequency with which characters are compared to film actors, could be read, in line with the tradition of the Nouveau Roman, as at once dismantling the myth of literary originality, signaling the ineluctability of de-individuation and stereotyping, and undermining the referential illusion. We have already argued that in many cases the recourse to cinematic writing techniques aims to harness the narrative efficacy of the 7th art rather than to draw attention to any inherent features of textuality. One argument that is often invoked when speaking of any sort of ekphrastic or heavily citational literature is that in drawing attention to the fact that its sources are artistic it operates a critique of the referential illusion underpinning other less theoretically sophisticated literatures. A systematic evaluation of the ‘referential illusion’ argument is, regrettably, beyond the scope of this analysis. I would argue, however, that as with theories that suggest that it is somehow less deceitful for a literary text to relate impressions of reality than to “pretend” to relate the real itself, it is not clear that, with respect to reference, artistic sources or the electrochemical reactions that constitute our mental functioning should be any more or less accessible to textual representation than things in the lived world, or indeed, depending on where one stands with respect to various forms of idealism, whether there

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177 Christine Jérusalem, among others, has argued that his treatment of cinema marks a point of continuity with the Nouveau Roman. Cf. Jérusalem, *op. cit.* (2005), p. 91.

178 This distinction is sometimes expressed as an opposition between *figurer* (writing of mental impressions) and *représenter* (writing of objects or reality). Cf. Viart and Vercier, *op. cit.*, p. 121: “Figurer c’est donner à voir/à lire non l’objet mais une idée de l’objet – ou l’effet produit par un objet dans la sensibilité et l’intellection de qui s’intéresse à lui.”
is even a difference between these putatively different sources. That Echenoz’s texts should make abundant use of cinematic or literary source materials does not, I would argue, necessarily indicate the presence of a critique of the referential illusion.

Another place in which the question emerges of whether Echenoz is writing first- or second-degree treatments of the romanésque is the subject of his frequent references to film actors or actresses. These references could be seen as signaling the text’s status as a copy of genre conventions or prior works, rather than as an original story. The result of comparing a character to Angie Dickenson or Grace Kelly is often a reduction of the individual to the status of “type,” and, ultimately, of stereotype. Christine Jérusalem describes this process in the following manner: “Lorsque l’identité personnelle craque, il ne reste plus qu’une identité sociale, officielle, et dans le cas des romans d’Echenoz, une identité conforme à une norme cinématographique. […] Le lieu commun filmique dissout l’individualité, la désincarne.”

A number of parallels could be drawn between this dissolution of individuality in the mass-produced stereotypes of stock film characters and the systematic attack on the psychological foundations of the literary character undertaken by the writers of the Nouveau Roman. Although the relative absence of

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179 One recurrent issue with many of the less sophisticated critiques of mimesis and representation is that they tend to consider mimesis as a process of reproducing reality. This argument ignores the fact that fictionality itself begins with the assumption that there is no direct reference to the real (the names for these types of texts being journalism and history). The subsequent step is often an affirmation that non-mimetic arts create meaning while the mimetic arts undertake the (impossible or theoretically naïve) task of reproducing the real (an agglomeration of received ideas and stereotypes). For a more elastic definition of mimesis, cf. Schaeffer, op. cit. (1999), and Halliwel op. cit.

180 The critique of these typologies can be read implicitly in Les Grandes Blondes, where Paul Salvador undertakes an absurd project of establishing the nature, typological features, etc., of tall blondes.

pathos, among other things, makes any broad comparison between Echenoz and a writer like Claude Simon problematic, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the reduction of humanity to a series of eternally recurring stereotypes is common to both *La Route des Flandres* and to a certain reading of Echenoz’s novels.\(^{182}\) However, as is often the case with Echenoz’s novels, where the fiction frequently seems nourished by a carefully maintained tension between seemingly incongruous literary aims, the use of comparisons with actors and actresses is not unequivocal. Rather, these comparisons serve alternately to dissolve individuality in stereotype and to produce more clearly individuated, vividly imaginable characters. If there are doubtlessly a number of justifications for situating such references to popular actors within a general conception of postmodernist literature (and society) wherein text and subject are but assemblages formed of stock elements and prior modes of expression, it would be hasty to assert that this is the only function of these references. There is, after all, a long tradition of using comparisons to actors, in literary texts and in everyday conversation, to help the reader or listener form a more accurate mental image of a described subject. Before cinema, the realist novel abounded in descriptions of characters that referred to well known paintings or sculptures. In our time, the technique is widespread in genre fiction and in serious literature.\(^{183}\)

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\(^{183}\) Among innumerable such examples, one could mention the scenes in Manchette’s *La position du tireur couché* where a worker in a hotel describes a visitor’s haircut as “comme Jeanne Moreau, l’actrice, voyez-vous?,” and where this same character is later described as being “une jeune brune aux cheveux taillés à la Louise Brooks.” Manchette, Jean-Patrick. *Romans noirs*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005, p. 905, 914.
universe of popular film actors functions, in both conversation and literature, as a sort of shared repertory of commonly recognized faces upon which one can base descriptions.

One somewhat banal explanation for recourse to comparisons to movie actors is thus the desire to make a face vividly imaginable. As Elaine Scarry has remarked, faces often seem particularly difficult to imagine when reading fictional works.\footnote{Cf. Scarry, Elaine, *Dreaming by the Book*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, p. 44: “Faces express the labor of perceptual mimesis; flowers seem to express its ease.” For further discussion of the difficulty of recalling faces, cf. Irwin, Michael. *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979. p. 15.} If reference to movie actors is so helpful to the textual arts, it is perhaps because description of faces often results in a very hazy mental idea of what a character looks like. That textual description systematically produces a sharp mental image of a main character is far from a certainty: as the New Novelists knew well, a surplus of description often prevents rather than facilitates certain types of imaginatively recreative readings.\footnote{Some of Jean Echenoz’s outsized comparisons might be said to perform the same function, drawing attention to the process of comparing in writing while rendering more and more difficult the process of applying the lessons of the comparison back to the original object. As pertains to comparisons to film actors, not all descriptions help the reader “see.” At times, the references are to actors who are not well known; at others, the comparison mixes too many incongruous elements to be of much use in visualizing a character: “Elle avait un visage de bonne fée incestueuse, comme le portrait-robot établi par un homme qui voudrait décrire à la fois Michèle Morgan et Grace Kelly à cinquante-cinq ans, cet homme étant Walt Disney” (CH, p. 28). This passage recalls a similarly humorous composite description in Manchette’s *L’Affaire N’Gustro*, which finally concludes “Bon, ça évoque pas grand-chose qu’un sacré bordel” (op. cit. 2005, p. 193). As Michael Irwin notes, some novelists are pessimistic about the possibility of description functioning at all. Laurence Sterne’s famous white page which stands in for a portrait of the widow is, for Irwin, “a reminder that any attempt at detailed description is hopelessly undercut by the subjectivity of writer and reader” (op. cit., p. 22).} With these considerations in mind, it seems that when the goal is to produce as clear a mental image as possible of a literary character—a goal which would be in keeping with Echenoz’s stated intention to appropriate in some sense the efficacy of film imagery and narrative—the recourse to comparisons with film actors is one of the most serviceable techniques available to an author. Indeed, such is the power of film images that it is often difficult...
after having seen a film adaptation to read the source novel without imaginatively “using” the actors’ faces. Though there are definitely moments in Echenoz’s novels where comparisons to actors or actresses are intended to recall stereotypes and suggest the deindividuation of the contemporary subject, there are others where such comparisons clearly aim to make the characters easier to imagine. When asked about the cameos that Doris Day and Dean Martin make in *Au Piano*, Echenoz commented that “c’était comme si je faisais un casting,” and that he considered both their physical appearances and their personalities in choosing them for their roles. In his most recent interviews, Echenoz has talked about the writing process as essentially one of transcribing mental images into words, or of translating a kind of interior cinema into text. Echenoz has even gone so far as to say, “J’ai le tic de parler comme si je faisais du cinéma. Mais d’une certaine manière j’ai quelquefois l’impression d’en faire.” Such statements lend credence to the argument that the references to cinema are not merely elements in a critique of representation, but in fact often aim to make the reader visualize sharp cinematic images while reading the novel. In light of the particular treatment of comparisons with actors and actresses in Echenoz’s fiction, it would therefore be shortsighted to suggest that they perform solely a critical function. As is true in general with Echenoz’s interest in cinema, the filmic intertext cannot be reduced to a simplistic critique of stereotypes; it is also the

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186 “La phrase comme dessin.” Interview with Christine Jérusalem. *Europe*, No. 888 (April), 2003: p. 299. Echenoz notes in particular that he read a biography of Dean Martin and used elements from it in the novel. This fact suggests that a reading of the appearance of actors as mere indicators of eternal stereotyping and copying is too restrictive.


188 Interview with Laure Adler, *op. cit.*
site of ludic experimentation with modes of imaginative engagement with textual art: sharpness or fogginess of literary expression, facilitating and preventing the formation of mental images, processes of materialization and dematerialization, of conjuring and of disappearance.

On this subject, as with several that we have already considered, it would be easy to conclude that Echenoz’s novels are constantly leading us in circles, moving from apparently corrosive irony or parody to a certain loving reappropriation of the classic *roman romanesque*, from distance to connivance, from critique to apology and then back again. In this matter, it would be rash to declare a victor; any account of Echenoz’s fiction that does not make room for the uncomfortable co-presence of contradictory elements is bound to be partial and unsatisfactory. It is for this reason that ambiguity and, particularly, *tension*, seem the key terms when attempting to discern how the *romanesque* manifests itself in these novels. In our discussion of the *effet de romanesque*, we have already encountered some of the ways in which Echenoz’s fictions seem to produce distancing effects by presenting patently artificial situations, only to then rely on their seductiveness to propel the story. On this subject, Bruno Blanckeman’s description of Echenoz’s novels in terms of a *constitutive duplicity*, an ironic movement which highlights the tiredness of literary convention, but which undertakes a simultaneous renovation of this very convention, seems a very precise encapsulation of this tension.

189 Although I might modify the terms slightly, Sjef Houppermans has, correctly, I believe, signaled that in Echenoz’s novels one is confronted with the coexistence of three irreconcilable orientations: “l’image bariolée d’un monde tantôt riche mais tantôt trop plein, le vide et la solitude de l’individu qui contrastent d’ordinaire avec cette plénitude (comme Félix Ferrer dans sa galerie d’art) et, en décalage inquiétant mais libérateur, l’ironie qui revendique le droit de jouer et de se moquer du sérieux omniprésent.” Houppermans, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
between parody and homage. Although Echenoz himself has never made the connection, this co-presence of antagonistic forces could be read as another manner in which his literature is in some sense jazzy, as jazz was born of and took a great deal of its power from a seemingly impossible synthesis (of religious music and of the profane music of brothels). It is not, therefore, just Echenoz’s practice of riffing on the established standards of genre fiction that recalls jazz; it is also the sense that his art is the site of a conversation, sometimes even of a struggle, between disparate drives and influences, and that this tension nourishes an exploration of the possibilities of the form itself.

The result of this state of tension that is maintained in Echenoz’s fiction is that it is difficult to analyze his work without resorting to either half truths (selectively privileging one orientation over another) or contradictions. If one limits oneself to an analysis of the ironic recasting of genre stereotypes, it would be easy to conclude that Echenoz’s novels are essentially concerned with the critical subversion of the codes of popular literature. Conversely, if one ignores the ironic impulse and focuses on the

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190 Cf. Blanckeman, op. cit. (2000), p. 43: “Il en résulte une duplicité constitutive qui, loin d’appauvrir le récit, en dédouble la trame. […] En reproduisant des formes-images stéréotypées, il témoigne de leur surconsommation dépréciative et de leur usure. En les maquillant étrangement, il les revivifie, selon un jeu à la fois iconique et ironique qui dynamite et dynamise le récit.” It should be recalled that Echenoz himself has always denied that his books are parodies, choosing instead to emphasize their function as homages, and to suggest that distancing effects make the narrative more effective and compelling. The danger here is that these works could end up perpetuating regressive stereotypes. Ruth Cruickshank critiques Echenoz for his lack of critical distance with regards to stereotyping, and suggests that he may end up unintentionally perpetuating misogynist stereotypes. Cf. Cruickshank, Ruth. Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: the Aesthetics of Crisis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 89-94.


192 Such an argument pops up in different places in many of the major accounts of Echenoz’s work, including the excellent studies by Jean-Claude Lebrun (op. cit. 1992) and Olivier Bessard-Banquy (op. cit. 2003). Lebrun does make the important qualification that Echenoz’s critical approach is more a question of “détournement” than of “parodie” (op. cit., p. 69). Christine Jérusalem, for her part, categorically refuses
elements of the story borrowed from genre fiction, one might arrive at the equally flawed claim that Echenoz unproblematically brings about a return of the romanèsque. It has been the argument of this chapter that Echenoz is indeed a major writer of this return, but such a statement cannot be made without conceding that this return is haunted, in a sense, by suspicion and irony. Or, perhaps, it would be better to say that it cohabitates with suspicion and irony in a surprisingly amicable relationship. It often seems that Echenoz’s fiction teases established codes, like one would tease a close friend, rather than critiques them. The romanèsque, in Echenoz’s novels, does not return triumphantly to reclaim its rightful throne and rule its literary kingdom, but rather enters into a kind of diplomatic dialogue with competing conceptions of literature. This seemingly impossible rapprochement results in the contradictions or apparent contradictions that abound in academic scholarship on Echenoz’s fiction. It is, for example, often asserted that Echenoz

any reading of Echenoz’s fiction in terms of subversion: “[…] l’écriture seconde pratiquée par Echenoz ne saurait se définir en termes de subversion.” Jérusalem, op. cit. (2005), p. 56.

193 Though Echenoz has never been among the writers who systematically speak of the ‘terrorism’ of formalist strictures or who rail against the supposedly oppressive literary environment of the 1960s and 1970s, it is still hard to shake the impression that his early literature constitutes in some manner an effort to reconcile a nostalgia for the great detective and adventure novels with the feeling that they can no longer be written innocently, that it is only in irony, or looking over one’s shoulder, that the illicit pleasures of story can be savored. It could be argued that irony functions in Echenoz in part as an anticipation of resistance to genre fiction, as an acknowledgement that the reader might have reservations about reading an adventure or a detective novel; an acknowledgement which frees the reader to savor the story in connivance with the author. This process comes into clearer focus if we accept that distancing effects, and in particular narrative metalepsis, function not only to prevent immersion by drawing attention to the functioning of narrative. On this subject, Jean-Marie Schaeffer has argued that, far from exclusive to critical fictions which attempt in some way to ‘expose’ fiction as fiction, metalepsis is present in almost all instances of fictional immersion, which in fact requires “un état mental scindé.” Schaeffer, Jean-Marie “Métalepse et immersion fictionnelle.” In: Pier, Jean and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (ed.). Métalepses. Entorses au pacte de la représentation. Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2005. p. 325. Cf. also Dyrtt, op. cit., p. 103, where he argues that Echenoz’s distancing effects demonstrate that “Dès lors, il n’est plus possible de considérer la métalepse comme un trait spécifique de l’écriture moderniste qui servirait ainsi de trait définitoire du modernisme.” In the same manner, Christine Montalbetti has suggested that in her fiction, metalepsis functions to “créer un espace de connivence sincère, afin que nous mettions nos forces ensemble pour, sur le fond dévasté du roman soupçonné, nous mettre à croire un peu de nouveau” (Del Lungo, Andrea. “Entretien avec Christine Montalbetti.” In: Del Lungo, Andrea (ed.), op. cit., p. 279).
is both a writer of re-enchantment and of disillusionment, or even of a “réenchantement sans illusion du monde.”\textsuperscript{194} At first blush, it seems rather unlikely that enchantment and disillusionment could be present in any other way than alternatively or episodically in the same fictional text. However, this co-presence hints at an essential feature of Echenoz’s writing of the romanèsque, one which we have been alluding to for some time, which is the manner in which the élan romanèsque is simultaneously sucked out of the characters and narrated events and given free rein in the margins. Echenoz himself describes this process as follows: “L’idée qui me plaît, c’est l’idée d’un roman à double action, où l’action existe dans le fil narratif et dans la phrase.”\textsuperscript{195} This double action—which suggests a much-needed reconciliation of the terms of the (largely) false dichotomy between the adventure that is written and the adventure that is writing—helps to account for the ways in which Echenoz’s romanèsque is at once concerned with disillusionment (on the level of character and plot) and with re-enchanting the novel (with unbridled enthusiasm on the level of style and narration). This carefully maintained tension between a story world that seems empty of significance and a narrative style which, almost dancing above the void, pulses with the energy and vitality of the romanèsque, is the essential feature of Echenoz’s project to renew the romanèsque, to produce a writing of the romanèsque which accounts as fully as possible for the literary and social situation of the contemporary period.

\emph{Is the Romanesque a Movement?}

\textsuperscript{194} Cossé, Laurence. Cited in Schoots, \textit{op. cit.} p. 20.
Scholars of contemporary French literature frequently assert that the period is characterized by a move away from group identifications. Manifestos and movements are indeed rarer in the contemporary period than in prior literary epochs, although they are far from extinct. This insistence that we are living in a period without schools or groups does carry with it the problem of how to characterize contemporary literature, of how to determine relations of literary kinship and affinity. It makes little sense, after all, to suggest that Echenoz is influential, that he is one of the writers at the origin of a broader trend in literature, if one cannot say precisely what that literary current is and who is swept up in it. The answer of the present study is, of course, that it is the slippery subject of the romanesque and the negotiation of its ‘return’ in contemporary literature that ties Echenoz to the broader concerns of the contemporary period. Be this as it may, it is nevertheless instructive to examine the various labels that have been affixed to Echenoz’s oeuvre, not only in order to determine their appropriateness to his fiction, but also to examine the manner in which they cast light upon or obscure the major orientations of the romanesque both in Echenoz’s fiction and in the contemporary period in general. While we have already noted that Echenoz’s novels can be situated under a number of more or less locally recognizable designations (ludic, undecidable, playful, critical, etc.), it will be our project here to examine the larger movements within which Echenoz’s novels are seen to belong or which his novels are perceived as inaugurating and popularizing: the minimalist, impassive, postmodern and sociological orientations.

*Minimalism and Impassiveness*
The terms minimalism and impassiveness, with the latter most often encountered in the French designation *roman impassible*, were popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s in an effort to categorize the writing of “nouvelle école de Minuit” (of which Jean Echenoz, Christian Oster, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Christian Gailly, Marie Redonnet, Éric Chevillard and Patrick Deville were among the major names). The tendency toward an impassive style was highlighted by none other than Jérôme Lindon, and certainly could be seen as providing a minimal point of similarity linking the diverse authors listed above. It is indeed still under the heading of the “roman impassible” that Dominique Viart chooses to place Echenoz in his *La Littérature française au présent*, citing the relative absence of affect that permeates his narratives. We have already noted that the refusal of any sort of pathos is characteristic of Echenoz’s writing, which is not to say that his characters are without emotions, but that even situations of extreme reactions tend to be treated with a certain lightness and detachment that prevent easy identification.

The problem with impassiveness as a blanket designation for the new fiction that emerged in the 1980s, and, to a certain extent, with any attempt to lump these authors together under a single heading, is that a broad tonal similarity belies the enormous differences between the literary projects of writers like Echenoz, Toussaint and Chevillard.196 Is the detachment of Echenoz, which clearly has its roots in the novels of Manchette, of the American behaviorist writers and, to some degree, of Flaubert, really the same as the jocular insouciance and wordplay of a novel like Chevillard’s *Palafox*? Is it the same detachment as one finds in Toussaint’s *La Salle de bain*? Impassiveness is

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196 It is significant that Echenoz himself has spoken of his affiliations to a particular group of writers in terms of the reappropriation of the *romanesque*, saying that he belongs to “un ensemble d’écrivains […] qui ont eu le désir, vers le milieu des années soixante-dix – au sortir d’une période plus théorique, plus expérimentale – de se réapproprier la forme romanesque.” Interview with Claude Murcia. “Décalage et hors-champ.” *Artpress*, no. 175 (Dec. 1992). Cited in Schoots, *op. cit.*, p. 212.
ultimately a term which applies to all these authors, but which is far too vague to cover up the obvious dissimilarities between their various modes of impassiveness.

In the case of minimalism, there is also a definite concern that the term may be a bit too easily applicable to any number of dissimilar fictions, but at the very least it must be admitted that it underlines a major tendency (or major tendencies) in contemporary literature. Bruno Blanckeman offers the following succinct definition of minimalism in the contemporary period: “Aujourd’hui, cette neutralité consiste à donner de la puissance au détail, au fait anodin, à la situation brute, à l’humour distrait.” Already in this description, one can see how Echenoz could be associated with some of the broad criteria of minimalist writing, even if it is far from an exact fit. For our purposes, perhaps the most interesting or puzzling thing about the wide use of the term minimalism to define Echenoz’s novels is that the drive to ascribe minimalist leanings to his fictions seems to coexist with the general critical reflex to consider him a writer of the return of the *romanesque*. The classic manifestations of the *romanesque* in literature can be called

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197 While more rigorous definitions of literary minimalism tend to specify that it works at once on the level of form, style and content, it is common to name writers minimalists who only opt for simplicity or reduction on one or two of these levels, with the result that an author who chooses to describe an extremely banal event may share the designation minimalist with an author who recounts extremely violent events in a laconic or impassive style.
199 Here and throughout, references to minimalism will concern exclusively its application to the French literary context. The definitions of American literary minimalism, to say nothing of minimalism in the plastic arts or other media, do not necessarily correspond to literary minimalism in France. Cf. Schoots, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–57 for a more in-depth stylistic and thematic definition of minimalist writing in France, as well as for the argument that the new generation of Minuit authors should be classified as minimalist. A more recent analysis of minimalism in French literature, which presents several edifying studies on Jean Echenoz, and which includes an introduction which casts some doubt upon the enduring utility of the term (if not the debate around the term) is to be found in Blanckeman, Bruno and Marc Dambre (ed.). *Romanciers minimalistes, 1979-2003. Colloque de Cerisy*. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2012. On minimalism in contemporary French fiction, also see: Motte, Warren. *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.
many things, but they were certainly anything but minimalist. Even if one puts to the side the often swollen prose styles of the serialized adventure novels of the nineteenth century, the romanesco seems inexplicable as a definitional category without some sense of abundant action, adventure, or excitement. Once again, contradiction appears to be the rule in all matters pertaining to Echenoz’s strange literary project, and the critical tradition has made odd bedfellows of Echenoz’s unorthodox minimalism and romanesco writing.

As easily as the supposedly minimalist aspects of Echenoz’s fiction could call into question the appropriateness of considering him a writer of the return of the romanesco, his professed affection for these traditional forms could cast serious doubt upon his status as a minimalist writer. The objections to this designation are numerous, and Echenoz himself has rather stridently rejected it: “[l]a notion de minimalisme, en littérature, me semble avoir à peu près autant de pertinence que celle de postmodernité : c’est-à-dire proche de zéro.”200 If Echenoz makes no bones about his habit of stripping pathos from his novels, if he eschews clarification and causal conjunctions, if his novels often progress with a great deal of arbitrariness, if, finally, he tends to write novels of fewer than 250 pages, these features of his fiction do not, for him, suffice to qualify an author as minimalist. Many readers attentive to the profusion of extreme actions in Echenoz’s novels, to his stylistic excesses, to the imaginative breadth of his writing, have come to the same conclusion.201 As Christian Oster put it in a recent interview, “A propos d’Echenoz ou d’Eric Laurent, je parlerai [sic] plutôt d’anti-minimalisme car ils cultivent

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le jeu sur la langue et les points de vue en déployant des moyens énormes qui exigent une grande inventivité.”

If certain aspects of the minimalist aesthetic could be said to have provided Echenoz with a starting point in his literary research, and if his particular version of the romanèsque is inflected with characteristics that recall more systematic forms of minimalist writing, it would nevertheless be rash to conclude that the inauguration of a new form of roman romanèsque or roman du romanèsque in Echenoz’s novels marches under the banner of minimalism. While his concern for everyday detail, his impassive style and his relatively short novels suggest a smaller, less grandiose romanèsque than that found in many traditional novels, it would be misguided to suggest that his new romanèsque is the child of a straightforward combination (or confrontation) of traditional story forms and a minimalist aesthetic.

Postmodernism/Postmodernity

As we have already had occasion to signal, the term postmodernism could, at times, be accused of creating more problems than it solves. The category of postmodernism spans not only artistic media and the habitual dividing lines between literary generations (it is sometimes argued that Medieval literature is highly postmodern), but also disciplinary and national frontiers, changing attitude and contour at every turn. A survey of the literature on postmodernism is prone to produce the dizzying impression that one is dealing with a theoretical double agent, at times working to liberate humanity from its illusions, at others slavishly promulgating the ethos of multinational capitalism.  

While

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203 Cf. Schoots, op. cit., p. 198, “Or, dire que leurs romans sont postmodernes signifierait, dans un cas, qu’ils sont expérimentaux, auto-référentiels, fragmentés, et hétérogènes, bref avant-gardistes et dans l’autre, qu’ils sont insignifiants, légers, indifférents et ludiques, bref conservateurs.” For a Marxist
restricted circles can often be relatively confident of understanding the meaning their group gives to postmodernism, outside such enclaves it tends to produce the opposite of the desired effect, exhorting the speaker to provide an exact definition rather than signifying a commonly agreed upon set of phenomena and conceptual positions which would dispense the speaker of such labor. It is to be wondered if, in a world in which a bounce pass in basketball can be dubbed postmodern, postmodernism has not become a hodge-podge of conflicting definitions that prevents rather than facilitates a clear view of whatever subject one is attempting to understand. Even if this were the case, however, the concept of postmodernism is so widely disseminated, and encompasses enough compelling intellectual positions, that it demands attention even from unsympathetic scholars.

Enough work has already been done attempting to delineate context-specific understandings of postmodernism that the present study can dispense with a broad definition of the word, and focus instead on its most common meanings in the context of French literature and, specifically, on its pertinence or lack thereof to the romanesque in the novels of Jean Echenoz. Despite the aforementioned confusion between modern and postmodern in the French context, with a number of les modernes popping up in the USA as postmodernists, and despite a more widespread resistance to the term in the French perspective on postmodernism, the touchstones are Fredric Jameson (Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) and David Harvey (op. cit.). A sense of weariness and resignation faced with the task of elaborating a satisfactory definition of postmodernism is already evident as early at the mid-nineties. Cf. Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. p. 581: “This is not the place to attempt yet another sorting out of the various meanings that have accrued to the term in the past two decades, and even less to launch another rocket in the (increasingly tiresome) battle over its implications.”

Even if this were the case, however, the concept of postmodernism is so widely disseminated, and encompasses enough compelling intellectual positions, that it demands attention even from unsympathetic scholars.

Cf. Hsu, Hua. “Understanding Rondo.” Grantland (internet), June 7, 2012. Hsu’s reference to the pass in terms of “paradigm-smashing” and “art-for-art’s-sake” does little clarify how exactly this (decidedly brilliant) bounce pass qualifies as postmodern.
academy than is found stateside, Jean Echenoz is still considered by many, in France and abroad, to be something of a prototypical postmodernist writer. Indeed, even in the numerous works that brush aside the term and assert its irrelevance to Echenoz’s fiction, local descriptions of his literary project often unwittingly lead the reader back to the habitual definitions of literary postmodernism. For example, the empty centers of Echenoz’s novels, the proliferation of rudderless characters devoid of any stable source of meaning in their lives, seem reminiscent of the postmodern condition (or postmodernity) as defined famously by Jean-François Lyotard. In this instance, however, it is possible that the question is more one of Echenoz as a writer of the postmodern era or of postmodernity than of Echenoz as an exemplar of the postmodernist literary aesthetic. Perhaps the version of postmodernism that is most directly relevant to our subject of inquiry is A. Kibédi Varga’s assertion that the postmodern in literature is essentially characterized by “renarrativisation,” which is to say, by the desire to write stories (récits) again. It is this account of postmodernism which is responsible for the conflation of the “retour du romanesque” with the term postmodernism, despite the fact that postmodernism, in certain versions, can signify the polar opposite of a return to story or tradition. While the present study has argued that the return of a certain kind of

205 Of the scholars who explicitly associate Echenoz with postmodernism, the work of Petr Dytrt stands out as particularly comprehensive. Rachael A. Criso’s dissertation, Jean Echenoz and the Parageneric Text. (University of Pennsylvania, 1993) also presents a good analysis of Echenoz’s early novels in terms of postmodernist concerns.
206 On Lyotard’s postmodern condition, cf. infra., ch. 1.
208 On this subject, cf. Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. “La catégorie du romanesque,” in: Declercq, Gilles and Michel Murat (ed.), op. cit., p. 295: “[...] ce qui a souvent été salué ou condamné comme un retour ‘postmoderne’ à la fiction me semble plutôt correspondre à une réactivation de la veine romanesque.” In
romanesque (or, if one prefers, “retour au récit” or “renarrativisation”) is an important feature of the contemporary period in French literature, and that Jean Echenoz is one of the major writers of this tendency, it also contends that this return is meaningless without a certain sense of a break with avant-gardes of the sixties and seventies, avant-gardes which have often been hailed in their own right as postmodern. All this to say that it is not clear that when one equates the “retour du romanesque” with postmodernism one is not unwittingly muddying the waters. If postmodernism referred exclusively to “renarrativisation,” it could be more or less unproblematically substituted for the notion of a return of the romanesque, but this is simply not the case.

This pattern emerges time and again when we consider definitions of literary postmodernism and their concordance with the major features of Echenoz’s novels. For example, almost every feature of postmodernism in literature, as defined by Marc Gontard, can be found at least superficially in Echenoz’s novels, whether it be heterogeneity, collage, fragmentation, metatextuality or ironic renarrativization. All of these features can also be found to varying degrees in the Nouveau Roman or the Roman Tel Quel. Rather than suggesting that all these writers are in some sense postmodern, the presence of these elements in such disparate literary projects should alert us to the fact that each of these elements can potentially be turned to a variety of literary uses, and appear in a variety of literary contexts. In other words, this overlap seems to demonstrate that use of such criteria to determine a writer’s status as postmodern risks obscuring the

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209 It is this fact, among others, that has led Bruno Blanckeman to call the writers of undecidable stories “post-postmodernes.” Blanckeman, op. cit. (2000), p. 207.

gulf that separates fundamentally different modes of literary expression. Although this point is perhaps slightly more controversial, I would make the same claim for the definition of postmodernism in terms of eclecticism, patchwork, citationality, pastiche and re-reading. While there is a strain of literature which presents itself as nothing but a collage of borrowed and reassembled discourses—the extreme fringe of this is Flarf poetry—it would be a shallow reading of Echenoz’s novels which would see only a hollow, all-encompassing citational practice or pastiche, only a patchwork of pre-existing materials. There is simply too much originality in their conception to accept such an account. The citational drive in Echenoz is ultimately more about establishing relations of kinship and influence than it is about deconstructing myths of originality or demonstrating the vacuity of a postmodern world condemned to eternal pastiche and reproduction. That contemporary literature is engaged with literary history and writes on the basis of selective re-readings of that history is indisputable. That this very fact is somehow unique to the contemporary or suggestive of a postmodern attitude does not necessarily follow. On this subject, Echenoz has the following to say:

J’ai toujours eu du mal à voir la pertinence de l’idée de postmodernité en littérature, alors que je peux la comprendre en architecture. Il me semble qu’aller chercher dans des champs différents, à différents étages, pour essayer de reconstruire une fiction, c’est la moindre des libertés. Ça ne part donc pas d’une décision théorique particulière, mais d’un rapport de plaisir avec la fiction. On cherche les moyens de construire une combinatorie du plaisir. 211

What Echenoz is driving at here is that it is a rare and undoubtedly a very poor writer who is not engaged in some dialogue with the past, with what he or she knows and appreciates about literature. If the contemporary period is certainly less concerned with rupture and innovation than its forebears, it is doubtful that the very act of returning to

211 Interview with Jean-Claude Lebrun, op. cit.
the past, of borrowing from writers one admires, suffices to define an essentially postmodern position.

It is not the aim of the present study to suggest that there is no validity in associating Echenoz with some of the major tenets of literary postmodernism. On the contrary, I have already suggested that several penetrating studies of his oeuvre take precisely this tack. Rather, it is my opinion that in the same way as impassiveness or minimalism highlights essential features of Echenoz’s fictional practice, but only tells a small part of the story, postmodernism is, in some versions, highly appropriate to Echenoz’s novels, while in others it obscures their singularity. If, however, Echenoz can only be called a writer of a postmodern or postmodernist romanesque by taking the term in a very limited sense, the same is perhaps not as true of Echenoz as a writer of the romanesque of postmodernity. While literary postmodernism may not fully account for Echenoz’s particular innovations with regards to the romanesque, there is an intriguing case to be made for his writing as an attempt to adapt the schemata of the classic roman romanesque to a particular vision of postmodernity (or, if one prefers, to contemporary society).

The scholars who call attention to the sociological bent to Echenoz’s fiction are legion. Indeed, of the major critics of Echenoz’s work, Fieke Schoots is really alone in taking pains to avoid characterizing him in terms of the impulse to describe the contemporary world, and even she lapses occasionally into descriptions of how he is typical of the era in which he lives.213 It would certainly be overstating the case to make

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212 It is not irrelevant to this subject that, before becoming a novelist, Echenoz himself briefly studied sociology.
213 Cf. Schoots, *op. cit.*, p. 84, for the argument that because reality in Echenoz’s fiction is always represented reality, Echenoz cannot rightly be called a painter of modern life.
of Echenoz a journalistic writer. His engagement with the contemporary world is much
too oblique and understated to ever confuse his fiction with that of the roman-reportage.
Likewise, it should be forcefully stated upfront that if Echenoz can be said to present in
some manner a view of contemporary society, he is no way, shape or form a realist or
naturalist writer. With that in mind, it is true that the more one reads Echenoz’s novels,
the more a coherent portrait of a certain vision of the contemporary world emerges. The
major features of this vision are as follows: an attention paid to the banlieue and to the
architecture of peripheral, economically disfavored areas, with a concomitant attention
paid to diverse modes of exploitation (interpersonal and socio-economic); a thematization
of surveillance and panopticism, often tied to a critique of mass media; a prevailing sense
of emptiness, loneliness, isolation, and disappearance (of meaning and of self); an
attention to various forms of decline and decadence; and a recurrent sense of the unreality
of the real which underlies a refusal of straightforward sociological realism. Each of these
aspects of Echenoz’s fiction is important enough to the elaboration of his new
roman esque to warrant at least a brief analysis.  

Echenoz’s engagement with the contemporary urban (and suburban) landscape,
despite being a marginal and episodic concern of his fiction, is nonetheless significant for
its consistent portrait of architectural, social and psychological emptiness. If, according
to Thomas Pavel, the roman esque has traditionally been a venue for the exploration of
values and their concordance, or lack thereof, with the real, it is clear that Echenoz’s

214 Although Un An is surely the novel where the sociological tendencies of Echenoz’s work are most
clearly apparent, it does not engage the tradition of the roman esque enough to be relevant to the current
study.
215 On the subject of Echenoz’s description of contemporary urban spaces, see: Jérusalem, op. cit. (2005);
and: Deramond, Sophie. “Une vision critique de l’espace urbain : dynamique et transgression chez Jean
Romanesque has no relation whatsoever to a literature of aristocratic self-affirmation. Rather, the quests of these novels’ lukewarm heroes tend to take them through a variety of soulless milieus, underlining isolation, superficiality and social emptiness. Typical of this depiction of the banlieue is the scene from Lac where Chopin comments on the painter Mouezy-Eon’s paintings: “Chopin se demanda comment il parvenait à choisir ses sujets dans ce décor: sous l’apparente diversité de la banlieue, toutes les choses y semblaient affectées du même poids, du même goût, nulle forme sur nul fond ne faisait sens, tout était flou.” Meaninglessness and uniformity are the watchwords of this new (sub)urban space, and, in this sense, the décor matches the existential emptiness which afflicts the majority of Echenoz’s characters. As Danièle Méaux rightly comments, “Les zones intermédiaires (aéroports, aires d’autoroute, hôtels…) que traversent les personnages à la dérive, les environnements contemporains tels que les centres commerciaux ou les banlieues dans lesquels ils passent sont marqués par le vide.” Emptiness of high-rises, of freeways, of shopping centers, of outer space, of the air that Gloire pushes her victims into, of sexual encounters, of television newscasts, of the very pursuits that drag the empty heroes across the empty landscapes of the contemporary

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216 Of which, it will be recalled, a few of the major modes are to be found in the Medieval courtly romance, the seventeenth-century sentimental novel and the nineteenth-century romantic idea of an aristocracy of spirit (esprit).
217 It is not the suggestion of the present study that all banlieues are intrinsically soulless. Rather, this is the impression that is consistently conveyed in Echenoz’s novels.
218 L, p. 188.
world—it would perhaps not be going too far to suggest that Echenoz’s *romanesque* is essentially a *romanesque* of contemporary emptiness.

We have already suggested how emptiness is both a structural feature of Echenoz’s narratives (the hollow center), and characteristic of the majority of Echenoz’s characters, who seem to be engaged in futile quests to fill some inner void. This pessimistic view of humanity is coupled with a general discourse of decline and decadence. As Christine Jérusalem has noted, “Les nombreux travaux de démolition qui affectent la ville (en particulier dans *Je m’en vais*) témoignent d’un monde qui s’autodétruit.”

Although they are radically dissimilar in many ways, a broad link can be made between Echenoz and Antoine Volodine in their thematization of a world where the outlook is fundamentally pessimistic, where the possibility of building a better future seems risible. If the persistence of amorous deception in Echenoz’s novels suggests on the one hand the difficulty or impossibility of using love as a means of accessing a more fulfilling existence, it also points to a refusal of the optimism of the classic comedic ending, in which a new society is formed around the coupling of the young lovers.

Echenoz’s novels are more likely to end in abandonment or death, if not outright apocalypse. The one exception to this rule, *Les Grandes Blondes*, presents a sort of perverse Hollywood ending from which it would be difficult to derive any sense of meaningful hope for the future. All of this is of particular significance to the question of the return of the *romanesque*, for with the possible exception of minimalism, there is

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220 Jérusalem, *op. cit.* (2006), p. 42. Jérusalem rightly notes that in addition to subtle references to decadence or destruction, several of Echenoz’s novels make of it a major plot point. Jérusalem mentions the island in *Le Méridien de Greenwich*, the advertisement with the mother’s image in *L’Occupation des sols*, and the earthquake and the blood rain in *Nous Trois*, to which I would add the mental decline of Ravel and the physical decline of Émile in Echenoz’s recent biofictional works.

221 Cf. the remarks of Frye, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-158.
nothing which is less characteristic of the traditional roman esque than pessimism and existential hopelessness. So much of the excitement of Jules Verne’s novels is derived from the sense of the power of science to open up new worlds to mankind. And what is the sentimental novel without a belief in love? In an era so insistently defined by the idea of being ineluctably post- (modern, historical, humanist, and so on), in which mankind seems to be plunging headlong toward hitherto unknown scales of human exploitation and environmental destruction, a return to the roman esque might seem like the very definition of evasion. However, it seems that precisely because the roman esque has traditionally been an expression of strong values, of optimism, of belief (in ethical and moral codes, in oneself, in love, in science, in the spirit of discovery), the adaptation of its schemata to a particular pessimistic view of contemporary realities brings into focus, by way of contrast, a vision of what has changed in the contemporary world, of what it is still possible (or no longer possible) to accomplish and to believe. As we shall see, this is not a universal trend in the contemporary roman esque, but it is an important trend.

We have already discussed in some detail the prevalence of manipulation, personal and political, in Echenoz’s novels. The sociological or political face of these schemes is evident in novels such as Les Grandes Blondes, where Gloire is manipulated by a shadowy multinational organization engaged in basically every imaginable form of immoral and exploitative activity:

This passage, which is at once profoundly pessimistic and highly entertaining, illustrates the duality of Echenoz’s writing project, where the pessimism of the plot is not reflected in the jubilance of the style. To return to the subject of machinations, however, it should be remarked that the power of these shadowy figures is often a result of surveillance measures which give the impression that all the characters are living in a panoptic regime controlled by a more or less evil elite. Often, in novels like *Le Méridien de Greenwich* or *Les Grandes Blondes*, it is unclear how these powerful manipulating forces manage to access all the information to which they are privy—a fact which reinforces the sensation of the unequal dynamics of visibility and control which govern the characters’ actions.

This representation of panopticism and manipulation could be associated with a particular critical view of the scopic drive underlying the novel as form. In this interpretation, the panoptic aspects of Echenoz’s fiction would serve to underline the manner in which the traditional novel promulgates the ideology of panopticism.  

For our purposes the emphasis on exploitation and panopticism are primarily interesting for their functions as markers of the social and psychological conditions of contemporary society. Alongside the critique of mass media (the inanity, even perniciousness of television is often suggested in Echenoz’s novels), the emphasis on continual surveillance and manipulation suggest a society in which one is always potentially being watched by forces who are either operating for unknown or absurd reasons (*Le Méridien de Greenwich*, *Lac*) or for

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222 *GB*, p. 179.

enrichment through immoral and malicious means (*Les Grandes Blondes*).\(^{224}\) As we have already mentioned, it is not the smallest consequence of these perpetual manipulations that the heroes seem never to really have full control over their own lives, to be able to define their own values and courses of action. In the absence of real sources of significance around which to base the quests of this new *romanesque*, the driving forces for these heroes’ voyages tend to either be vacuous (obtaining the useless prestige machine) or downright malevolent (forcing a mentally unstable woman to appear on television).

The final aspect of Echenoz’s portrayal of contemporary society that should be underlined is the persistent manner in which he suggests the unreality of the real. Christine Jérusalem has noted that the least realistic details of Echenoz’s novels—for example, the names of the characters and locations in the arctic voyage in *Je m’en vais*—are often the ones taken from real life.\(^{225}\) Moreover, the proliferation of fantastic coincidences, the occasional dreamlike quality of the narrative, as well as the games the novelist sometimes plays with various levels of ekphrastic description, push the reader towards a state of uncertainty with respect to what is real and what is unreal. I have already suggested that one explanation for these techniques is Echenoz’s interest in experimenting with the capacity of text to produce sharp or dreamlike images, to mimic the efficacy of the filmic image or to sabotage visualization or imaginative reading with incongruous or unimaginable elements. In other words, the movement between unbelievable-but-true fact and believable fiction can be read as part of Echenoz’s interest


\(^{225}\) Jérusalem notes that “La réalité retenue par l’écrivain est précisément celle qui peut passer pour irréaliste ou romanesque.” Jérusalem, “Stevenson/Echenoz.” In Blanckeman, Mura-Brunel and Dambre (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 337.
in creating propulsive narratives with surprising and unexpected literary effects, particularly confusion (is this the story or a movie being watched by a character?), suspense and misidentification (who is doing what for what reasons?), and co-presence of incongruous elements (stereotypical tropical morality appearing in the polar region). It has also been suggested by various critics that this blurring of boundaries is indicative of the victory of the virtual over the real, of the death of reality in our contemporary cultures. While the argument has been made so many times as to impose itself as a fact, we should perhaps not too hastily accept that the proliferation of various modes of virtual reality and new media has resulted in increased confusion between what is real and what is virtual, to say nothing of the contention that we are now living in a realm of virtuality completely severed from any possible relation to a real world. Despite the fact that we are constantly bombarded with representations and virtual images, it is not clear that our grip on the distinction between what is real and what is virtual is inferior to that of, say, a superstitious peasant of the sixteenth century. All recent eras of humankind have produced representations of the real which redound on a culture’s understanding of its lived reality. It is possible that the explosion of new media has damaged communities, modes of social interaction, and the profundity of political discourse; it is not a given that it has made the line between the real and the virtual any easier or harder to distinguish than in past centuries.

Another element of the unreality of the real in Echenoz’s novels that has garnered significant critical interest is the absence of logical conjunctions, and the apparent randomness of the events which shape his narratives. While our analysis of the *effet de*

226 On these subjects, the work of Jean Baudrillard is obviously the major theoretical touchstone. See also: Jérusalem, *op. cit.* (2005), p. 125: “Le traitement de l’illusion dans les romans d’Echenoz rend compte de cette nouvelle ère de l’image qui contamine le réel, le modélise pour imposer sa propre loi.”
*romanesque* in Echenoz’s novels has already proposed a particular reading of these coincidences, other scholars have suggested that these moments of randomness or seemingly unrealistic coincidence reflect the new understanding of physical dynamics brought about by quantum mechanics and chaos theory. It is my opinion that we should have some reservations about the argument that the refusal of rational causality as a structuring principle of Echenoz’s stories is based in the principles of chaos theory and quantum physics.\(^{227}\) This is, of course, not to say that the shift from a deterministic to a probabilistic paradigm in particle physics was not an intellectual development of enormous significance. It is not clear, however, that what we know about quantum mechanics should radically alter our conceptions about interactions at the macro level of individual subjectivity, human societies, or literary narratives. I do not have the relevant expertise to fully evaluate such claims, but it is my understanding that quantum-level indeterminacy does not necessarily invalidate the rules of classical dynamics at the scale of the atom and up.\(^{228}\) To suggest, as scholars in the Humanities, broad analogies between the principles of quantum physics and the structuring of literary narratives; or, to go further, to suggest that, because of the discoveries of quantum physics, narratives that emphasize discontinuity and randomness are somehow truer to reality, is perhaps to venture out onto ice of which we are not qualified to judge the thickness.

Whatever we may conclude with respect to the questions of the victory of the virtual over the real or of the isomorphism between Echenoz’s use of coincidence and our


\(^{228}\) Cf. the work of Nobel-prize winning physicist Robert B. Laughlin on emergence and physical dynamics.
understanding of quantum mechanics, it is clear that a particular vision of postmodernity or contemporary society influences enormously Echenoz’s elaboration of a new romanescue. Emptiness, disappearance, meaninglessness, decadence and manipulation form in a sense the thematic backbone of a romanescue which cannot in good faith unthinkingly reproduce the values of its era; or which, perhaps, is unsure that its era has any real values that a novel might seek to reflect or idealize. As we have already taken pains to demonstrate, this pessimistic account of Echenoz’s romanescue must be considered in tandem with what might be called a stylistic optimism or jubilance, with a form of writing that is at the polar opposite of a certain naturalist miserablism. Once again, as with so many aspects of Echenoz’s surprising and innovative romanescue, the idea of productive tension or contradiction is apposite to this co-existence of a pessimistic view of postmodernity and a style which seems constantly to favor play, amusement, engagement. If it is far from sure that mankind can confront the major issues of our time, can succeed in creating an existence for itself that is anything but crumbling post-world, Echenoz’s fiction presents a style which finally seems to still believe in literature, to believe that a new literature is possible.
Chapter 3. An Eternal Return? Jean Rouaud’s Romanesque Between Slow Literature and Ressentiment

When one considers that, depending on the account, the contemporary period in French literature now spans thirty or forty odd years, it would seem logical to assume that, after all of the noise made about the “retour du romanesque” in the early 1990s, recent novels would find a context of reception no longer primarily concerned with the production of a counter-discourse to the major tenets of avant-gardism or literary formalism. However, a brief glance at the critical reception of Jean Rouaud’s 2006 novel, \textit{L’IMITATION du bonheur}, suggests on the contrary that the battle against the “ère du soupçon” in the name of the roman esque still has its partisans. One of the things that stands out when reading \textit{L’IMITATION du bonheur} is that, while it is clearly an adventure novel, an historical epic, a love story and a political parable, it is also, in Rouaud’s words, “[une] histoire critique de la fiction.”\textsuperscript{229} Appropriately, many scholars have emphasized the manner in which the author presents something like “la célébration de ses noces avec la fiction fictionnante,”\textsuperscript{230} with some critics even going so far as to suggest that the novel was essentially a pretext for some score-settling with Rouaud’s former publishing house, Les Éditions de Minuit, and its legacy of promoting so-called experimental fiction. One could be forgiven for thinking that all of this discussion of the affirmation of the roman esque sounds surprisingly similar to the justifications heard for the new types of novels that were appearing in the eighties and early nineties. If the previous chapter of this study sought to determine how, in a very different intellectual environment, Echenoz’s fiction


delineated new possibilities for the *romanèsque* in contemporary French literature, this chapter will focus on what Rouaud’s novel tells about how the “retour du romanèsque” is positioned in an era where, for better or worse, the dominant paradigm of literary studies can no longer be said to be formalism. It will be the contention of this chapter that Rouaud’s novel provides an intriguing apologia for a new type of *romanèsque*, a kind of “slow” literature, opposing the deleterious march of modernity and the progressive rationalization of society. This chapter will also ask, however, if this particular “littérature romanèsque,” with its obsessive will to demarcate itself from formalist, scientific and experimental literature, does not risk becoming a kind of *romanèsque de ressentiment*, wherein the primary purpose of the novel would be to transform perceived intellectual inferiority into moral and spiritual superiority.

When considering *L’Imitation du bonheur* and its particular framing of the issue of how and why contemporary literature should write the *romanèsque*, it is important to note the extent to which this novel represents a departure from the literary project that, in the early nineties, catapulted Rouaud from a job in a newspaper kiosk to literary stardom.\(^{231}\) For a long time, Rouaud could be quite accurately portrayed as a novelist emblematic of the emerging trend of biofiction, a writer whose novels, in the words of one scholar, tended to touch upon a small set of insistent themes and characters (“Rouaud/papa/maman/tante Marie/Loire-Inférieure/années soixante”).\(^{232}\) Although many of Rouaud’s perceptive critics have questioned the extent to which his recent novels constitute a total rupture with his earlier work, there is no doubt that before 2006 he

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231 Rouaud won the Prix Goncourt with his first novel, *Les Champs d’honneur*, published in 1990. The story of the humble kiosk worker turned literary celebrity made the rounds of all the major papers at the time.

would have seemed a highly unnatural choice for a study on the return of the thematics of the *romanesque*.\(^{233}\) *L’Imitation du bonheur* is not, therefore, the work of an author who, like Jean Echenoz or Antoine Volodine, can be said to have made his name through a systematic exploration of the potentialities of the *romanesque*. *L’Imitation du bonheur* is particularly interesting, in fact, for the way in which it both recounts the literary conversion of its author and acts as a proselytizing work, aiming to convert its readers from the bad ideologies of scientism and literary realism.

This polemical bent sharply distinguishes Rouaud from Echenoz; and although the two authors inevitably share a few stylistic features (ludic narrative stances, play with omniscience and ignorance), the differences between them are much more pronounced than the similarities. Even the most superficial of comparisons between Rouaud’s recent novels and the oeuvre of Jean Echenoz immediately reveals that Rouaud has no interest in following Echenoz’s self-imposed rule of denuding his novels of pathos. On the contrary, Rouaud has spoken of *L’Imitation du bonheur* as “rien qu’un rêve d’amour,”\(^{234}\) and of his writing as essentially nourished by “[une] sensibilité un peu balourde parfois, encombrante, handicapante, souvent déplacée […].”\(^{235}\) A glance at *L’Imitation du bonheur*’s plot reveals no shortage of occasions for emotion and pathos. Its heroes are

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\(^{233}\) The most complete account of the points of continuity and rupture in Rouaud’s fiction is to be found in Sylvie Freyermuth’s *Jean Rouaud et l’écriture ‘les yeux clos’: de la mémoire engagée à la mémoire incarnée* (Paris: Harmattan, 2011). Although Freyermuth does see Rouaud’s recent work as part of a new period which she calls “le cycle de la liberté de l’écrivain,” she takes pains to emphasize that all of Rouaud’s novels should be read as part of a continuum, with each reflecting in some way on “sa vie d’écrivain et ses rapports avec sa propre création” (Freyermuth, *op. cit.* (2011), p. 8). For an excellent overview of how Rouaud continues to work biographical details into *L’Imitation du bonheur*, cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-218.


Constance Monastier and Octave Keller. Constance, “la plus belle ornithologue du monde,” is a young mother of humble origins who has, in typical nineteenth-century fashion, been coerced into marrying the wealthy owner of a silk mill (a stock bourgeois villain who, in addition to exploiting his workers, also sexually abused an adolescent Constance after her father’s death). Octave is a wounded communard who is fleeing the authorities after having rather miraculously escaped the semaine sanglante. A chance meeting between the two leads Constance to abandon the (John Ford-inspired) stagecoach taking her back to her marital home and strike off into the Cévennes with Octave. This elopement is the occasion for an amorous and political awakening, with Octave showing Constance an alternative to a loveless marriage and to her reactionary bourgeois milieu. Some years later, the favor is in a sense returned when Constance, having somewhat fortuitously inherited her husband’s mill and transformed it into a kind of phalanstère, manages to overcome Octave’s disenchantment—the product of a long exile—and reignite his belief in love and justice. In a final, Hollywood-inspired flourish, Octave vanquishes an evil notary intent on dispossessing Constance of her mill, and the novel ends with an unequivocal affirmation of love. While the importance of sentimentality in Rouaud’s work is suggested most forcefully by the centrality of love in the plots of his recent novels, it is also brought to the reader’s attention through explicit and implicit moments of intertextuality. With references to literature ranging from courtly

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236 The choice of the Cévennes is not gratuitous; one of the major sources of inspiration for the voyage of Rouaud’s lovers is Robert Louis Stevenson’s Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes.

237 In interviews, Rouaud has also chosen to emphasize the intertwining of the political and the sentimental in his earliest conceptions of this story: “Cette rencontre sentimentale va transformer sa vision du monde puisqu’il va lui expliquer le sens de sa lutte et de son engagement et l’obliger, elle, dont le mari a une filature, à porter un autre regard sur la condition ouvrière. […] Et c’est elle qui va le réenchanter politiquement. Et ce réenchantement politique sera aussi un réenchantement amoureux.” “Bibi en l’an 2000.” Interview with Sylvie Ducas. In: Ducas, Sylvie (ed.), op. cit., p. 304.
romance (Octave is called a “chevalier errant”) to the *roman précieux* (the famous “Carte de Tendre”) and to authentic love stories drawn from travel narratives like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* and Isabella Bird’s *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains*, Rouaud calls upon a variety of literary traditions that privilege emotion and love in their political, social, spiritual and axiological worldviews. This is perhaps where Rouaud’s differences with Echenoz come most sharply into focus. For while Echenoz does return often to the idea of love as a (perhaps unattainable) source of meaning, his writing refuses any discourse of transcendence or universal value, departing sharply from the particular vein of the *romanesque* that concerns itself above all with the representation of strong value systems. Rouaud’s conception of the *roman romanesque*, on the other hand, places a great deal of emphasis on a not-very-modern idea of love as a spiritual quest and of the work of the novelist as at once concerned with personal redemption through art and with a certain salvation of the novel as literary genre.

When one evaluates *L’Imitation du bonheur* using Schaeffer’s four features of the *romanesque*, it becomes clear that it conforms much more readily than any of Echenoz’s novels to traditional notions of what constitutes a *roman romanesque*. As we have just mentioned, affectivity, or what Thibaudet problematically called the “feminine”

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238 It should be noted that this a consistent feature of Rouaud’s writing. In *La Femme Promise*, the love story is developed through a number of references to the Lancelot myth, while the heroine is named Mariana in a nod to the protagonist (and sometimes presumed author) of the *Lettres portugaises*. In *Évangile (selon moi)*, Rouaud refers to the blues song he wrote in *La Fiancée Juive* as “un chant d’amour courtois comme au Moyen-Âge.” Rouaud, Jean. *Évangile (selon moi)*. Paris: Éditions des Busclats, 2010, pp. 9-10.

239 A particular conjugation of love and virtue is essential to this project. As Sylvie Freyermuth explains, in Rouaud’s novels, “les personnages principaux évoluent dans une communauté de valeurs spirituelles en allant au plus profond du dénudement et du dépouillement des biens tangibles et temporels, pour s’élèver au plus près de cette vérité : il n’y a de sens à la beauté des arts que s’ils sont créés dans l’exigence de l’amour et de la vertu” (*op. cit.*, p. 236). That Rouaud’s notions of love and virtue are associated with deprivation and austerity, with a sort of imitation of Christ, is also interesting when one considers *L’Imitation du bonheur* within the general framework of a Nietzschean conception of Christian *ressentiment*.
The sincerity of such proclamations is in stark contrast to the more restrained, ironic, even elusive style of Echenoz’s novels. The same could be said of *L’Imitation du bonheur*’s heroes and villains, who are highly typical of the tradition of the roman romanesque, but who have little in common with the often lethargic and morally ambiguous characters that haunt Echenoz’s story worlds. On a superficial level, the plot of *L’Imitation du bonheur*—to say nothing of its considerable heft, weighing in at almost 600 pages—also seems to conform to Schaeffer’s third feature, which is to say the saturation of events in the story. This would represent at least one point of contact with Echenoz’s often action-packed (if much shorter) novels. However, as we shall soon see, if the novel’s bloody backdrop and the importance of forbidden love seem highly typical of the roman romanesque, the profusion of digression and various types of metalepsis or metadiscursive passages makes relating *L’Imitation du bonheur* to a traditional historical adventure or love story somewhat problematic. The final identifying feature of the roman, a form of mimesis in which the story world presents a counter-model to the world of the reader, is also present in Rouaud’s novel in the form of historical distance. Rouaud’s roman has for models the traditions of exoticism, travel writing, frontier narratives and historical adventure fiction, rather than genres like fantasy or science fiction. Rouaud

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240 *IB*, pp. 491-492.
241 Throughout *L’Imitation du bonheur*, Rouaud insists on the ways in which our position as modern readers, children of technological modernity and of the experimental novel, makes us unable to look at the nineteenth century and its stories as its inhabitants would have.
does not seem particularly inclined to depart from at least some semblance of historical plausibility, even when he fudges facts or pushes the limits of *vraisemblance* with his novelistic coincidences. One intriguing exception to this rule, however, could be found in Rouaud’s tendency to use metalepsis to make his narrator—whose voice is clearly intended to be perceived as that of Rouaud the author—a kind of time-traveler from the present. The narrator engages in a dialogue with his late-nineteenth-century characters, explaining broad developments in the history of the twentieth century to the characters, and passing freely between hetero- and homo-, intra- and extradijgegetic narration.242

This is but one of the particularities of Rouaud’s style which alerts the reader to the fact that although all of the conventional features of the *roman romanesque* are to be found in *L’Imitation du bonheur*, it is in reality very different from the classical manifestations of the genre. As Sylvie Ducas has suggested, Rouaud’s writing is the site of a paradox, at once “héritier de la modernité littéraire et fervent partisan de la fiction romanesque.”243 Ducas adds, on the subject of Rouaud’s appropriation of the traditions of the *roman romanesque*, that “Cette réhabilitation de la fable est néanmoins tout le contraire d’une restauration ou d’un simple retour à des prérogatives périmées. Personnages à géométrie variable, art de la reprise, détours de la narration, zones d’ombre et points de fuite, l’écriture chez Jean Rouaud est sous surveillance et le texte se commente à mesure qu’il s’écrit.”244 This abundance of commentary, the presence of “d’interminables métadiscours exposant la poétique de l’auteur,” at times threatening to entirely eclipse the (supposedly) central love story, ultimately calls into question the

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242 For example, the narrator at times acts as a physical inhabitant of the story world who is an ocular witness to the events recounted, while at others he maintains the distance of an author working with archival documents to reconstruct the story.
The novel’s status as a *roman romanesque*.

The book begins with an abundance of prefatory remarks discussing a wide range of subjects: the author’s inaptitude for writing such a novel, the onerousness and superfluity of literary description in the age of the photograph, the pernicious influence of Zola and scientism on twentieth-century literature.

The reader must wait until page 48 for anything like a traditional story to make an appearance. It might be suggested that digression and the practice of delaying narrative gratification are highly typical of a number of serialized novels—and Jean Rouaud has in fact spoken of his narrative detours as a sort of homage to works like Paul Féval’s *Le Bossu, ou le Petit Parisien*—but very rarely in these traditions is story as systematically de-emphasized as it is in *L’Imitation du bonheur*. Rouaud’s digressions are frequently argumentative and metadiscursive, and this distinguishes his writing from that of serialized novels which may often multiply digressive sub-plots, but which rarely suspend plot entirely for stretches of fifty or more pages. Furthermore, Rouaud takes absolutely no pains to build any sort of suspense, routinely giving away major plot points and alerting the reader of what will transpire. *L’Imitation du bonheur* is a book that almost always tells before it shows, and in which readerly immersion seems far from the primary concern.

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246 It is important to note that none of this seemingly prefatory content is explicitly marked as a preface. This is also an instance where the influence of André Breton’s anti-descriptive bias can perhaps be detected in Rouaud’s work. While Rouaud is generally antagonistic towards practitioners of any kind of “experimental” or avant-garde literature, he does express some admiration for Breton. Cf. Rouaud, Jean. *La Femme promise*. Paris: Gallimard, 2009, pp. 21-22 and p. 278 for favorable references to Breton.

Judging by some of Rouaud’s pronouncements on the subject of his literary aspirations, one could be forgiven for thinking the author more interested in a kind of Ricardolian “aventure d’une écriture” than in any sort of recuperation of the propulsive narrative forms that characterized the roman romanesque. Rouaud rather categorically distinguishes himself from “raconteurs d’histoires,” proposing instead “des récits qui ne se résument pas à la somme d’événements qui vous tiennent en haleine.”\(^{248}\) Rouaud’s justification for this refusal is twofold. First, he argues that cinema and television are more effective media for such narratives. Second, and more importantly, he states that such story-focused narratives are, for him, too functionalist, subordinating writing to an instrumental concern for the development of an engrossing plot. What is interesting is that while he does mention some of the classics of the roman romanesque, he tends to associate this instrumentalized literature with realism, scientism, and the experimental novel (a tradition which, in Rouaud’s conception of literary history, passes from Zola through the Nouveau Roman).\(^{249}\) And, thus, while Rouaud’s digressive style could be read as antithetical to the thematics of the roman esque, he is in fact much more interested in distinguishing himself from a certain kind of utilitarian realism. Digression is finally, for Rouaud, a practice which endows the text with an essayistic freedom that breaks free of the (supposedly) scientistic strictures of experimental literature.\(^{250}\)


\(^{249}\) The surprising aspect of this argument is not that realism should be called an over-determined, instrumentalist literary genre—this was, after all, one of the things that Barthes famously endeavored to show in *S/Z*—but that this critique should extend forward to the Nouveau Roman and other avant-gardist literature, while apparently leaving space for an affirmation of the (classically plot-driven) roman romanesque. The contradictions of this account of literary history will be discussed in more detail below.

\(^{250}\) The importance of Montaigne and the tradition of the essay to Rouaud’s fiction can be seen in his choice of epigraph for *L’Invention de l’auteur*, a text which at once recounts the author’s assumption of his status as writer, and lays out some of the major theoretical postulates that will be reiterated in *L’Imitation du
Whether or not one is persuaded by this particular framing of the affinities and antagonisms of French literary history, the fact remains that Rouaud at once refuses the plot-driven narratives that are so characteristic of the *roman romanesque*, and positions himself as a defender of the tradition of the *romanesque*. While Rouaud’s novel makes abundant reference to potential sources of inspiration—Chateaubriand, Rousseau, Proust, Mallarmé, Kleist, the Goncourt brothers, Diderot and Sterne, Homer, Mark Twain, W. H. Hudson, Isabella Bird, Charles Gounod, John Ford, The Bible, *The African Queen*, *Jeremiah Johnson*—the importance of Robert Louis Stevenson, and, in particular, of the reading of Stevenson provided by Michel Le Bris, should not be understated. Rouaud goes so far as to instruct Constance, in *L’Imitation du bonheur*, to read Le Bris: “Mais il faudrait aussi que vous lisiez la préface de Michel Le Bris, un auteur et un découvreur de ma génération, à qui je dois parmi mes plus beaux moments de lecture et la plus convaincante réhabilitation du roman […]”. As this passage makes clear, Le Bris’s thought has been, for Rouaud, an important source of inspiration for his own efforts to rehabilitate the novel as genre. Whether one thinks of their relation in terms of influence or in terms of affinity, there is no doubt that Rouaud’s recent pronouncements on the *romanesque* seem to echo in large part Le Bris’s advocacy for a “littérature voyageuse,” for a literature that assumes the traditions of travel and adventure narratives while affirming a literary community that transcends national boundaries. It would be hasty to entirely equate Rouaud’s theories of the novel with those of Le Bris, especially in light of

*bonheur*. The epigraph is from the essay “De la vanité:” “Ai-je laissé quelque chose à voir derrière moi ? J’y retourne : c’est toujours mon chemin. Je ne trace aucune ligne certaine, ni droite, ni courbe.”

251 Michel Le Bris writings on Stevenson include a biography and an edited a volume on the author, as well as a personal homage to the writer (*Pour saluer Stevenson*).

252 *IB*, p. 73. Rouaud has also underlined in interviews the importance of Stevenson and Le Bris to his recent thought: “J’ai fait dernièrement une rencontre vraiment importante : c’est celle de Stevenson à travers Le Bris” (Interview with Sylvie Ducas. In: Ducas (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 302).
the latter’s tendency to fustigate “nombriliste” autofiction and biofiction. There is no doubt, however, that Rouaud’s touchstones for his theory of the romanesque are largely the same as those of Le Bris: both are outspoken critics of the perceived “terrorism” of structuralism and formalism, and readily blame these movements for devalorizing imagination in the novel. In fact, although Rouaud has insisted in interviews that from his very first novel he has been concerned with effecting a certain “retour du romanesque,” the transition from seemingly regionalist biofictional literature to this new literary cycle can be read as essentially marking a move towards a type of literature which would be closer to Le Bris’s advocated “littérature voyageuse.”

A discussion of Le Bris and Rouaud’s conception of the romanesque would be incomplete without a brief mention of the recent collaborative work the two have undertaken on both Pour une littérature-monde en français (2007) and Je est un autre, pour une identité-monde (2010). These publications—as well as the “Manifeste pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français,” signed by 44 authors and published in Le Monde—essentially call for a reformulation of the relations between the center and the periphery, between France and the francophone world. The authors declare that we are witnessing the beginning of a post-national paradigm in French letters which would cease to view francophone literature as an offshoot of a central national literary tradition. Along the way, the manifesto takes what were, by 2007, already highly formulaic passing shots at

formalism, literary auto-referentiality and “navel-gazing” literature. This call for a “littérature-monde” has garnered its fair share of plaudits and criticisms. For our purposes, the question of whether the manifesto is effective in its goal of advocating for a transnational literature, as well as a consideration of the manifesto’s propositions in light of the theoretical advances made by various branches of Postcolonial Studies, are secondary to the issue of how Rouaud’s involvement in this movement informs his project to rehabilitate the romanesque. Perhaps what is most interesting about the manifesto is how it harnesses the discourse of the “retour du romanesque,” with its explicit refusal of the intervening years and its will to overcome the perceived interdictions of the prior literary epoch, and turns it towards a new goal: the affirmation of a post-national paradigm in French literature. It will be the argument of this chapter that the manifesto’s polemics are in alignment with what we will call Rouaud’s romanesque de ressentiment. For the moment, however we will limit ourselves to the observation that Rouaud uses his chapters in the volumes he and Le Bris edited not only for a good deal of score-settling with the structuralist and experimental currents of French literature, but also to affirm his belief in the freedom of imagination and to categorically refute the contention that he might be a regionalist writer.

In “Adieu à l’Ouest,” Rouaud examines the relationship between the place he grew up and his imagination, concluding that his voyages have liberated his thought and permitted him to write about more than just his own past, opening the door to the

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possibility that, in the words of Rouaud, “enfin peut-être j’allais être libre.” Rouaud reiterates this point in Évangile (selon moi), recounting the revelation that “tou mon imaginaire est un imaginaire hors-sol, un imaginaire d’importation.” These formulations are echoed in the manifesto for a “littérature-monde,” which concludes: “Le centre relégué au milieu d'autres centres, c'est à la formation d'une constellation que nous assistons, où la langue libérée de son pacte exclusif avec la nation, libre désormais de tout pouvoir autre que ceux de la poésie et de l'imaginaire, n'aura pour frontières que celles de l'esprit.” It is finally this liberty of the imagination—which, according to Rouaud, has too long been disdained by the promoters of experimental literature—that is at the heart of Rouaud’s conception of the romanesque.

For the Romanesque as ‘Slow Literature’?

An affirmation of the liberty of the imagination is not necessarily in and of itself a particularly satisfying end point for a theory of new novelistic practices. As with any freedom, the inevitable next question is always “free to do what, exactly?” Even if we accept that a new writing of the romanesque has emerged that explores the possibilities of imaginative freedom, it remains to be shown what such works might accomplish, beyond a mere statement of their right to exist. In the case of Rouaud’s recent books, there is an intriguing case to be made that the romanesque operates as part of a general strategy of willful archaicism which would promote a kind of “slow literature;” a literature that would present, as an alternative to unhealthy tendencies of modern thought and life, a

256 Rouaud, Évangile, p. 16.
slow way of thinking and living; a literature which would fully assume its status as anti-modern.

Before the features and ramifications of this slow literature can be fully explicated, some attention must be paid to the complicated stances that Rouaud develops on the subject of the relations between the past and the present, the archaic and the modern, stances which can be best understood by way of an examination of Rouaud’s discourse on the rural and the urban. Although interviews with Rouaud demonstrate that he is a committed leftist, from the very beginning of his career he has been suspected of harboring essentially passéiste, conservative regionalist tendencies. And it is not hard to see why. Rouaud has explicitly stated on numerous occasions that one of the aims of his early books was to endow his rural origins with the dignity that literature bestows on its subjects. In French literature, the road is short that leads from a celebration of rural life and country traditions to more malicious xenophobic sentiments. While there are a number of writers with a concern for place and rural life who are far from reactionary, there remains, from the perspective of leftist political culture, a certain stigma attached to any seemingly regionalist literary project. On this note, it is not insignificant that Rouaud

258 As Jean-Claude Lebrun stated in an early work on Jean Rouaud, “on a parfois cru y déceler le retour nostalgique et attendri d’une France profonde aujourd’hui disparue.” Lebrun, Jean-Claude. Jean Rouaud. Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1996, p. 45. One prominent example of the conservative lamentation of disappearing rural values—a lamentation which Rouaud seeks to avoid at all costs—can be found in the new “romans du terroir” of the writers of the “École de Brive.” Jean Duffy offers the following succinct overview of this school: “Defiantly anti-urban, anti-modern, and politically and culturally conservative, these prolific authors write about the pull of the land, the disappearance of the peasantry and the threats posed by modernity to traditional lifestyles and values.” Duffy, Jean H. Thresholds of Meaning: Passage, Ritual and Liminality in Contemporary French Narrative. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, p. 3.

took pains to publicly distance himself from Nicolas Sarkozy after the latter made reference to *Les Champs d’honneur*. One can only assume that the former president—who has not achieved much renown as a scholar of literature—was judging Rouaud’s book by its cover and not by its content. For his part, Rouaud has never assumed the title of regionalist writer, and has in fact gone so far as to critique those who saw his writing as “un éloge de ce mode d’existence provincial, faisant de moi le chantre de la ruralité.”

It should be noted that if Rouaud seeks to confer upon the *Loire-Inférieure* the dignity of literary representation, his vision of the region is far from rosy. He is often an outspoken critic of provincial backwardness, of “ce vase clos de la vie rurale.” Indeed, what comes through when one reads Rouaud’s comments on the rural and the urban is the complexity of defining the political orientations of the two spaces in the modern context. As Raymond Williams remarked some years ago in his seminal study of the subject, the country and the city are sites which elicit a broad range of reactions in the cultural imaginary:

> On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalised. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.

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260 Rouaud, “Adieu à l’Ouest,” p. 33. While it is true that Rouaud is not a classical regionalist writer—he does not systematically reproduce the speech patterns of his region, and he seems to subordinate the question of regional identity to that of personal identity—his early novels can nevertheless be loosely called regionalist, in the sense that they express a concern for describing the *Loire-Inférieure* and for expressing its social dynamics.


The political history of the French nation adds further complications to the already contradictory connotations of the notions of country and city, of capital and province. For the purposes of this study, the two most important political touchstones are the Paris Commune, which, broadly speaking, saw the revolutionary political agenda of the city violently repressed by the provinces, and the Maréchal Pétain’s “Révolution Nationale,” which was the blueprint for a xenophobic far-right denunciation of urban decadence in favor of wholesome rural values (“la terre, elle, ne ment pas”). Even as the intervening years have complicated a straightforward association of the country with reactionary politics and the city with a progressive agenda, these connotations remain broadly operative in the French cultural context. Rouaud himself has spoken of the relation between country and city as a contrast between Pétain and Marx. And if *L’Imitation du bonheur* chooses as its setting the period immediately following the *semaine sanglante*, it is, among other reasons, precisely because this allows Rouaud to establish a strong opposition between a provincial, close-minded bourgeois ideology, and the failed revolutionary aspirations of the communards (for whom Rouaud does not hide his admiration). If one were to add to this account a few selective passages from books like *Comment gagner sa vie honnêtement*, where Rouaud discusses his gradual disillusionment with the back-to-the-land movement, it would be easy to conclude that Rouaud’s story is one of a writer and intellectual who escapes the rigid confines of his rural upbringing in order to access the broad-minded and politically forward-thinking world of the city. In fact, what Rouaud takes pain to emphasize are the contradictions at

263 Here a few words should be spared for Emmanuel Berl, who, although he wrote this line which has become one of the iconic formulations of the Vichy government’s rhetoric of rural values, was in fact a Jewish man of letters who quickly distanced himself from Vichy politics.
the heart of the rural experience.\textsuperscript{264} For while Rouaud is not shy about speaking of the backwardness of rural culture, his vision of the country focuses on how it can be both oppressor (of the revolutionary ideal) and victim (of technological modernity).\textsuperscript{265} We must be alive to this ambiguity if we want to understand the specificity of Rouaud’s sometimes contradictory appropriation of the \textit{romanesque} as quintessential natural, archaic, slow literary form.

\textit{L’Imitation du bonheur} can be said to present the two faces of the countryside. On the one hand, as we have already mentioned, the historical backdrop allows the novel to reflect on close-minded, provincial bourgeois values that led to the brutal repression of the \textit{semaine sanglante}. On the other hand, the time period is also that of the industrial revolution, of “l’avènement de notre monde moderne,” and Rouaud uses the text to discuss what he sees as a major turning point in the history of the novel, of French society, and of humankind’s relation to the natural world.\textsuperscript{266} As Raymond Williams and others have noted, the country is not reducible to agriculture or to the values of rural communities, it is also the site of “[…] a precarious but persistent rural-intellectual radicalism: genuinely and actively hostile to industrialism and capitalism; opposed to commercialism and to the exploitation of the environment; attached to country ways and

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{264} It might be said that Rouaud is fighting on two fronts, seeking at once to eliminate any suspicion that he is aiming to produce a conservative regionalist literature, while also opposing what he sees as a set of leftist interdictions regarding writing the country experience. Cf. Interview with Séverine Bourdieu, in: Del Lungo (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 301: “Ce que je voyais aussi en travaillant, c’était que le roman avait non seulement des interdits officiels, mais également des interdits plus sournois, comme par exemple le milieu rural (estampillé pétainiste), les petits-commerçants (représentant ‘la hyène puante du profit’, selon la terminologie pseudo-marxiste de l’époque), la religion (l’opium du peuple), etc.”

\textsuperscript{265} Cf. Freyermuth, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 171. And: Freyermuth, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 35, on Rouaud’s “dialectique de l’urbain et du rural.”

\textsuperscript{266} Interview with Séverine Bourdieu. In: Del Lungo (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 293.
\end{footnotes}
feelings [...].”267 While Rouaud is careful to avoid an apologia for rural values at the expense of a supposedly decadent urban way of thinking, he nevertheless connects with a tradition of nature writing which sees the natural world as a space of escape from society.268 When Constance and Octave leave the road behind and strike off into the wilderness, they are not choosing the country over the city, they are seeking a freedom in nature that is accessible neither in the city nor in the rural society that Constance inhabits. This is one way of understanding the allure of frontier and early travel narratives for Rouaud. Jeremiah Johnson, A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains and Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes are all descriptions of individuals who abandon society in search of, yes, adventure, but also, more importantly, a way of life in which the emphasis is placed on the relation of the individual with the forces of the natural world, and not with a social milieu, whether urban or rural.

It is this embrace of nature that is not commensurate with an unproblematic acceptance of rural life that permits Rouaud to at once critique provincial society and the back-to-the-land movements of the seventies, while also celebrating a kind of environmentalism and archaicism that become, in Rouaud’s argument for the romanesque, as much literary as historical and social issues. For Rouaud, the death of the

267 Williams, op. cit., p. 36. While Williams’ arguments are limited to the British context, there is no reason why this sort of rural intellectual should be a specifically British phenomenon. I hasten to add that we should also be wary of looking exclusively to literature for evidence of a rural intellectual tradition. Rural intellectual radicalism does not necessarily express itself through written literature or scholarly articles.

268 Of the writers in this tradition, a wealth of examples could be cited, but Rousseau’s Les Rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire, and the Romantic tradition—particularly Chateaubriand, in Rouaud’s case—are undoubtedly important sources for this type of discourse. More explicitly, the influence of Stevenson’s Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes is relevant here. Stevenson travels by foot, frequently sleeps under the stars, and reflects at length on the liberating experience of time spent in nature. In particular, Stevenson speaks of the feeling that one has “escaped out of the Bastille of civilization, and [has] become, for the time being, a mere kindly animal and a sheep of Nature’s flock.” Stevenson, Robert Louis. Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes; and, The Amateur Emigrant (ed. Christopher McLachlan). London: Penguin, 2004, p. 57.
frontier lifestyle and of its relationship with the natural world is indicative of a larger historical trend: “Et si je vous ai parlé de Buffalo Bill, c’est qu’il marque la fin pathétique et grandiose d’une civilisation, c’est-à-dire d’une forme de pensée, dont vous enregistrez l’inexorable agonie sous les coups de la modernité industrielle.”269 Here industrial modernity signals the end of a lifestyle, and the beginning of the primacy of scientific rationality, a trend which Rouaud will deplore in its extension in twentieth-century thought. One of the major accusations that Rouaud levels against scientific literature in all of its manifestations is its pretention to make man independent of nature, to create a world “où l’homme évoluera dans un monde libéré du monde.”270 The peculiar narrative acrobatics of *L’Imitation du bonheur*, which make the novel a sort of dialogue between the author and his character, also have precisely the effect of allowing Rouaud to describe the events of the early 1870s through the prism of the triumph of scientific thought. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, Rouaud suggests, the frontier life, a mode of existence which emphasized man’s relation to nature, and its privileged mode of writing, the *romanesque*, were all abandoned in the name of technological modernity.

The modern world, which, Rouaud is quick to remind us, has seen atrocities that would have been scarcely imaginable to the nineteenth century, is thus a world which has been witness to a total transformation of man’s relation to nature, and a concomitant transformation of our modes of thinking and writing. When describing train travel early in *L’Imitation du bonheur*, Rouaud speaks of a technology that is “en voie de remplacer la traction animale et d’avoir définitivement le dessus, non seulement sur une ancienne façon de se déplacer […], mais aussi sur ce qui allait avec, par exemple les romans de

chevalerie […], autant dire le monde d’avant, celui de la dépendance aux lois de la nature. ”271 With passages such as this one, it becomes clear that, for Rouaud, a reappropriation of the romanesque can only be an anti-modern literary act that repudiates the developments of technological modernity and scientific reasoning. Rouaud’s privileging of nature over technology, of intuition and imagination over scientific rationality, allow him to find a middle ground between the extreme connotations of country and city. Neither Pétainist nor Marxist, neither reactionary regionalism nor revolutionary avant-gardism, Rouaud seeks to elaborate a discourse of the romanesque that refuses the values of the modern world without reverting to conservative provincialism or to a nationalist conception of the Great French Novel.

If we have chosen to speak of Rouaud’s romanesque as a sort of “slow literature,” it is precisely because his framing of the issue of a return to the romanesque ties the literary form to an anti-modern lifestyle and to a mode of thought characterized by slowness. There are numerous moments in L’Imitation du bonheur where Rouaud uses the transitional historical period of the 1870s as a pretext for an elaboration of a discourse advocating another type of existence. We have already mentioned Rouaud’s discussion of how train travel marks the end of both the horse as principal means of transport and the tradition of romance which had been the essence of the novel. To this, Rouaud adds an analysis of cinema, an art form which, as he must explain to Constance, is quintessentially modern and has, apparently, rendered the traditional novel obsolete.

After a great deal of simulated indecision, Rouaud finally rejects cinema in the last half of the novel, abandoning himself to the rhythms of the romanesque and exclaiming,

“Alors va pour le carnaval romanesque.” Other aspects of the novel, from the lovers’ retreat into nature (off the road and the map, away from the modern world) to the self-indulgent digressiveness of the style and the length of the book itself suggest the extent to which Rouaud’s writing practice aims to distance itself from modernity’s obsession with efficiency and speed. *L’Imitation du bonheur* is never just a love story—it is a reflection on modernity as cult of speed, as triumph of scientific rationalization, and as force of political and environmental destruction.

A reading of *L’Imitation du bonheur* in terms of a discourse of slowness is amply justified by Rouaud’s meditations on literature and life in a variety of other works, particularly *L’Invention de l’auteur* (2004) and *Comment gagner sa vie honnêtement* (2011). In these books, Rouaud develops an explicit “apologie de la lenteur,” which envisions writing as deliberately archaic and out of step with the modern world. In a long passage—what else would one expect from an apology for slowness?—on the subject of the patient art of Chardin and its relation to Rouaud’s novelistic practices, Rouaud offers the following description of his slow literature:

La peinture apaisée de Chardin parlait pour lui, et j’étais tout disposé à le croire, mais de là à suivre ses conseils. Les temps avaient changé, on ne s’éclairait plus à la bougie et on avait inventé plus rapide que le cheval pour se déplacer. Comment lui expliquer que nous étions entrés dans le siècle de la vitesse et du progrès, un peu, vois-tu, comme l’esprit encyclopédique mais en bien plus développé ? Tu n’imagines pas, Siméon, la frénésie qui s’est emparée de nous. On nous force à nous agiter, ça court de tous les côtés. Dans le moment même où la chose est créée on la dit démodée. Notre époque n’est plus disposée du tout à cette patience, à cette lenteur, à cette attention aux choses, à ces personnages d’un autre temps comme ma vieille tante Marie récitant ses rosaires à la chaine. Comment faire moderne avec ce magasin d’antiquités qu’est mon enfance ? Tu sais ce qu’on demande à un auteur, aujourd’hui, dans ce dernier quart du XXe siècle, pour suivre le tempo du monde et être en phase avec lui ? D’écrire

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273 Rouaud, *Comment gagner sa vie honnêtement*, p. 17.
As he does in numerous other passages like this one, Rouaud marks an explicit contrast between, on the one hand, an art of the time of candlelight and horse travel, an art which is marked by patience, calmness, an unhurried attention to detail, lyrical freedom; and, on the other, an art marked by speed (in this passage alone, I count eight references to rapidity of some sort or another), frenzy, agitation, and a writing that is factual and laconic. The possibility of a writing that would imitate in some way Chardin’s “peinture apaisée” is shown here to be tied up with questions of social transformation, coercion and exclusion. The transformation from slowness to rapidity is presented as a plain fact: “les temps avaient changé […].” Coercion is presented as not only a personal experience, but a phenomenon which permeates society; Rouaud suggestively says “on nous force” rather than “on me force,” and presents this rather vague nous as the victims of a broader social process, “la frénésie qui s’est emparée de nous.” The possibility of a social exclusion is introduced with the question of how a writer like Rouaud, whose childhood is essentially a “magasin d’antiquités,” can “faire moderne”. Intriguingly, Rouaud arrives at the conclusion that not only is he incapable of being “moderne,” but that the act of writing itself, in the machine age, is inevitably incompatible with modernity. When Rouaud associates slowness with the romanesque and rapidity with the scientific spirit underlying experimental literature, his argument in favor of the former relies in part on the idea that the very act of writing cannot be realistically made modern. Rouaud has the following to say on this subject:

Ibid., p. 15. This characterization of contemporary style is belied by numerous authors who can be said write in something like the “grand style” to which Rouaud refers here.
D’où ce sentiment très aigu de n’être pas aux avant-postes et qui vaut, quelle que soit leur dénégation, pour tous ceux qui se mêlent d’écrire, même si de travailler à présent sur ordinateur leur donne depuis quelque temps ce délicieux sentiment d’être quand même dans la course, d’avoir réussi à accrocher leur wagon d’autrefois au train de la modernité, au risque qu’il ne puisse suivre ce rythme et se démantèle.275

As this passage suggests, even if the computer can give the illusory impression that writing has kept up with the machine age, the writer is still, inevitably, condemned to archaicism. While Rouaud’s usual self-conscious and self-deprecatory tone can be detected here, these arguments are in fact enlisted in Rouaud’s broader discourse of refusal of modern, avant-gardist and experimental literature. Beneath the apparent rhetoric of self-effacement lies an assured and self-valorizing argument for one type of novel to the exclusion of another. Rouaud does not merely believe his own writing to be archaic and assume this archaicism, he suggests that any attempt at a truly cutting-edge literature is fundamentally mistaken about the possibilities of text in the modern age.276

Literature, Rouaud ultimately seems to be saying, is not the domain of modernizing ideologies; it is tied to a fundamentally slower way of thinking and living that the dominance of science and the dawn of the anthropocene have threatened to eliminate.277 L’Imitation du bonheur is, on one level, a tale of two lovers who abandon,
for a time, the course of history to find their own rhythm of life, to affirm sentimental and
political values that are impermissible to society. As we have already said, however, the
novel also recounts, in its own way, Rouaud’s own itinerary, which abandons the
injunction to make writing modern or scientific, and seeks to affirm instead its own
putatively healthier mode of thought. Rouaud discusses this disposition in his writing in
the following manner:

Il y a quelque temps déjà que je me présente volontiers comme archaïque,
ce qui ne veut pas dire dans la querelle à laquelle j’ai fait allusion prendre
le parti des Anciens contre les Modernes, mais ce qui signifie seulement
que j’ai décidé que le monde maintenant irait sans moi. Je continuerai à
mon rythme, à me hâter lentement comme le bon La Fontaine – […] – et
lui, le monde, au sien, c’est-à-dire à son rythme effréné. Archaïque, ou, si
vous préférez, ce soldat à la traîne qui impatiente ses camarades pressés et
auxquels il conseille de filer sans chercher à l’attendre, ce qui est moins un
sacrifice de sa personne qu’une manière de dire : ne vous inquiétez pas
pour moi, laissez-moi tranquille, le monde recèle aussi des beautés pour
les retardataires, les lambins, les flâneurs.²⁷⁸

It is possible, though by no means essential, to perceive in this passage perhaps another
instance of Stevenson’s influence on Rouaud’s writing, with the reference point here
being Stevenson’s delightful refusals of a hurried, productivity-focused life.²⁷⁹ In any
case, what is interesting here is that Rouaud reframes the opposition of speed and
slowness in personal rather than social terms. The nous of the manifesto or of the broad
social argument is replaced with the personal je, suggesting a me-against-the-world
attitude that anticipates Octave and Constance’s deliberate self-exclusion from society
and its values. The Romantic impulse to abandon a society with which one does not share
the dominant values is clear. And although Rouaud’s position, in this instance, seems less
one of contestation than of amicable separation—society can go its way, he seems to be

²⁷⁸ Rouaud, L’invention de l’auteur, pp. 250-251.
²⁷⁹ Such reflections have been collected in the recent volume of Stevenson’s writing entitled, An Apology
saying, and I’ll go mine—such affirmations of personal liberty are never far, in Rouaud’s later works, from more collective arguments about what the novel should and should not aim to accomplish. The contemplative beauties that the world reserves for literary flâneurs such as Rouaud should not be read merely as the rewards reserved for a particular type of writer. They function as part of a broader rhetoric which systematically privileges slowness over speed, archaism over modernity.280

Rouaud’s decision to opt for a slow mode of thinking, writing, and living, is particularly interesting in light of the recent elaboration, in various places and under various guises, of the notion of “slow literature.” The most influential account of slow literature is to be found in Maura Kelly’s article in The Atlantic, “A Slow-Books Manifesto.” Kelly adapts Michael Pollan’s influential dictum (“Eat food, mostly plants, not too much”) to the question of reading, suggesting that we should “Read books. As often as you can. Mostly classics.”281 With this deliberate attempt to superimpose the question of literary habits onto the question of eating habits, Kelly mirrors a number of other slow movements that have tried to seize upon the momentum that slow food garnered beginning in the late-1980s. For writers like Kelly, a certain kind of literature is thought to be, like food, healthy, and our choices regarding what we put into our bodies and minds can have far-reaching implications.282 These implications can best be

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280 A few critics have already commented on the importance of slowness to Rouaud’s thought. Cf. Boyer-Weinmann, Martine. “Rouaud sur un fil de soie. Une pensée du roman ‘romanesque’.” In : Baty-Delalande and Debreuille (ed.), op. cit., p. 149, where she speaks of “cette méditation sur la lenteur comme condition de possibilité du romanesque,” and argues that “La question du roman rejoint donc celle de la manière dont une société aborde le rapport à la vitesse […].”


282 Kelly has, in my estimation quite rightly, drawn criticism for her emphasis on classics and on poetry as quintessential “healthy” reading. For an account of why Kelly may, however, be correct to assert that reading fiction has benefits that extend beyond mere leisure or entertainment, cf. Paul, Annie Murphy.
appreciated if we consider some of the more fully formed theorizations of the slow movement. In *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, Carl Honoré sketches out the major tenets of the slow movement, and suggests how embracing slowness in areas ranging from food to literature to sex can result in a healthier life (for oneself and, in theory, for the whole of human society). While the book is not predominately concerned with the question of literature (it spends as much time on the subject of knitting as on the subject of reading and writing), it is significant that Honoré begins with an anecdote about looking at one-minute bedtime stories to read to his young son, and realizing that even considering such a thing meant that his life was wildly out of balance. At the origins of the realization that he needed to adopt a broad lifestyle change, therefore, one finds the idea that reading, and, by extension, literature, no longer fit into modern life. While it is unnecessary for our purposes to examine all of the major topics discussed in Honoré’s paean to slowness, the essential point is that, like Rouaud, he conceives of slowness as part of a general intellectual disposition that opposes many of the major tendencies of modern society. Honoré offers the following account of “slow” thought in its opposition to “fast” thought: “Fast is busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity-over-quality. Slow is the opposite: calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity.”²⁸³ If many of these connotations are self-evident, the idea that analytical thought is somehow “fast” and that intuitive thought

is somehow “slow” should not, it seems to me, be accepted without some reservations.  

This opposition between the analytical or rational and the intuitive is, nevertheless, not dissimilar to Rouaud’s own ideas about thinking and writing. One need only read the opening pages of *L’Invention de l’auteur* to see a number of instances where intuition or natural instinct are privileged over rationality or machine computation. For example, in his description of a bird’s flight (which is also very much a description of the writer’s process), Rouaud offers the following comparison:

[…| déjà les voilà [les oiseaux de mer] au ras des vagues qui se rient de toutes ces forces contraires, se laissent porter, emporter, dériver, s’élevant en larges courbes spiralées, jonglant savamment avec des milliards de paramètres à rendre tous les spécialistes des turbulences atmosphériques où chaque microgouttelette en suspension en sait plus long qu’un ordinateur de bord […].

The natural, intuitive flight of the bird is here shown to be superior to the analytical powers of “spécialistes” (a designation which recalls the critique of “maître-penseurs” in the “Manifeste pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français”), and Rouaud’s poet-bird is finally an avatar of Honoré’s slow thinker. Beyond the aforementioned isomorphism

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286 Although Rouaud does show evidence of any kind of systematic engagement with Nietzsche’s thought, it should be mentioned that Nietzsche offers one of the most intriguing early formulations of slow thinking, a formulation which positions itself as in conflict with the then-modern emphasis on efficiency and speed. Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, P5: “A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both, I just as much as my book, are friends of lento. It is not for nothing that I have been a philologist, perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading: – in the end I also write slowly. Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste – a malicious taste, perhaps? – no longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is ‘in a hurry’. For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow – it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*. But for precisely this reason it is more necessary than ever today, by precisely this reason does it entice and enchant us the most, in the midst
between Rouaud’s formulations of slow thought and the characteristics of slow thought highlighted by Honoré, the two also share a proclivity for a certain number archaizing lifestyle choices that stop short of a Luddite rejection of all the amenities of the contemporary world. Thus, although Rouaud does see the death of calligraphy as one more indication of the changes that have befallen society, like Honoré he does not eschew the computer or the word processor.\textsuperscript{287} In the end, these are not dogmatic, revolutionary thinkers—they are rather amateurs of what they feel are more healthy ways of living and thinking.

If these calls for a slow literature—whether oriented towards reader or writer, whether formulated by Nietzsche, Rouaud, Honoré or Kelly—have a certain allure, it is undoubtedly at least in part because they tap into an anxiety about the status and future of literature and literary study in a world where the demand for efficiency in all areas of life seems to leave no time for such activities. This anxiety is not new—the lament that young people are lazier, less inclined to work, think or read is a commonplace that has probably followed human societies for as long as such concepts have been expressible—but there are nevertheless good reasons to see it as a particularly legitimate concern in our modern societies. A 2007 National Endowment for the Arts report entitled “To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence,” which considered over forty studies from a variety of academic and professional sources, came to the rather sobering conclusion that the past twenty years have seen three major trends: “[…] a historical decline in voluntary reading rates among teenagers and young adults; a gradual worsening of reading skills of an age of ‘work’, that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to ‘get everything done’ at once, including every old or new book: – this art does not so easily get anything done […].”\textsuperscript{287} Cf. Rouaud, \textit{L’Invention de l’auteur}, p. 73.
among older teens; and declining proficiency in adult readers.” In the eyes of some thinkers, this decline in voluntary reading is but one component of a broader social problem: the dominance of corporate, profit-driven thought and the subsequent devaluing of the role of the Humanities in our academic institutions. While not all scholars and cultural commentators take as bleak a view of the situation, there is a great deal of evidence to support the argument that reading fiction no longer really fits into modern life, and that it is widely perceived as useless in an educational system whose function is increasingly seen in narrowly vocational terms. As the aforementioned *New York Times* article on the broad neurological benefits of reading suggested, there has perhaps never been a time in history when we have been better equipped to demonstrate scientifically the edifying influence of reading fiction; and yet, the fact that so much literature—arguably, the best of literature—is stubbornly irreducible to simplistic derivations of use-value or to the formulation of historical, philosophical or economic propositional truths continues to marginalize it both inside and outside the university system. With these trends in mind, Rouaud’s formulation of the “retour du

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289 Among the various considerations of this subject, Martha C. Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) is particularly interesting and well thought out.

290 For an argument against the idea that there is a “crisis in reading,” cf. Schaeffer, *op. cit.* (2011). For quite some time now, Schaeffer has been arguing that the perceived crisis in reading and in literature is in fact nothing but a crisis in literary studies and its justifying discourses.

291 Stevenson offers a particularly eloquent defense of literature, and art in general, as slow knowledge: “But of works of art little can be said; their influence is profound and silent, like the influence of nature; they mould by contact; we drink them up like water, and are bettered, yet know not how.” In: Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Essays in the Art of Writing*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1925, p. 80. Cf. also, p. 78, on fictional works: “They do not pin the reader to a dogma, which he must afterwards discover to be inexact; they do not teach him a lesson, which he must afterwards unlearn. They repeat, they rearrange, they clarify the lessons of life; they disengage us from ourselves, they constrain us to the acquaintance of others; and they show us the web of experience.” The comparison of the effects of art to the effects of nature is
"romanesque" as the promotion of slow thought that opposes the dominant social and intellectual orientations of technological modernity and of scientific rationality—and above all his argument that this kind of romanesque is the essence of novelistic practice—are endowed with an acute historical-intellectual vitality and urgency.

Before we come to the conclusion, however, that Rouaud’s romanesque as slow literature presents the intellectual and spiritual antidote to a number of pernicious social, political and environmental developments, we should take a closer look at the underpinnings of the slow movement, and the potential political efficacy of its recommended actions. For while Rouaud could be said to follow very closely a number of the precepts of the slow movement, his writing can as a result be subject to many of the critiques that this movement might elicit. Among the most immediate criticisms that could be leveled at this “worldwide movement […] challenging the cult of speed” is that it lacks a coherent theory of global economic relations that would underpin a call for political and social transformation. For while Honoré pays lip-service to opposing the destructive impulses of “turbo-capitalism,” he does not opt for any alternative political-economic paradigm (socialism, Marxism, etc.), stating instead that the movement aims to put a “human face on capitalism.” A reader could be forgiven for finding any unsubstantiated claim to being able to accomplish such a feat highly dubious. Indeed, once one leaves the realm of food, the immediate health benefits and the potential for tying one’s “slow” lifestyle choices—whether slow literature, slow sex, or slow child rearing—to larger political or economic causes become less immediately apparent. The danger with slow literature is the danger that haunts many such calls for slowness, which

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pertinent to Rouaud’s notion of slow literature, which ties the romanesque to a particular kind of relationship to the natural world.

Honoré, op. cit., p. 17.
is to say, that it might reflect an essentially yuppie-ish sense of entitlement to a lifestyle and economic comfort level that allow one to read more, eat expensive food, and spend hours in bed with one’s lover. While we should not be too quick to condemn calls for slow literature in the name of some ideal revolutionary purity that they cannot possibly attain, we must nevertheless be cautious about imagining that the choice of the *romanesque* carries with it immediate political ramifications. The question of the means for achieving an effective politically revolutionary literature is a very difficult one, and it may well be that for the same reasons that literature can be said to be a kind of slow knowledge, it is also difficult to enlist it in political struggles whose main weapons tend to be the sound bite, and whose temporalities are increasingly those of television-news immediacy.

Despite the fact that Rouaud’s *romanesque* as slow literature fails to attain the coherency of other more fully realized critiques of technological modernity and human environmental destruction, it nevertheless presents a very intriguing justification for why contemporary literature might seek to effect a “retour au *romanesque*.” In this account, the decline of the *romanesque* is a symptom of a broader transformation of thought and society in the past 150 years. The conversion of the central characters in *L’Imitation du bonheur*, which sees them pursue the ideal of love and justice, mirrors the conversion of the author-narrator, who finally reaffirms the values of the *romanesque*. These are

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293 When I speak of more fully realized critiques of the direction of modern society, I am thinking specifically of the Degrowth movement, which could be seen as either an alternative to the slow movement or as a complementary discourse. In either case, the efforts of the Degrowth movement seek to address many of the major problems highlighted by the slow movement, but do so by proposing alternative economic, social and political models. For a good overview of the sorts of economic problems thinkers of this movement highlight, cf. Daly, Herman. “Eight Fallacies about Growth. *CASSE, Center for the Advancement of a Steady State Economy* (Internet), August, 2012. If I have chosen to speak of Rouaud’s literature in terms of the slow movement rather than in terms of a movement like Degrowth, it is because the question of speed is much more central to Rouaud’s thoughts on the novel than the question of growth.
essentially slow values, and they seek to challenge the cult of efficiency and instrumentalized scientific thought. Whether this account of the political, social and literary developments is persuasive, and whether the ultimate goal of this literature is to renew the romanesque or merely to use it as a pretext to pillory structuralism and avant-gardist modernism, will be the question that this chapter will now endeavor to answer.

**Romanesque and Resentment**

Whatever one might think about the project to reaffirm the romanesque as a slow literature that would oppose the iniquities of the modern world, it should be clear that Rouaud’s particular discourse on the romanesque draws on a number of very strong opinions about the developments in the past two hundred years of French literature. While we have already analyzed some of Rouaud’s arguments as they pertained to his elaboration of an implicit theory of the romanesque as slow literature, a more complete description of Rouaud’s version of literary history will be necessary in order to adequately evaluate the potentialities and orientations of this literature. For although the discussion of literary history can be read as a pretext, as a sort of clearing of the ground for a roman romanesque that should perhaps, in the contemporary period, no longer be theoretically justifiable, one could just as easily turn the tables and suggest that the romanesque is in fact a pretext for Rouaud to focus on his primary concern: a critique of experimental literature in all its guises. We already hinted at this ambiguity in Rouaud’s work when we discussed the variety of critical reactions that greeted L’Imitation du bonheur upon its publication; for some, it was a celebration of “la fiction fictionnante;” while for others it was a polemical firebomb lobbed in the general direction of 7 Rue
Bernard-Palissy. What a careful examination of the version of literary history presented in *L’Imitation du bonheur* reveals is that if Rouaud’s *romanesque* can perhaps be called a celebration of slow literature, it is also not devoid of a certain tendency toward Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Could it be that one of the major pleasures of the affirmation of the *romanesque* in the contemporary period is a sort of pleasure of the weak in watching the powerful receive their divine retribution?

One of the major complications that arises when one attempts to summarize Rouaud’s opinions on literary history in *L’Imitation du bonheur* is that the novel’s essayistic, digressive style, its ironic asides, and its frequently allusive or contradictory proclamations do not lend themselves readily to systematic analysis. Rouaud is an amateur of ludic polemics, often willfully exaggerating his arguments for comic effect, and he likewise distances himself from what he sees as an academic “esprit de sérieux.”294 The novel’s epigraph—from Stevenson, predictably—can in fact be read as a sort of warning to anyone looking for a fully formed, scholarly theory of literature in such a novel: “Il est plus honnête de confesser immédiatement à quel point je suis peu accessible au désir d’exactitude.”295 After such a disclaimer, one might have some reservations about attempting any sort of distillation of the explicit and implicit theorizations of the literature found in Rouaud’s novel. However, his persistent comments on literary history in interviews, his authoring of manifestos and essays for scholarly conferences, as well as his recent editing of an issue of the *Nouvelle Revue*

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294 Rouaud seems to use this term in the sense of a general seriousness of attitude and demeanor, and not in its more rigorous philosophical sense. The Sartrean formulation of the “esprit de sérieux” refers, for example, to the notion that moral values precede human existence.

295 Rouaud, *L Imitation du bonheur*, p. 9. This insouciance with respect to exactitude could also be related to Rouaud’s essayistic style. Cf. Duffy, *op. cit.*, p. 281, for a discussion of how such an essayistic style favors “errance” around topics.
Française on precisely the subject of the twentieth-century novel, demonstrate a concerted effort to advocate for a particular theory of the novel not only in essayistic fiction (which claims for itself no principle of exactitude), but also in the journalistic and academic spheres. \(^{(296)}\) Indeed, Rouaud has spoken of his work since *Pour vos cadeaux* (1998) as essentially concerned with the question of the novel: “A partir de *Pour vos cadeaux*, je commence à démonter la mécanique romanesque et je démarre la critique du roman, la question de la fiction.”\(^{(297)}\) If, therefore, it is not without some reservation that one might read *L’Imitation du bonheur* as a document with a coherent vision of literary history, such a reading is permitted on the basis of Rouaud’s statements about his fiction, and his status not only as novelist but as scholarly commentator of literary history and the history of the novel.

If one were to strip Rouaud’s theory of literary history since the Enlightenment down to its bare bones, its essential arguments would be as follows. First, Rouaud asserts that the situation facing the novel at the end of the 1970s was nothing less than the total interdiction of all of its major traditional functions: to explore the world and the subject, to play with imaginative freedom, to seek beauty through lyricism and poetic expression. The aspiring novelist in the contemporary period is thus forced to confront the impossibility of writing a novel in any of its habitual guises. To the question of how literature arrived at this point, Rouaud suggests that it was, more or less, Zola’s fault.


Although Rouaud locates the seeds of this intellectual disposition in the Enlightenment, he sees Zola’s “roman expérimental” as laying out the blueprint for a new literature that severs ties with the imagination and dedicates itself to photographic reproduction of the real. Rouaud uses this idea of Zola’s scientific literature as aspiring photographic document to draw a connection between Zola and, ironically, some of Zola’s fiercest critics, the New Novelists, whom Rouaud understands as basically constituting an “école du regard.” In the midst of this reduction of literature to an art of pure description which finally, as it radicalized its doctrine, came to the dead-end of self-referentiality, cinema steps in and appropriates the romanesque. Rouaud’s rehabilitation of the novel and the romanesque thus involves both a virulent rejection of Zola, the New Novel and its formalist theoreticians, and a struggle with cinema to reclaim a certain kind of romanesque for the novel.

Before we examine some of the more glaring problems with this vision of literary history, we should look in detail at the exact formulations that Rouaud gives to it. While his attacks on Zola in L’Imitation du bonheur are diverse and almost obsessional in their frequency, his argument returns time and again to the basic idea that Zola is a writer and thinker who condemns literature to perform the tasks of science: “[…] en dénonçant l’imagination, en donnant la priorité à la vérité sur le lyrisme, [Zola] engage clairement la littérature à marcher sur les brisées du monde scientifique.” In support of this

300 Ibid., pp. 45-46. Rouaud goes on to critique Zola’s pretention to scientific seriousness. Rouaud responds to Zola’s pronouncement that naturalist writers are “des savants” by stating: “Des savants, entendons : pas
argument, Rouaud returns on numerous occasions to the subject of Zola’s abundant documentation for his novels, a practice which Rouaud parodies by means of references to real and imagined sources in his pseudo-historical *L’Imitation du bonheur*.

Furthermore, Rouaud devotes long passages to the fastidiousness of literary description, explicitly establishing a contrast between his novelistic practice and that of what he depicts as the essentially descriptive naturalist tradition.

Very early on in *L’Imitation du bonheur*, Rouaud draws a parallel between Zola’s experimental novel, the Nouveau Roman, and structuralism. In a snide and dismissive aside—in which Rouaud says structuralism was “une sorte de farce précieuse comme en joue de temps en temps l’intellect”—the two periods are linked in their subservience to a scientific conception of literature: “[…] car ce n’est pas sans lien, cette mathématique littéraire, avec notre écrivain enquêteur.”

If, however, Rouaud is generally dismissive of the Nouveau Roman, structuralism and formalism, he nevertheless sees the Nouveau Roman as a response to a specific historical and literary crisis:

> Il fut un temps, après la guerre terrifiante au mitan du siècle qui désespère de la nature humaine, où les romanciers se sont privés de tout ce qui faisait les ingrédients du genre : l’intrigue (autrement dit le sens de l’histoire, savoir, le bonheur c’est par-là, et au lieu de la félicité annoncée on débouche sur l’horreur, alors autant laisser tomber), les personnages (agglomérés dans les masses informes et anonymes), le style (rendu complice de la catastrophe et de son bilan idéologique), l’émotion (forcément déplacée face à la montagne de cendres des corps brûlés) pour ne conserver que cet art minimal de la description, du fragment. 

302 Ibid., p. 147.
What Rouaud suggests in this passage is that the Nouveau Roman’s reduction of the novel to an art of pure description, if misguided, is at least historically comprehensible.\(^{303}\)

It is perhaps for this very reason that Rouaud seems much more interested in confronting Zola, the putative originator of scientism in literature, than in embarking upon a systematic critique of the New Novelists, who are nevertheless some of the main perpetrators of the intellectual “terrorism” that Rouaud so often deplores. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that Rouaud elaborates his theory of the *romanesque* as an explicit response to a tradition of literature which seeks scientific truth, and which, in Rouaud’s eyes, reduces the novelist to a passive describer either of nature or of writing itself.

As we have already suggested, it is this journey from interdiction to freedom, or a sort of literary resurrection, in Rouaud’s eyes, that is the other major story of *L’Imitation du bonheur*. In the prefatory opening pages of the novel, Rouaud comments that when it comes to writing a novel, “l’innocence en ce domaine appartient au paradis perdu du roman.”\(^{304}\) Later in the novel, Rouaud offers a more complete account of the difficulties encountered by a contemporary novelist: “[…] si je dis la vérité, ce n’est plus un roman, c’est un reportage, et si j’affuble c’est un tissu de sornettes, donc un déni scientifique, une manipulation destinée à éloigner du monde réel que des esprits forts s’occupent à améliorer. Où l’on voit que le roman est impossible.”\(^{305}\) The reference to “esprits forts” recalls earlier occasions where Rouaud opposed his thought to that of “spécialistes” and “maître-penseurs.” This characterization of the doctrine of the impossibility of the novel (or *romanesque*) in terms of intellectual sophistication will be significant to the potential

\(^{303}\) Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 146: “Ce fut même, cet art de la description, tout ce qui est resté au roman après qu’on l’eut jugé responsable, au nom de l’humanisme dont il était un avatar, de tous les crimes du XXe siècle.”


for reading Rouaud’s novel as illustrative of a romanéque de ressentiment where the weak (or the supposedly “naïve”) take their revenge on the strong (or the supposedly “intelligent”). As the novel advances, the author-narrator progressively “liberates” himself from these concerns, and, as we have already shown, the novel ends with an affirmation of love and justice. But before this can happen, the romanéque must, in a sense, be taken back from cinema. Rouaud spends a good part of his novel pretending that this story will finally become a film, precisely because that is the medium where the romanéque is still possible. In Rouaud’s version of literary history, cinema was a haven for those that were no longer welcomed by the gatekeepers of scientism in literature, “[ceux] dont le roman, n’admettant que le naturel et bientôt les seules contorsions de la pensée ou de la phrase, ne voulait plus. Le cinéma a été pour ceux-là, pour ces héros sans famille, dont la littérature scientifique ne voulait plus entendre parler.” What the last one hundred pages of the novel show, however, is the author finally abandoning the crass director with whom he has been engaged in a pseudo-dialogue throughout the book, and reassuming the romanéque for the genre of the novel. The novel, and its particular

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306 This is another aspect of Rouaud’s thought that suggests the influence of Michel Le Bris. As Charles Forsdick has remarked, “His thought is founded on careful research and meticulous erudition, but Le Bris has attempted to position himself—most obviously in the review Gulliver and through the annual literary festival in Saint-Malo, Etonnants Voyageurs—as a militantly anti-intellectual figure.” Forsdick, “Fin de siècle, fin des voyages? Michel Le Bris and the search for une littérature voyageuse.” In: Bishop and Elson (ed.), op. cit., p. 48.

307 In the words of Hélène Baty-Delalande and Jean-Yves Debreuille, the novel is the site of “un élan romanéisque fondé sur le matériau autobiographique et l’orfèvrerie dans la langue, pour atteindre progressivement, et de plus en plus nettement, une fiction d’autant plus libre et féconde qu’elle apprivoise les soupçons hérités du formalisme, et qu’elle nourrit des retours critiques d’un auteur triomphant.” Baty-Delalande, Hélène and Jean-Yves Debreuille “Présentation.” In: Baty-Delalande and Debreuille (ed.), op. cit., pp. 8-9.

308 Rouaud, L’Imitation du bonheur, p. 239. On this page, Rouaud explicitly mentions the tradition of the roman-feuilleton.


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vision of the *romanesque*, is thus affirmed, but the affirmation has been achieved by way of a long series of metadiscursive digressions that situate Rouaud’s project in relation to the traditions of naturalism, the Nouveau Roman, and popular cinema.

In most scholarly articles on the topic of the literary conversion in *L’Imitation du bonheur*, the emphasis has been on the ways in which Rouaud might be said to successfully divest himself of the burdensome strictures of the “ère du soupçon,” arriving in the process at a powerful statement of the potentialities of the *romanesque* in the twenty-first century. In other words, most articles on the subject of the *romanesque* in *L’Imitation du bonheur* seem to feel that Rouaud achieves his stated goal of helping the novel “sortir de l’ère du soupçon, de l’ère de l’indécision, pour rentrer de nouveau dans ce pacte de la fiction.”\(^{310}\) While the present study has already suggested some of the ways in which Rouaud might be said to propose an intriguing apologia for the *romanesque* as slow literature, we should have some reservations about accepting wholesale Rouaud’s model of literary history, or jumping to the conclusion that he has somehow achieved a total exorcism of the preoccupations of the Nouveau Roman and literary formalism. For when one examines with a critical eye the affinities and antagonisms that underpin Rouaud’s theory of the novel, one finds a story that, although far from idiosyncratic, is guilty of a great deal of oversimplification.

One of the most problematic assertions that Rouaud makes is that the Nouveau Roman is, in a sense, the spiritual child of Zola’s naturalism. While Rouaud has demonstrated familiarity with the major theoretical writings of Robbe-Grillet, he fails to address the extent to which the Nouveau Roman defined itself precisely in opposition to

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\(^{310}\) Rouaud, Jean. Interview with Sylvie Ducas, In: Ducas (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 302.
the literary doctrines of someone like Zola.\footnote{Rouaud does mention Robbe-Grillet’s refusal of the Balzician novel, but preserves the filiation that leads from Zola through the Nouveau Roman. The discussion of Balzac is to be found in “Mort d’une certaine idée,” where Rouaud essentially accuses the Nouveau Roman of evasion, of being a theory intended to deliberately avoid the historical shame that hung over 1950s French culture: “Ainsi le roman aurait pu passer au travers de la machine à broyer les peuples sans en tirer d’autre conclusion que celle-ci : Balzac a fait son temps.” Rouaud, “Mort d’une certaine idée.” In: Rouaud and Le Bris (ed.), op. cit. (2007), p. 18.} Rouaud’s response to this objection is, of course, that, notwithstanding the explicit proclamations of Robbe-Grillet or Ricardou, the Nouveau Roman is a descendent of Zola because of its passion for description and its pretention to impose itself as a scientific literature.\footnote{Robbe-Grillet does, in fact, speak of the Nouveau Roman in terms of a “passion de décrire.” However, he also explicitly distinguishes the project from that of naturalism. Cf. Robbe-Grillet, Alain. “À quoi servent les théories.” In: Pour un nouveau roman. Paris: Gallimard, 1963, p. 15.} A brief examination of the issue of description—and, in particular, the issue of description as isomorphic to reality or as pretention to rival photographic reproduction—reveals, however, that the question is more complex than Rouaud’s account would suggest. To begin with, for all of Zola’s rhetoric about the naturalist novel as an experimental tool capable, like any other good science, of helping mankind better understand the world, the fact is that Zola stridently rejected any assimilation of the naturalist novel to a project of photographic realism. It will be recalled that Rouaud essentially accuses naturalism of being a doctrine of servile, photographic reproduction of reality, a doctrine which hides a more insidious pretention to monopolize the means of legitimizing the truth of literary discourse: “Voilà comment, sous couvert d’une pure doctrine à l’exigence photographique, on se fait trafiquant de la vérité.”\footnote{Rouaud, L’Imitation du bonheur, p. 267. It is interesting to note that on this page Rouaud accuses this doctrine of truth of masking the fact that naturalism could only really reproduce “des a priori et des présupposés dont on fait la loi commune.” One can easily hear, in such proclamations, an echo of Barthes famous critique of the “roman lisible.” This is but one of many moments where Rouaud’s rhetoric seemingly aligns itself with that of his supposed theoretical enemies. While it could be argued that Rouaud}
of the world, he never claimed for himself any “pure doctrine à l’exigence photographique.” On the contrary, Zola declared that, “Un reproche bête qu’on nous fait, à nous autres écrivains naturalistes, c’est de vouloir être uniquement des photographes.”³¹⁴ For Zola, observation is only the first step for the experimental novelist, a step that establishes the base conditions which are then used to run the experiment:

Eh bien ! en revenant au roman, nous voyons également que le romancier est fait d’un observateur et d’un expérimentateur. L’observateur chez lui donne les faits tels qu’il les a observés, pose le point de départ, établit le terrain solide sur lequel vont marcher les personnages et se développer les phénomènes. Puis, l’expérimentateur paraît et instaure l’expérience, je veux dire fait mouvoir les personnages dans une histoire particulière, pour y montrer que la succession des faits y sera telle que l’exige le déterminisme des phénomènes mis à l’étude.³¹⁵

To make of naturalism an art of pure description is to amputate Zola’s method of precisely the process that transforms the dossier (including photographic documentation) into a novel. It should be added that if Zola has been accused, by his contemporaries and by our own, of being a practitioner of a writing that is reducible to photographic documentation, he has also, on the contrary, been seen as an essentially impressionistic writer.³¹⁶ Wherever one comes down on the subject of the impressionistic qualities of Zola’s writing, the fact remains that a reduction of his novels or of his theories of the

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³¹⁶ The impressionistic qualities of Zola’s writing have been subject to debate among scholars of his literature.
novel to a doctrine of photographic reproduction would require a much more sustained and detailed argumentation than Rouaud provides.

The same can be argued for Rouaud’s reduction of the Nouveau Roman to the oft-applied label “l’école du regard.” For while the major New Novelists undoubtedly derive a great deal of their singularity from their particular modes of descriptive writing, their novels are no more reducible to pure description in a photographic mode than Zola’s were. If we return to Robbe-Grillet’s theorizations of the Nouveau Roman, we find a similar rejection of photographic realism:

On voit dès lors combien il est faux de dire qu’une telle écriture tend vers la photographie ou vers l’image cinématographique. L’image, prise isolément, ne peut que faire voir, à l’instar de la description balzacienne, et semblerait donc faite au contraire pour remplacer celle-ci, ce dont le cinéma naturaliste ne se prive pas, du reste.317

In the case of Robbe-Grillet, it is very dangerous to isolate a passage from his theoretical writings and present it as a definitive statement of the author’s viewpoints. As Philippe Forest, among others, has noted, Robbe-Grillet had a tendency to vacillate between the Nouveau Roman as literature of total objectivity and the Nouveau Roman as literature of total subjectivity.318 What such passages from Robbe-Grillet’s writing as well as the critical corpus that has built up around his novels in the intervening years demonstrate,

however, is that to read Robbe-Grillet unproblematically as a promoter of pure
description in a photographic mode is to practice a distortion of his writing—an
understandable distortion, but a distortion nevertheless. And this is to say nothing of
the heuristic validity of coming to such conclusions with respect to the entire corpus of
the Nouveau Roman. One might actually be tempted to conclude in a somewhat
tongue-in-cheek manner that Zola and Robbe-Grillet could be linked more through their
refusal of literature as photographic realism than through their shared work as writers of a
uniquely descriptive literature.

Another major feature of Rouaud’s polemical style which does not necessarily
hold up to close scrutiny is his habit of establishing somewhat facile binaries, particularly
between realism or experimental literature on one side, and lyricism or imaginative
literature on the other. For Rouaud, the whole question of the romanesque is tied up in
the negotiation of this binary:

Mais ce choix en faveur de la science plutôt que de la poésie – or ce sont
les deux pôles qui bornent le terrain du roman –, de glisser la littérature
dans le courant positiviste du temps pour la sortir au nom de la modernité
de l’arriération poétique, mise dans le même sac que la religion et la

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320 Someone like Nathalie Sarraute, for example, could be said to be interested in a writing that is at least two degrees removed from the surface reproduction of the photograph. Far from a simple photographer, Sarraute was, among other things, interested in a writing that would explore what was not even perceptible to conscious thought. Of the writers who are associated with the New Novel, it could perhaps be argued that it is Michel Butor who could be most readily associated with Zola’s legacy. It should be noted, however, that Butor develops his very positive account of Zola’s *Roman expérimental* not though emphasis of a supposed argument for photographic fidelity, but by highlighting the manner in which Zola’s experimental literature sees writing as essentially rhetorical in nature. Cf. Butor, Michel. “Émile Zola romancier expérimental et la flamme bleue.” In: *Répertoire IV.* Paris: Minuit, 1974, pp. 259-291. It should also be added that Butor, despite his status as an experimental novelist, has distanced himself from the Nouveau Roman as literary movement.
superstition, c’est-à-dire de l’incertain, on sait aussi ce qu’il lui en a coûté. Fini les cavalcades et les effusions du cœur.\textsuperscript{321}

While realism and lyricism can very reasonably be argued to constitute, if not mutually exclusive, at the very least often opposed tendencies in literature, Rouaud exaggerates the extent to which the literary traditions he refuses make of their literature a pure scientific realism. In all his discussion of Zola’s work, Rouaud never really addresses the function of myth in Zola’s literature, and how it might cohabitate with the arguments of the roman expérimental. It should not be forgotten that, for someone like Michel Tournier (who also practiced, in his own way, a return to the romanesque), Zola’s legacy is as a great writer of myth. Likewise, if Robbe-Grillet undoubtedly saw the Nouveau Roman as an experimental literature breaking with sentimental lyricism and facile psychologism, his literature can also be read, as we have already mentioned, as an exploration of “un monde proprement onirique, nourri des mythes mêmes de l’amour et de la mort.”\textsuperscript{322} What one so often finds when one digs a little bit deeper than the most radical theoretical pronouncements offered by Zola, Robbe-Grillet or Ricardou, is a much more nuanced and, at times, conflicted literary project than that for which their most strident critics give them credit.\textsuperscript{323} Rouaud’s attacks on the Nouveau Roman and Zola tend, unfortunately, to rely on the aforementioned reduction of their literary projects to a pure scientific realism. Rouaud returns to this binary so often, and so frequently criticizes realist, scientific or experimental literature, that a few scholars of his literature have come to the

\textsuperscript{321} Rouaud, \textit{L’Imitation du bonheur}, p. 408.
\textsuperscript{323} In a recent book, Jean H. Duffy has had the following to say of recent trends in critique of the Nouveau Roman: “If the strength of the antagonism still directed at the Nouveau Roman is surprising, the ignorance and indiscriminateness evidenced in the more sweeping comments made by critics and journalists inside and outside France show that […] many cultural commentators have been unable or unwilling to see beyond the formalist experiments of Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou or their more inflammatory and dogmatic pronouncements.” Duffy, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5.
understandable but mistaken conclusion that he advocates a kind of return to a pure lyrical literature. In fact, Rouaud seeks a middle ground that is neither disincarnated, metaphysical lyricism, nor scientific, materialist realism; a middle ground which is, at times, more similar to the projects of the tradition he refuses than he seems to realize.\(^{324}\)

One of the ironies of Rouaud’s polemical literature is that in many respects it can be said to reactualize certain postulates of the formalist and avant-gardist literature that he so vehemently rejects. Rouaud’s *romanesque* is, as we have already mentioned, nourished by a number of more or less traditional sources: travel and frontier narratives, the western, etc. Rouaud also, however, positions his practice of digression as an homage to Diderot and to Sterne, two writers who are often seen as important precursors to the modern literature from which Rouaud takes pains to distance himself. This is, if anything, even truer of Mallarmé, who in addition to being one of Rouaud’s influences was a major hero of the textualist avant-garde.\(^{325}\) When one reads of Rouaud’s pretention to “dire l’indescriptible;”\(^{326}\) or statements such as “Bref, le roman exige de se faire violence quand on se fait une idée disons mallarméenne de l’écriture et qu’on répugne comme le commun des mortels à appeler un chat un chat,” one could be forgiven for mistaking Rouaud for a descendent of the very traditions that he would see relegated to the dustbins of history.\(^{327}\) The same could be said of Rouaud’s tendency to privilege attention to the adventure of writing over the exigencies of propulsive narrative, which recalls Ricardou’s

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\(^{324}\) On this middle ground, cf. Rouaud, *L’Imitation du bonheur*, p. 522: “Mais pour dire cette émotion, on ne disposait pas de beaucoup d’espace entre une vision romantique désincarnée, éthérée, et le réalisme brutal de notre inspecteur pour lequel la sexualité se réduisait à une pulsion bestiale.”

\(^{325}\) Mallarmé is so influential for the whole era of ‘high theory’ that Vincent Kaufmann saw fit to give the title *La Faute à Mallarmé* to his recent book on French theory.

\(^{326}\) Cited in Herzfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

famous proclamations on the subject. And what could be more ‘modern’, in twentieth-century literature, than the refusal of realism and naturalism? Finally, if Rouaud distinguishes himself from naturalism and from the Nouveau Roman by rejecting their supposed policy of purely descriptive writing, Rouaud’s œuvre is itself littered with examples of protracted descriptions of both the natural world (the famous rain description from *Les Champs d’honneur*) and of photographs. These contradictions have led a number of critics to speak of Rouaud as a descendent of the Nouveau Roman—something which might seem almost incomprehensible in light of Rouaud’s explicit rhetoric, but which has a certain logic when one considers the detail of his writing practices. What these inconsistencies or performative contradictions suggest is that while Rouaud’s rhetoric clearly positions him as a supporter of the reaffirmation of the

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328 In addition to the passages we have already cited on Rouaud’s decision to distance himself from “raconteurs d’histoires,” cf. *Ibid.*, p. 7: “[…] écrire c’est une autre histoire. C’est même à mes yeux, la seule qui vaille la peine d’être racontée. […] Et l’écriture, c’est ce qui m’intéresse, bien plus que l’histoire pour laquelle effectivement le téléfilm fait tout aussi bien l’affaire.”


330 Critics have tended to approach the question of description in Rouaud and its possible associations with a still-unsavory practice of *mimesis* (narrowly understood as reproduction of the real) with the tired and not entirely logical argument that Rouaud is different from previous (bad) practices of *mimesis* because his writing represents not the real, but rather the real as filtered through the perceptions of the writer. This distinction, which Dominique Viart expressed as an opposition between *représenter* and *figurer*, is reproduced by Jean-Claude Lebrun as a distinction between description and evocation. Cf. Lebrun, *op. cit.* (1996), p. 16. On Rouaud and description, cf. Titieni, Livia. “Descripção – Ancilla Narrationis ?” In: Goga and Jişa (ed.), *op. cit.* As I have already suggested, it is the opinion of the present study that mental impressions are, referentially speaking, no more or less problematic to represent than real-world objects. They are, from the perspective of the writer, not even necessarily distinguishable.

331 Although he is far from the only person to have made this comparison, cf. Duffy, *op. cit.*, p. 18, for a discussion of Rouaud’s writing in relation to that of Claude Simon. Rouaud has a tendency to “save” Claude Simon from his association with the Nouveau Roman by privileging Simon’s later statements about the place of historical references in his novels. Rouaud forgets the Claude Simon who could, for a time, have been mistaken for Jean Ricardou’s spokesman.
*romanesque* in the face of the untenable strictures of the Nouveau Roman, structuralism or formalism, the reality of his writing practices suggests that he is anything but a writer of an unproblematic *romanesque* liberated from the concerns of the previous literary generation.

One must finally ask the question of whether Rouaud takes on scientific literature and formalist interdictions in order, in a sense, to liberate the *romanesque* and open new avenues for the novel, or whether it is not, on the contrary, the *romanesque* that serves as pretext for the primary aim of attacking his perceived tormenters: the “spécialistes,” the “maître-penseurs,” the “esprits forts” who would condemn the novel to photographic realism or to sterile formalism. As usual, in dealing with Rouaud’s pronouncements on this subject, one must wade through a few inconsistencies. The majority of the time, Rouaud speaks of *L’Imitation du bonheur* as a novel in which the story was, to a certain extent, primary, and which uses abundant commentary in order to argue for the novelist’s seemingly retrograde practice of writing a story of love and adventure with a happy ending:

[…] si l’on accepte de passer par ce début un peu compliqué, un peu lourd, au bout d’un moment, on n’est plus dans l’ère du soupçon. C’est la condition *sine qua non* pour qu’au finale il n’y ait plus que l’histoire lue : tous ceux qui auront affronté l’arsenal théorique du début se seront purgé l’esprit et seront prêts à accepter cette rencontre amoureuse improbable. C’est une manière de désarmer les esprits forts, de leur dire : ‘oui, bien sûr, je sais moi aussi que ce n’est pas possible, et pourtant…”

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332 Rouaud, Jean. Interview with Séverine Bourdieu. In: Del Lungo (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 294. Soon afterwards, Rouaud makes explicit his desire to return to the *romanesque*: “Je ne vais pas me laisser impressionner par ces diktuts et je vais faire entrer les bons sentiments, les fins heureuses et le romanesque dans le roman, avec tous les artifices de la modernité littéraire” (p. 295). This passage suggests, intriguingly, that Rouaud’s seemingly contradictory appropriation of modernist writing techniques could be seen as a technique intended to validate the *romanesque* in the contemporary period.
In this passage, the conflict with the “esprits forts” is still very much framed as a necessary precondition for any kind of writing of the _romanesque_. If one recalls, however, Rouaud’s opposition between his writing at that of the “raconteurs d’histoires,” the issue begins to seem less clear cut. Indeed, if it is the norm for Rouaud to portray the novel as essentially a love story that utilizes abundant commentary to justify its own existence, Rouaud has also categorically denied that _L’Imitation du bonheur_ is a _roman romanesque_, stating instead that it is a book that is essentially concerned with the question of fiction.\(^{333}\) In light of such statements, and considering the abundance of commentary and polemics in _L’Imitation du bonheur_, it is possible to read the novel as instrumentalizing the discourse of the “retour du romanesque” for the primary purpose of transforming a perceived (or, perhaps, purely rhetorical) intellectual inferiority into moral and spiritual superiority. The operation bears a striking resemblance to what Nietzsche famously described as the _slave morality_ of “ressentiment” in _On the Genealogy of Morality_, a form of thought which, “in order to come about, […] first has to have an opposing, external world,” whose “action is basically a reaction.”\(^{334}\) While I have no intention of systematically applying Nietzsche’s evaluative criteria to the debate between Rouaud’s _romanesque_ and the traditions it refuses—no intention of making of formalism or the Nouveau Roman aristocratically self-affirming moralities—I do think that Nietzsche’s formulation, applied loosely, evokes the particular _reactive_ orientation of a

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strain of the contemporary *romanesque*.\(^{335}\) For it is not always entirely clear whether *L’Imitation du bonheur* is primarily a celebration of love and justice, embodied in the spirit of the *romanesque*, or whether it is a celebration of love and justice self-consciously staged in order to demonstrate the moral and spiritual vacancy of a tradition of powerful thought (“*maître*-penseurs,” “*esprits forts*”) which is, in the contemporary novel, finally receiving its divine retribution.\(^{336}\)

What finally makes *L’Imitation du bonheur* such a fascinating novel is the ways in which it simultaneously points to the potentialities and shortcomings of the attempted rehabilitation of the thematics of the *romanesque*. On the one hand, Rouaud offers a powerful statement for how the *romanesque* might operate as an anti-modern slow literature. Such a literature would counteract the pernicious effects of technological modernity and its literary ideologies on at once a personal and social level. On the other hand, Rouaud is an example how the discourse of the “retour du romanesque” is so often instrumentalized for essentially polemical purposes, using any number of returns (of the subject, of the world, of the imagination) as pretexts to fustigate an often caricatural version of naturalism, formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, avant-gardism or the Nouveau Roman. The relative moderation of Echenoz’s reappropriation of the *romanesque*, which began at a time when many of these movements had much stronger defenders in the academy and in culture at large, stands in stark contrast to the polemical

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\(^{335}\) The persistence of this negative discourse perhaps points to the difficulties that contemporary authors have defining the newness of their literary projects. The need to say that one *is not* a descendent of the Nouveau Roman surely stems, in some cases, from an inability to clearly state what one *is* doing, or how one’s literature conceives of referentiality. It is the opinion of the present study that recent theories of mimesis and fictionality offer the positive theorizations that these literatures often lack.

\(^{336}\) Cf. Nietzsche’s commentary on Thomas Aquinas and Tertullian, where he notes how part of the bliss of Paradise is to watch the iniquitous suffer, *GM*, 15. It should be noted that there is a strong undercurrent of Christian asceticism in Rouaud’s account of literary salvation. Cf. Freyermuth, *op. cit.*, p. 271.
bent of *L’Imitation du bonheur*. That the terms of the dialogue between writers of a new *romanesque* and the versions of the ‘modern’ they are defining their writing against seem to have grown if anything more acrimonious in recent times should give us pause, and lead us as readers and scholars to consider whether the different novels of the “retour du romanesque” have something to propose to us beyond a broad rejection of the ‘modern’.

At the beginning of the 2000s, this rejection already seemed well past its expiration date.\(^{337}\) That today we are still reading of a *return* of the *romanesque* that breaks what can by now only be considered imaginary shackles should be cause for some concern. Is the “retour du romanesque” to be an eternal return? Will it still be “returning” in ten years’ time? In twenty years’ time? The moment has perhaps arrived for us to begin thinking about “écriture romanesque” without recourse to the polemical assertions of literary return.

\(^{337}\) Cf. the comments of Charles Forsdick on Michel Le Bris and the possibility that his literature and theorizing was, appropriately, beginning to display a more positive orientation. Forsdick, “*Fin de siècle, fin des voyages?* Michel Le Bris and the search for *une littérature voyageuse.*” In: Bishop and Elson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 55.
Chapter 4. Point of No Return? Antoine Volodine’s ‘Post-Exotic’ Romanesque

As Jean Rouaud’s recent publications suggest, writing some form of the romanesque in contemporary literature is often a way of advocating for a particular reading of literary history. For a number of contemporary authors, returning to the romanesque signals one’s allegiance to forms of propulsive narrative fiction, and consequently one’s dismissal of the modern novel. This polemical affirmation of genealogies, family resemblances, feuds and enmities is one way of justifying a literary program in the contemporary period. Jean Echenoz’s complex and playful fictions, which rely on a certain “effet de romanèsque,” represent another, less vengeful attempt at moving beyond the literary aesthetic of the textualist avant-gardes. In both instances, however, the romanèsque is recuperated within the context of a reading of the development of twentieth-century French fiction. If Echenoz and Rouaud stand as exemplars of two literary-historical orientations with respect to a return to the romanèsque, Antoine Volodine, on the contrary, is an author whose fiction constitutes a radical refusal of any such contextualization. As Pascal Gibourg has remarked, “Dans le paysage littéraire européen, Volodine est à part. Son œuvre brille d’un éclat qui fait le vide autour.”

Leaving the world of literary histories—whether of the institutional or of the personal kind—firmly behind, Volodine seems determined to create an autarchic fictional universe that systematically severs ties with any literature that is not signed by one of his numerous pseudonyms. It would be

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339 Antoine Volodine is itself a pseudonym, and many scholars who study his work do not know his real name. Volodine has also published under the pen names Manuela Draeger, Elli Kronauer and Lutz.
tempting to call him a lone wolf (or, to borrow the name of one of his many writer-cum-terrorist characters, a lone Wolff), but ‘he’ is really more like a community apart, an entire constellation of marginalized, imprisoned, often insane writer-revolutionaries determined to make the reader forget that their texts all originate from one human being in the real world. This radical declaration of literary independence, this work which is at once highly romanesque and completely resistant to any discourse of return, stands in stark contrast to the habitual explanations of what constitutes the romanesque in French fiction of the past thirty years. Volodine’s romanesque claims no country, no national history, no ethnic origin, no literary tutelage, and, perhaps most significantly, no vision of a future either for literature or for the human race. It is, ultimately, a literature which radically rethinks the possibilities and functions of the romanesque in a perhaps irrevocably post-historical world.\footnote{The following abbreviations will be used to designate Antoine Volodine’s works: Bio. – Biographie comparée de Jorian Murgrave (1985), N – Un Navire de nulle part (1986), RM – Rituel du mépris (1986), EF – Des enfers fabuleux (1988), L – Lisbonne, dernière marge (1990), AS – Alto Solo (1991), NS – Le Nom des singes (1994), P – Le Port intérieur (1995), NB – Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie (1997), V – Vue sur l’ossuaire (1998), PE – Le Post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze (1998), AM – Des anges mineurs (1999), D – Dondog (2002), B – Bardo or not Bardo (2004), AP – Nos animaux préférés (2006), S – Songes de Mevlido (2007), E – Écrivains (2010). All works that are collaborative or published under other pseudonyms will not be abbreviated.}

Volodine’s work has been described as designed to systematically invalidate any form of critical or theoretical interpretation. In many ways, the whole of his fictional project can be seen as a sustained attempt to wall off the universe of post-exotic writers from any scholarly or aesthetic outside perspective.\footnote{That this community of fictional writers is a community of prisoners is not insignificant to this undertaking.} If the present study will be concerned with showing the ways in which, perhaps against his stated wishes, Volodine’s Bassmann. Volodine calls the fictions of this literary community “post-exotic,” a term which will be explained in more detail shortly.
work allows us to explore extreme, at times even nihilistic conceptions of literature and human existence, the complexity and singularity of these fictional universes demands that we first describe their broad contours and the manner in which one might be justified in reading them in the context of a study of contemporary French literature. Several problems are immediately apparent to any scholar attempting to write about Volodine. First, although his works do contain references to historical events that are identifiable in the real world, he tends to elaborate fictional worlds that are highly oneiric and unstable. Volodine writes parallel universes that recall the history of twentieth century and, in particular, its atrocities and the progressive disillusionment with the revolutionary ideal, but which recall them as if refracted through a feverish dream or the mind of a madman. These worlds at once cry out for interpretation in terms of a political history of the twentieth century, and resist that very same reading through distancing strategies.

Second, Volodine cuts the prospective scholar or critic off at the pass by developing his own literary community (of imprisoned leftist revolutionaries), his own aesthetic category (post-exoticism), his own literary genres (the shaggâ, the romançé, the narrat, the murmurat, the novelle, the entrevoûte), and his own critical vocabulary. Volodine seems to ask of his would-be interpretors that they adopt the terminology of the post-exotic universe, or even that they construct their discourse on the work as though they were characters within these fictions. Finally, Volodine consistently emphasizes his works’ status as coded messages, which only the post-exotic revolutionary prisoners of Volodine’s “parades sauvages” can decode. The reader is often conferred the status of eavesdropper upon a narration of dubious truth content. The interpreter of Volodine’s
work thus runs the risk, at every moment, of taking the code at face value while missing the underlying message.\textsuperscript{342}

Before we discuss these problems in more detail, a few words should be said about the types of stories that Volodine tends to tell. One of the things that make Volodine’s oeuvre so interesting is that it is highly thematically consistent. His works are characterized first and foremost by violence: revolutionary (assassinations of capitalists and exploiters) and politically repressive (torture of dissidents, prison camps of all sort), individual (murder, suicide) and collective (genocide, species extinction), directed at humans (cannibalism, sexual assault) and at animals (slaughter of turtles and farm animals), obeying supposedly rational political motivations (repression of intellectuals in \textit{Alto Solo}) or following no logic but that of madness or incomprehension (vengeance killings that have forgotten their targets and reasons, insane asylum inmates torturing each other).\textsuperscript{343} Although there are some exceptions, generally when Volodine’s books are not using situations of interrogation—political, psychiatric, or both at once—as a central structuring element of the plot, they at least thematize interrogation on some level.\textsuperscript{344} As this description has already to some extent suggested, Volodine’s stories are universally

\textsuperscript{342} It is not insignificant, with respect to this uncertainty, that there is almost undoubtedly no message ‘there’, no secret hidden behind the code. Volodine has been read in many ways, but there are, to my knowledge, no major studies that aim to decipher or decode his works for broad hidden meanings.

Volodine is interested in making the reader perceive an exclusion from what seem like deeper meanings hidden beneath the text, but he is almost certainly not writing fictions that seek a reader intelligent enough to find these meanings. Their irretrievability is an essential component of Volodine’s fictional strategies.

\textsuperscript{343} To the extent that his fictions portray characters eating gray apples (\textit{AM}, p. 8), living endless summers (\textit{S}, p. 227), unable to breathe the air (\textit{S}, p. 92), or surrounded by sickly, chemically burned plants (\textit{AP}, p. 139), Volodine can also be said to reflect on ecological destruction and issues of environmental justice, or what Rob Nixon has called “slow violence.” Cf. Nixon, Rob. \textit{Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor}. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

\textsuperscript{344} The works where interrogation is most central to the narrative are \textit{Le Nom des singes} (1994), \textit{Le Port intérieur} (1995), \textit{Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze} (1998), and \textit{Vue sur l’ossuaire} (1998). These books were published between 1994 and 1998, and it is notable that, with the exception of \textit{Nuit Blanche en Balkhyrie}, all of Volodine’s works from this period are essentially concerned with interrogations.
thematically political, and here one could interpret “universally” in two senses: first, in the sense that they are all, without exception, concerned with issues of violence, repression, inequality and suffering; and, second, that they are political in a universal, highly abstracted manner which most often eschews direct representation of recognizable political issues or events. As Volodine’s author biography rather succinctly put it, post-exoticism is interested in writing “[un] univers littéraire parallèle où onirisme et politique sont le moteur de toute fiction.”

Although we will have to wait to fully explore the implications of both the political bent of these works and their oneiric qualities, it is important to mention immediately that this dreamlike quality is derived to a large extent from Volodine’s habit of creating highly unstable narrators and characters. As Dominique Viart has noted, “dans l’œuvre de Volodine, la narration dissipe et dissout l’identité de l’instance qui la porte. […] le narrateur est à la fois multiple et déliquescent: il est mourant, mort, mutant… et ses identités sont fluctuantes. Plus rien ne se garantit de rien.” Numerous examples could be given of the practice of employing fluctuating narrative identities, but the most striking manifestation of this technique is undoubtedly to be found in Des Anges mineurs. In this collection of 49 narrats or “instantanés romanesques,” the narrator moves freely from omniscience to intradiegetic narration, and the frequent ‘clarifications’ concerning the use of pronouns have the effect of constantly dissolving and reconstituting the identity of the narrative voice:

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345 There are notable exceptions to the habit that Volodine has of constructing story worlds that do not refer to specific historical events, and which choose instead to construct stories that seek wider anthropological pertinence. Lisbonne, dernière marge, for example, makes a number of references to the Rote Armee Fraktion and its concrete historical and political context.

346 B, back cover.

In addition to the heteroglossic effect produced by these precisions, the suggestion that pronouns are apt to refer to a multiplicity of identities contributes to the oneiric feel of the stories. These story worlds aim for the indeterminacy of dreams, where identity is prone to rapid dissolution and reconstitution, where voices are confused and blended. In this manner, the reader is frequently asked to accept a situation in which, as Joëlle Gleize puts it, “Je = nous = il.” The situation is further complicated by the frequency of metafictionality in Volodine’s works. There are times where it is fairly easy to distinguish between the various diegetic levels. In *Vue sur l’ossuaire*, for example, the presence of new title pages clearly delineates the embedded stories (Jean and Maria’s post-exotic fictions) from their frame narrative (the torture of Jean and Maria). At other times, the situation is much less clear. In *Des Anges mineurs*, it is very difficult to establish definitively whose story is being dreamed by whom. There is not necessarily, in this web of dreams, a stabilizing outer layer or frame narrative that would allow us to interpret the relationships between the other layers. Likewise, the story that the princess tells in *Nos 348*... 

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[^349]: Gleize, Joëlle. “Pour une meilleure transparence de la désinformation.” In: Roche and Viart (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 75.
Animaux préférés begins in precisely the same way as the “Balbutiar” chapters from earlier in the work, and thus cast doubt upon who is telling these stories. These are but a few examples which demonstrate how narrative peculiarities and metafictional strategies tend, in Volodine’s work, to produce a highly oneiric, fluid and unsettling fictional universe.\(^{350}\)

As the act of imagining an entire community of fictional post-exotic writers suggests, Volodine is interested not only in creating self-contained works, but in constructing a network of fictions that are in communication with one another, and which contribute to the elaboration of a meta-fictional discourse pertaining to their own production. While character names do return from book to book, rarely do they seem to refer back to the same character identity: the Breughel in Le Port intérieur is clearly not the same Breughel that the reader finds in Nuit Blanche en Balkhyrie (although he is, perhaps, the same Breughel who returns in Macau). Volodine is not writing a new Comédie Humaine, and his works are much too deconstructive of fixed identity to suggest anything like a shared universe which each book would contribute to further elucidating. However, despite the dissimilarities between the universes and homonymic characters that traverse Volodine’s work, they are tied together by an originary meta-fictional schema, which is that of the imprisoned writer or storyteller. The figure of the imprisoned revolutionary who constructs post-exotic fictions to evade his or her violent reality, or to deceive his or her interrogators, returns again and again in Volodine’s

\(^{350}\) Although these clarifications could be said to destabilize, to a certain extent, the reader’s habitual points of reference, one should be careful not to conclude that these are fictions primarily concerned with deconstructing narrative conventions. Volodine’s fictions tend to be, despite their dreamlike qualities, very readable.
fictions and interviews.\textsuperscript{351} Every work that Volodine or one of his pseudonyms publishes is thus not only meant to be interpreted on its own terms, but also to be read as a contribution to a larger meta-fictional edifice, that of the post-exotic fictions developed by a group of imprisoned writer-dissidents. For this reason, although many other writers benefit from a global comprehension of their entire oeuvre, Volodine seems to demand that we read his ever-expanding corpus not as a progressive experimentation (although Volodine’s writing has changed in some ways over time) or as a development of unique fictions, but as a unitary work in which each individual publication not only develops its own meanings, but also contributes to a global signification.\textsuperscript{352} Perhaps because he wrote a number of unpublished works for himself before seeking to become a writer, Volodine’s fictional project as presented in his published work never seems to have gone through a gestational period. His reader is confronted with a highly consistent set of works that can all be envisioned as contributing to the larger project of constructing a self-sufficient literary universe.

\textit{Post-exoticism, Oneiric Encryption, and the Problem of Interpretation}

Where, one might ask, should one situate such a unique project in the contemporary literary landscape? Some time ago, a journalist saw fit to ask Volodine precisely this question, and, according to the author, he was so taken aback that he invented a term on the spot—“le post-exotisme”—that would signal his non-belonging to any existing

\textsuperscript{351} It should be noted that some of Volodine’s interviews can be read as extensions of his fictional project. He often speaks as though his various fictional personas were real people, part of a real community of writers.

\textsuperscript{352} Among others, Dominique Viart has suggested the importance of considering Volodine’s fictions as “un bloc.” Viart, “Situer Volodine?” In: Roche and Viart (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 30.
literary current. The term “post-exotisme” was, Volodine has stated, originally a “boutade” or a “supercherie moqueuse,” an empty designation standing for nothing except the author’s unwillingness to be put in a neat category alongside other authors.\(^{353}\) The designation “post-exotic” is intended to alert the reader and critic to the fact that they do not possess a critical category that could account for these fictions.\(^{354}\) Volodine explains his invention of the term in the following manner:

Il s’agissait d’affirmer que mes livres se situaient à l’écart des catégories conventionnelles de la littérature existante. Qu’ils appartenaient à un courant d’expression littéraire que les critiques n’avaient pas vraiment répertorié jusque-là. Il s’agissait de revendiquer une marginalité, un éloignement des centres officiels, des normes, des modes, un éloignement des métropoles, des cultures dominantes, mais sans accompagner cette revendication d’une posture identitaire, sans prétendre parler depuis une minorité bafouée ou depuis une minorité nationale particulières.\(^{355}\)

As this passage suggests, post-exoticism was, at the outset, a negative designation, aiming to draw attention to a lack of suitable definitional categories for an essentially outside or outsider mode of writing. In this vein, Bruno Blanckeman characterizes Volodine’s fiction as concerned above all with the establishment of a counter-cultural space or a “zone de déviance.”\(^{356}\) However, in the intervening years this vague label has progressively been given more positive content. Volodine recently offered the following definitions of post-exoticism:

- “Une littérature de l’ailleurs, venue d’ailleurs, allant vers l’ailleurs.”


\(^{354}\) As one of Volodine’s characters says, “ensemble, nous avons fabriqué une littérature qui n’a pas de nom” (*E*, p. 129). Post-exoticism is, at its origin, a name for a literature that has no name.


• “Une littérature internationaliste, cosmopolite, dont la mémoire plonge ses racines dans les tragédies du XXe siècle, les guerres, les révolutions, les génocides et les défaites du XXe siècle.”
• “Une littérature étrangère écrite en français.”
• “Une littérature qui mêle indissolublement l’onirique et le politique.”
• “Une littérature des poubelles, en rupture avec la littérature officielle.”
• “Une littérature carcérale de la rumination, de la déviance mentale et de l’échec.”
• “Un édifice romanesque qui a surtout à voir avec le chamanisme, avec une variante bolchevique du chamanisme.”

Some of these explanations may seem to confuse rather than clarify what a post-exotic story might look like, but this list gives a very accurate representation of what Volodine has been saying about post-exoticism in the years since he coined the term.

Post-exoticism essentially refers to a fictional universe shared by a community of fictional writers or storytellers. Although some argue that it was with *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze* (1998) that a theory of post-exoticism came into being, the fact of the matter is that most of the explanations of the term or ‘movement’ provided in that work exist in at least embryonic form in Volodine’s earlier fictions. More important still, it is often forgotten that *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons* is not an essay or a treatise on post-exoticism, but rather a fictional work in its own right, in which a series of prisoners are interrogated about post-exoticism.\(^{358}\) In addition to the aforementioned list of attributes, Volodine consistently emphasizes the following features of post-exotic literature. First, that it is politically anti-capitalist. There are many allusive references to various strains of Marxist thought in Volodine, but it would be very hard to argue that Volodine develops anything like a fully formed political philosophy. Rather, his political

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\(^{358}\) Volodine has insisted on the fact that this work is not “un ouvrage à part” or an *ars poetica*, so much as “une affirmation de rupture avec les arts poétiques officiels.” Volodine adds: “Avec ce petit livre, mon ambition n’était pas de proclamer une nouvelle voie avant-gardiste.” Volodine, “On recommence depuis le début…” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 255.
proclamations tend to be reducible to a very simple affirmation of egalitarianism, in opposition to capitalism in all its guises. This aggressive, violent, revolutionary anti-capitalist message is one half of the double movement that characterizes post-exotic literature. The other half is its construction of a “terre d’accueil” that permits evasion from the violent ‘realities’ of the post-exotic storyteller. Post-exoticism consistently refuses the ‘outside’, and the only literary works from our world that it consistently cites as influences are One Thousand and One Nights and the Bardo Thodol (sometimes called The Tibetan Book of the Dead). The notion of Bardo, or the period of 49 days that follows death and precedes rebirth, is of particular importance to Volodine’s fictions, whose structures often reflect division into 49 parts or into multiples of seven. The combination of the Bardo and the traditions of shamanism lends Volodine’s work a strong undercurrent of religiosity, which Volodine is careful to counteract by explicitly stating that atheism is one of the intellectual pillars of post-exotic thought. Volodine’s characters are often living in variants of the Bardo, in odd post-death or pre-life conditions; they engage in shamanism, create beings from rags, and are summoned to each other in dreams; but these aspects of his fiction should be read more as metaphors whose import is historical (Bardo as existence after “the end of history”) and aesthetic (shamanism as an analogy for fictional creation). Finally, it should be noted that even after it has been given positive content, post-exoticism is above all an affirmation of rupture: “On le voit, ce qui revient le plus souvent dans ces très courtes et très imparfaites synthèses, c’est l’affirmation d’une rupture. Rupture avec ce qui existe, avec la tradition,”

359 PE, p. 17.
360 This is the formalist aspect of post-exoticism that is discussed in Le Post-exotisme en dix leçons. The various numerological structures and formalist gymnastics (stories composed of precise numbers of words, etc.) of Volodine’s novels do not reflect, however, a broader mystical or theological conception of literary practice.
It would be very easy to read such statements as pointing essentially to the desire to assume an avant-gardist posture. In fact, Volodine is as resistant to the idea of founding an avant-garde as he is to the idea of recuperating any literary tradition:

Le post-exotisme n’est pas un courant littéraire en ‘-isme’. Ce n’est pas une école, pas un style. Ce n’est pas un mouvement d’avant-garde qui s’autoproclame en espérant qu’autour de ses initiateurs se regrouperont des bonnes volontés, de nouveaux auteurs, de nouvelles voix.

Post-exoticism, according to Volodine, does not have the pretention to open new horizons or point the way for other authors; it does not seek followers or adepts. What the term post-exoticism expresses, fundamentally, is a violent demand that all interpretation be constructed within the vocabulary of the fictional universe elaborated within post-exotic works, and with reference only to that particular universe.

It would be easier for a reader of such works to deny this demand to engage post-exoticism only on its own terms if it were not for the systematic emphasis, in the discourse on post-exoticism, on the coded or encrypted nature of these stories. As Volodine has stated, in his books, “Le cœur de l’objet est inaccessible par principe.”

This encryption operates on several levels. The first level is what might be called oneric or schizophrenic encryption, in which any fact about the “real” world of a character is systematically confused with dream content, or filtered through a mind that is not

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362 Ibid., p. 153. Also see p. 156: “[…] ils ne souhaitent pas spécialement une confrontation ou une fusion avec la littérature officielle qui les entoure. En particulier, ils ne cherchent pas à s’insérer dans la littérature existante avec l’objectif avant-gardiste de la réformer, de l’infléchir ou de la subvertir.” And, PE, p. 60: “[…] une littérature étrangère qui accueille plusieurs tendances et courants, dont la plupart refusent l’avant-gardisme stérile.”
necessarily sane.\textsuperscript{364} As Bruno Blanckeman has noted of Volodine’s works: “Les balises psychologiques, ou frontières entre réalités matérielles et psychiques, s’effacent : tout se joue dans leur entre-deux expressioniste, qui est aussi celui du cauchemar.”\textsuperscript{365} In \textit{Bardo or not Bardo}, Volodine stages a reading in which a variety of Surrealist sentences are decoded for their revolutionary content. The Surrealist phrase, “En retenant ses larmes, l’ours rond du milieu a ébloui les poissons rouges…” thus becomes “En reprenant les armes, nous serons des milliers à rétablir les passions rouges.”\textsuperscript{366} Volodine’s fiction seems often to ask of the reader that he or she engage in the same sort of task of transforming dream, automatism, or madness back into an intelligible political message. It is only, therefore, in a very loose sense that one can speak of the madness or dreams in Volodine as processes of \textit{encryption}, for it is not clear that there is ever an original message (though the work demands to a certain extent that we pretend there is), and it is highly doubtful that any reader could ever decode Volodine in a satisfying manner. To decode a coded message, there has to be some kind of rational coding to begin with. Like many wild over-interpretations, a decoding of Volodine’s work would probably be possible only as the result of a kind of madness, and the message that one arrived at would not be one that was put there by the author to be found by an enterprising reader.

\textsuperscript{364} The confusion of real with dream, as well as the question of the sanity of various characters and narrators is so pervasive in Volodine’s work that it is hard to pick a central example that would stand in for all of the manifestations. \textit{Cf. NB}, p. 165: “Je ne parvenais pas à définir si je me trouvais en état de veille ou en dérive mentale après mon décès.” \textit{AP}, p. 21: “[…] encore qu’il fût difficile d’établir si on nageait dans le cauchemar de Balbutiar ou dans le nôtre propre, ou dans une exécrable version de la réalité, ou dans autre chose de presque pire, ou ailleurs.” \textit{S}, p. 170: “[…] des certitudes dangereuses […] s’étaient établies en lui, le conduisant à confondre l’existence dans la réalité ou dans les rêves.”

\textsuperscript{365} Blanckeman, Bruno. \textit{“Une lecture de Bardo or not Bardo. Mange tes morts (et dis bonjour à la poule).”} In: Roche and Viart (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 218.

\textsuperscript{366} \textit{B}, p. 33. There are several other examples of this practice on this page.
If the psychological liminality of Volodine’s characters and narrators—who often inhabit intermediate spaces between dream and reality, between madness and lucidity—performs in its own right an encryption of what the reader is supposed to perceive as some essential but inaccessible foundational truth, there are also more deliberate strategies of encryption undertaken by Volodine’s characters.\textsuperscript{367} The most important of these is the emphasis that Volodine’s narrators and characters often place on the necessity of hiding the truth from their interrogators or from hostile political elements, which is to say, in practical terms, from any reader of Volodine’s fictions who is not a sympathetic character within those fictions.\textsuperscript{368} This characteristic of post-exotic fiction is emphasized in the section of \textit{Le post-exotisme en dix leçons} which is entitled “Parlons d’autre chose,” and in which the prisoner-storytellers state that “[…] nous avons contourné les anecdotes centrales afin de ne pas renseigner l’ennemi […].”\textsuperscript{369} The suggestion that the characters or narrators are avoiding speaking of some deeper, more essential anecdote or truth is present not only in \textit{Le post-exotisme en dix leçons}, but also explicitly or implicitly in almost every book by Antoine Volodine. It is exemplified in \textit{Lisbonne, dernière marge}, where Ingrid writes a novel that recounts her exploits with Kurt, but which will be unintelligible to BKA agents: “Pas une seule ligne de mon roman ne sera claire pour tes formidables spécialistes du chiffre. Les clés du mystère n’ouvriront aucune porte.”\textsuperscript{370}

\textsuperscript{367} On the subject of inaccessible truth, cf. \textit{PE}, p. 30: “Des clés sont fournies, qui n’expliquent rien, ou suggèrent que des vérités existent, essentielles, monstrueusement violentées et cachées, ailleurs que dans les textes et dans la réalité fallacieuse que les textes explorent.”


\textsuperscript{369} \textit{PE}, p. 48.

\textsuperscript{370} \textit{L}, p. 18. Other pertinent examples from this book can be found on p. 16 (“des textes cryptés, une intrigue, un romanesque dont tous les rebondissements, tous les messages, seront cryptés”) and p. 38 (“Derrière le langage, en tout cas, il y a les mots, et derrière les mots, parfois il y a un code, parfois il y a
resurfaces in Alto solo, in the scene where each male member of the quartet believes that Tchaki’s music has a special message for him, that he is the privileged auditor, when in fact “elle vougait jusqu’à des univers univers décalés, moins quotidiens.” The necessity of dissimulation is explicitly stated in Le Port intérieur: “Nous ne parlions jamais ouvertement de vous, même à voix basse. Vous savez bien qu’il y a toujours une oreille non bienveillante qui traîne derrière les murs.” It is again explicitly stated in Nos Animaux préférés: “C’est un programme codé, qui renvoie à un vécu, à des expériences, à des connaissances que le texte n’aborde pas, fût-ce de façon allusive. […] On se penchera là-dessus en vain. La réponse ne se dessinera pas, ne viendra pas.” These are but a few examples of the extension of the thematics of encryption in Volodine’s work. The effect of this insistence on coded communication is not so much that of rendering the text unintelligible, like so many encrypted messages are. Rather, it leads the reader to systematically suspect that what has been made intelligible is nothing but deception and fantasy. This is a suspicion that has haunted fiction, and particularly fiction that represents fantastic worlds, since times immemorial (the rhetoric of fiction as lie is as persistent as it is perhaps misguided). What Volodine’s fictions do, rather slyly, is

une culture, parfois il y a un hurlement, et parfois il n’y a rien.”). This suggestion of an essential void behind words hints at Volodine’s engagement with nihilist thought.

371 AS, p. 20-21. It is interesting here that schema is in a sense the opposite of that of the habitual post-exotic artistic expression. The listeners read a conventional message when in fact the music is an escape into an alternate universe. In the coding described in Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, the listener only receives information about alternate universes, without any practical use for the interrogator.

372 PI, p. 11. Le Nom des singes is also littered with statements of this sort. It might be added that the very title of this latter work could be a Ricardolian play on words, with reflection on “le nom des singes” leading inevitably to the question of “le nom des signes.” Volodine’s staging of encryption strategies definitely functions as part of a larger reflection on the possibility of finding a language that is adequate to naming the violence of the world, or to the expression of an effective political message. As we shall soon see, this language is, perhaps, not a human language, but a kind of post-human language for spiders or for cockroaches.

373 AP, p. 85, 86.
elaborate one story (or, often, many more) while suggesting another level of interpretation that will remain permanently inaccessible to the non-revolutionary reader. This endows the texts with an aura of significance and political vitality that is detached from the represented actions of their story worlds. It also causes the reader to question his or her ability to access any real meaning in the story, and hence to offer any substantive interpretation that is not subject to invalidation by reference to some deeper meaning. Volodine is constantly suggesting that his stories do not let the reader in, and hence it is not clear that this reader can take from them anything back to the real world. What is unique about this suggested hermeticism is that it is present not in the form of an unintelligible text, but in the form of a highly readable and engrossing narrative.

These texts from another world, written, spoken, murmured by prisoners subject to all manners of violence, present another type of encryption that should not go unmentioned, which is the destruction of intelligibility effected by history and forgetting. With the elimination of humans, their minds and social structures, records of their existences and thoughts, a fundamental unintelligibility is attached to what is left of their languages or arts. In Nos Animaux préférés, one is given to read a shaggâ where the commentary is missing. The reader learns that those who could have explained the contents of the shaggâ are dead, and that the commentary provided by the narrator is an attempt to fill the void left by the deaths of the writer/writers of the shaggâ. Despite the effort to paper over this textual sign of violence, this situation exemplifies the ways in which texts are coded, in a sense, by the violent destruction of artistic communities and their conditions of intelligibility, as well as by the slow transformations of history, which

Volodine defines the shaggâ as a text habitually composed of seven short poetic sequences of equal length and tonality, and of a commentary on these sequences.
defamiliarize art works in multiple manners. Volodine’s works often have an eerie, distressing quality; one understands the words on the page, but nevertheless has the feeling that they are perhaps from another language—identical to French but not French—and refer to another system of intelligibility. In Borges’ famous story “The Library of Babel,” there is a parenthesis that very eloquently expresses this emptiness and undecidability that inhabits text detached from cultural context:

No one can articulate a syllable which is not full of tenderness and fear, and which is not, in one of those languages, the powerful name of some god. To speak is to fall into tautologies. This useless and wordy epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves in one of the uncountable hexagons—and so does its refutation. (An $n$ number of possible languages makes use of the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol library admits of the correct definition ubiquitous and everlasting systems of hexagonal galleries, but library is bread or pyramid or anything else, and the seven words which define it posses another value. You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?)

The anxiety that one feels when one reaches this parenthesis that casts doubt upon the intelligibility of the entire story is an anxiety which Volodine carefully cultivates in his post-exotic fictions. These strategies of encoding, of effacing, of distorting and introducing noise into messages, of producing doubt as to the very communicative utility of his language, all participate in a process of rupture with literature, national cultures and, more broadly, the real world. Volodine seems determined to produce fictions that are at once highly readable, and at the same time highly resistant to any mode of

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376 It should not be forgotten that Volodine also incorporates a number of neologisms and foreign words in his texts. This is particularly true of the Rabelaisian lists of plants and animals that pop up in different places in his fiction. Cf. Draeger, Manuela. Herbes et golems. Paris: Olivier, 2012. Volodine’s insistence that his literature be read as if it were translated suggests his desire to fabricate a sort of “langue chamanique universelle” (B, p. 26).

interpretation that is not interior to the post-exotic universe. To interpret post-exoticism on its own terms is, in a sense, to become a character in Volodine’s world, to begin to play Volodine’s fictional game at a level of seriousness that is unsettling to most scholars.

Many scholars have, nevertheless, done their best to follow Volodine down his rabbit hole, and have elaborated critical appreciations of his novels using the terminology of post-exoticism. Dominique Viart is likely correct, however, when he cautions that post-exoticism is an element of a broad fictional edifice, and not necessarily a valid theoretical or critical paradigm. Viart suggests that faced with Volodine’s work, two strategies are possible: one can accept post-exoticism as an operative theoretical concept and interpret the rest of his work from the interior of this framework, or one can treat post-exoticism as an integral part of the fiction itself, and analyze the whole using any number of traditional, real-world analytical methods.\textsuperscript{378} The first strategy reduces the critic to a redundant reproduction of the discourses elaborated by Volodine’s characters: “[cette lecture] ne fera que répéter ce que l’oeuvre dit elle-même.”\textsuperscript{379} If this latter option does not necessarily get us past a number of the epistemological problems posed by Volodine’s fiction, it nevertheless has the advantage of authorizing a reading of Volodine’s work that does not lead irrevocably back inside the very fictional project one is trying to analyze, that does not condemn the scholar to tautology. It is a perilous undertaking to ask how a writer who refuses comparison compares to other writers, to ask how a writer who refuses any national identification and literariness participates in

\textsuperscript{378} Cf. Viart “Situer Volodine?” In: Roche and Viart (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 35: “Dans ce second type de lecture, le ‘post-exotique’ est alors renvoyé à un élément de l’imaginaire volodinien \textit{parmi d’autres}, même s’il en est, de fait, le principe organisateur.”

\textsuperscript{379} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 34.
French literature, to ask how a writer who refuses any discourse of return or relation to an identifiable tradition of the romanèsque writes the romanèsque and thinks history. If we are to read Volodine not from his world but from our own, as (usually) unimprisoned readers who hold in our hands his books which are French-language, literary, and romanèsque, these questions are, nevertheless, valid.

Antoine Volodine and “le retour du romanèsque dans la littérature française contemporaine”

At the outset of this study, we suggested that almost every word in the phrase “le retour du romanèsque dans la littérature française contemporaine” was potentially problematic. It could be said of Volodine that his entire literary project aims to sever all possible ties to any of the major terms of that phrase. If it would be tempting to read Volodine against the grain and tease out all of his references to prior literatures (which, despite his best efforts, are numerous), concluding finally that he participates in the “retour du romanèsque,” it is undoubtedly more productive to leave Volodine his singularity in order to examine how he turns a particular type of romanèsque to inhabitual uses. Before we can discuss the pertinence of his highly original literary project, however, a brief consideration of his conceptualization of notions like the contemporary, the romanèsque, and return is necessary.

It is not without interest to the present analysis that Volodine has taken pains at every turn to reject any recuperation of his fictional works for the category of contemporary French literature. Volodine is an author who, in many ways, has no contemporaries. Outside of his own community of fictional writers, there is no school to
which he attaches himself, no mentor who would play the role that Michel Le Bris plays for Jean Rouaud. While there is a minimal belonging to a period that is imposed by practical considerations—who publishes your books and who reads them—Volodine refuses to be the contemporary of any other movement or author of our time. Dominique Viart rightly notes that the invention of new literary genres is, for Volodine, a strategy of resistance to literary-historical readings (theory of the novel), and that when it comes to literary communities beyond his invented one, “Volodine préserve avec hauteur son indépendance au sein du champ littéraire.”

One way in which Volodine has cultivated this independence is by strictly refusing any relationship between his biological existence, his cultural background, his reading habits, and the content of his literature. If the notion of the contemporary implies at minimum a shared temporality (literary coevals), and more commonly a diverse but nevertheless broadly shared set of aesthetic concerns and cultural touchstones, Volodine’s invented genres and ‘unauthored’ fictions seek to create a space “outside of the dominant aesthetic ideologies.” It should be obvious that Volodine is not an author whose work asserts the necessity of a return to any prior tradition, even if this rejection of the contemporary might be construed in certain circles as a refusal to abandon the modern impulse. The refusal to establish genealogies

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381 This is undoubtedly, at least in part, an effort to anticipate facile biographical readings of the kind critiqued by Proust in Contre Sainte-Beuve. It also participates, however, in a broader effort to sequester his literary project from any literature that can be tied to a particular culture. This desire for broad anthropological significance recalls Jean Bessière’s definition of the aims of the contemporary novel, as discussed infra, ch. 1.

or relationships of antagonism casts serious doubt on the suitability of this reading, however. Volodine’s works do not so much attack contemporary literature as they ignore it outright. They are also opposed to any sense of belonging to contemporary literature, to the extent that it supposes an association with other authors who exist or existed outside of the universe of Volodine’s own fictions. As Jean-Didier Wagneur puts it:

Post-exoticism does not arise from an attempt to subvert official literature. It maintains no rapport with the manifestations of literature deployed outside the prison world. Post-exoticism does not want to enter into an antagonistic relationship; it does not desire to be the “other” or the margin of an official discourse.\footnote{Wagneur, \textit{op. cit.} (2003), p. 10.}

Wagneur’s statement here perhaps falls into the trap of interpreting Volodine’s literature from the inside rather than the outside of the post-exotic world; for it is far from certain that it is even possible to construct a fully autarchic literature that does not enter into relation with other fictions published in the real world.\footnote{For this reason, it is understandable that Lionel Ruffél would read Volodine’s fiction in relation to broader issues pertaining to contemporary French literature. Cf. Ruffél, \textit{op. cit.} (2007), p. 9: “[l’œuvre de Volodine] participe au renouvellement de la littérature contemporaine.” And p. 118: “[Volodine propose] une lecture forte des enjeux de la littérature après la fin des avant-gardes. \textit{Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze} situerait ainsi le geste littéraire post-exotique en opposition à trois tendances : les pastiches d’avant-garde, les littératures commerciales et les néo-académismes.”} It is nevertheless significant that this is Volodine’s stated intention. While one could try to rather awkwardly shoehorn Volodine in with the other authors who were publishing at Minuit in the nineties, the fact of the matter is that he tries his hardest to burn the bridges that might lead to non-post-exotic literary periods.

In addition to denying his belonging to the contemporary, or to any literary movement not of his own making, Volodine is resistant to any effort to define his literature in national terms. Volodine’s frames of reference are persistently global and anthropological: “Les deux seules identités [que les écrivains post-exotiques] se
reconnaissent, et que d’ailleurs ils ne brandissent pas avec fierté, sont d’une part leur appartenance génétique à l’espèce humaine, et, d’autre part, leur appartenance géographique à la planète Terre."385 This genetic belonging is still perhaps too narrow a definition of the post-exotic identity, as many of Volodine’s characters inhabit hybrid human-animal identities.386 The important thing here, however, is that Volodine does not consider his decision to write in French as implying in any way a sense of belonging to a national, cultural or even linguistic community. Volodine has asserted that his language is “débarrassé de ce background culturel spécifique, français, en même temps que de tout background lié à une langue déterminée.”387 This proclamation might seem rather naïve, for there are numerous theorists who would argue that it is impossible to eliminate any trace of cultural background, or to appropriate a language without assuming its cultural baggage. This statement signals, however, the extent to which Volodine’s conception of language emphasizes porosity and cultural heterogeneity. Volodine has consistently spoken of language as a neutral, universal tool: “La langue est un outil neutre qui accueille toutes les composantes de l’humanité, et qui ne peut plus être annexé par une seule composante nationale.”388 One of the ways that Volodine argues for this universality is by opening up French literature not only to works written in the French language, but also to every work that has been translated into French. French, for Volodine, is just a name that is given to a set of signs that is now highly culturally

386 It is not just that Volodine’s fictions implicitly refuse the idea of a human exception, but rather that their characters are often not fully human. This element of his work is too complex to be fully explored here, but it should be noted that this emphasis on non-belonging to the human race points to several types of voluntary and involuntary exclusion, and not only to those pertaining to dehumanization or dehumanizing situations.
heterogeneous and untethered to any association with the French nation or a national culture.

Volodine’s fictions demarcate themselves from fixed national or cultural identity not only by dint of a particular vision of the French language, but also by avoiding precise national, cultural and ethnic references. One of the major meanings that could be ascribed to the term post-exoticism is precisely this geographical, ethnic and cultural indeterminacy that effaces the distinctions between self and other, familiar and unfamiliar that grounded the psychology and aesthetics of exoticism. In interviews, Volodine vociferates against any and all racial distinctions, favoring instead a broader anthropological viewpoint. Volodine’s character names are generally amalgamations that deny any narrow national identification—Mario Hinz, Hans-Jürgen Pizarro, Freek Winslow, Linda Siew, Julio Sternhagen—a practice that is in keeping with Volodine’s emphasis on egalitarianism and internationalism. Onomastics, in Volodine, serve to perform post-national identities that exclude any conventional reading on the basis of national, racial or ethnic categories. For this reason, when Volodine’s work treats subjects such as ethnic cleansing and genocide, its racial and ethnic categories tend to be fictional (the Ybürs, etc.). To speak of Volodine as a French writer is thus, in a sense, to betray the explicit and implicit rhetorical stances of his fictions and interviews. Such a betrayal may be instructive, however, especially if one does not espouse, as Volodine does, a view of language which sees it as entirely detached from cultural tradition.

389 If Volodine has a weak spot for a particular region or culture, where he would fall back into exoticism rather than post-exoticism, it is definitely with regards to China and Chinese identity. For a few examples, cf. Volodine, Antoine, and Olivier Aubert. Macau. Paris: Seuil, 2009; S, p. 79; and E, p. 29.

390 While this sort of name is the generally the rule in Volodine’s fiction, there are numerous exceptions. It could be argued that his recent fiction is less rigorous in this regard. It should also be remembered that characters are, in Volodine’s fiction, subject to float between names or to be inhabited by a plurality of voices.
fact remains, however, that Volodine is committed to elaborating fictions that do not
belong to any nation or culture (beyond that of defeated revolutionaries), fictions in
which traditional notions of national, cultural, ethnic, or even personal identity are
destabilized. For Volodine, it is the rule that “je est un autre.” His characters have no
country; each of them is, to borrow from Claude Roy, but “le souvenir d’un avenir, qui
s’était cru d’espèce humaine.”

The question of whether or not it is appropriate to speak of Volodine’s work as
literature runs up against the same issue of the appropriateness of departing from the
categories developed within Volodine’s fictional universe. From within the post-exotic
framework, there is no question that this fictional production systematically touts its
status as sub-literary, while railing against the stale exercises of “official” literatures.
Volodine often contrasts the stories of his writer-revolutionaries with that of conformist,
state-approved, official literatures. Numerous examples of this contrast could be cited,
and this passage from Le post-exotisme en dix leçons, in which a post-exotic prisoner-
writer is interrogated by a representative of official literature, is representative of the
general tenor of these declarations of literary independence:

De toute façon, je n’ai rien à vous dire… Nous n’avons pas de langue
critique commune… L’hyperclassicisme de la Shaggâ ne coïncide avec
aucune des normes de votre académisme… les Shaggâs ne peuvent être
décryptées que si on pose en principe des valeurs et des expériences que
votre littérature n’a jamais reconnues comme siennes… Je dis ‘votre’
académisme, ‘votre’ littérature, mais… Ne voyez pas là une élégance…
destinée à tendre entre vous et nous je ne sais quelle passerelle
paradoxale… mondaine… Vous savez, le gouffre qui nous sépare ne se

this poem that could be spoken by Volodine’s characters, although the style is decidedly un-Volodinian.
One might alter Claude Roy’s formula in different ways, however, to account for the pessimism that
pervades Volodine’s work. Often, his characters are lobotomized “avenirs sans souvenir,” or dying
“souvenirs sans avenir.” And, as we have already mentioned, they are not always sure they belong to the
human species…
franchit pas… Votre littérature et la nôtre… ne dialoguent pas… Par paresse intellectuelle, vous considérez que le post-exotisme constitue un courant esthétique parmi d’autres, une variant bizarre de post-modernisme magique…

In Volodine’s fictional worlds, post-exoticism is rigorously distinguished from literature, to the extent that the term literature supposes a certain respectability, intelligibility, and cultural-intellectual status. Volodine’s storytellers prefer to write “littérature des poubelles,” a sub-literature for the sub-human “untermenschen” that haunt their violent worlds. And while nothing requires us to read Volodine’s works as fables of the novel which would posit the absolute non-communicability of his fiction in terms of habitual literary projects, much of Volodine’s rhetoric pushes the reader in this direction.

When one considers the issue of the literariness of Volodine’s work, it is possible to read his novels as falling prey to a performative contradiction by arguing, after a fashion, for their own sub-literary status from the comfort of the prestigious Minuit, Gallimard, and Seuil publishing houses. Volodine has, in fact, spoken of how important it was for him to make the move in the early nineties from the science fiction collection “Présence du futur” to Minuit. It has not escaped some specialists of Volodine’s work that his characters’ declarations of marginality appear in collections that are the antithesis of real-world editorial marginality. If fictional discourse surrounding post-exoticism constantly emphasizes the status of post-exotic fiction as sub-literary, Volodine’s books are in many ways dictionary definitions of literature. They are published by prestigious publishing houses, have received major literary awards, have been the subject of

392 PE, p. 33. Also see E, p. 19: “[…] il ne considérait pas cette ample entreprise de néologie comme entretenant le moindre rapport avec ce que, dans le monde extérieur, on appelait encore de l’art ou de la littérature.” And E, p. 162, where a writer refuses to “se livrer aux activités fallacieuses et arrivistes que l’on regroupe habituellement sous le terme pompeux de littérature.”

numerous academic studies (colloquia, monographs, etc.), engage with heady philosophical and political issues, deploy strategies of defamiliarization, foreground language, and deconstruct character and narrative in interesting ways. Rather than seeing a contradiction, however, we might read Volodine’s refusal of “literature” in highly literary texts as participating more broadly in a rhetoric that seeks to avoid any discourse of return or of alignment within a national tradition. While we have already discussed Volodine’s habit of distinguishing his writing from the reading habits and biological existence of the real person who writes the books that are signed Antoine Volodine or Maneula Draeger, another important way that these books are walled off, in a sense, from easy appropriation for a literary tradition is their habit of avoiding intertextual references to works outside of the universe of the post-exotic writers. It will be immediately objected that the Bardo Thodol and 1001 Nights are both outside sources, but it would be an inventive scholar who could, on the basis of these two texts, place Volodine within any kind of current in contemporary literature. When the subject of potential references in his work comes up in interviews, Volodine has been very careful to exclude any possibility of influence. In an interview in 2006, Volodine answered the question “Quelles expériences littéraires ont été pour vous les plus importantes, Kafka, Borges ?,” by responding: “Peut-être est-ce cela qu’il vaut mieux ne pas faire, convoquer, comme vous dites, des références littéraires, alors que tous les romans que vous voulez cerner se méfient des références littéraires et, la plupart du temps, s’en détournent de façon

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394 It is important to remember that the category of literature is not always easily dissociable from literary history, a discipline which, as Antoine Compagnon reminds us, “[…] est avant toute chose une idéologie (l’idée d’une littérature nationale) […].” Compagnon, Antoine. La Troisième république des lettres, de Flaubert à Proust. Paris: Seuil, 1983, p. 8.
If Volodine’s recent works are much less rigorously denuded of references to literary or artistic works that exist outside the post-exotic fictional community, the bulk of his work contains a remarkable paucity of direct references to real books or writers. Several major figures of communist thought—Marx, Lenin, Trotsky—appear either through explicit or implicit reference; the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm are alluded to in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*; H.G. Well’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is referred to in *Nuit Blanche en Balkhyrie*; finally, some of Volodine’s characters bear names that are either deformations of names from other books (the name Volodine itself is found in the works of both Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Mikhaïl Bulgakov), potentially borrowed from other books (Molly, from Céline, for example), or which refer to artists or writers (Breughel). While these are already interesting references, about which much could be said, this list is very short when one compares it to the profusion of references to works by post-exotic authors in Volodine’s oeuvre. The tenth chapter alone of *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons*, which is a list of works “du même auteur” or “dans la même collection,” lists 343 titles. It is not an exaggeration to say that for every intentional or unintentional reference to a real-world work, there are at least twenty to works from other post-exotic authors.

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395 Volodine, “On recommence depuis le début…” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 240. Although several scholars have tried to follow Volodine’s injunction to avoid a search for sources, it is a rare academic who entirely avoids the lure of comparison or the demonstration of one’s fine eye for literary allusion. While it is fairly safe to speak of references to science fiction writers (Ievgueni Żemiatine, Stanislaw Lem), to Kafka, to Beckett, to Brecht, and to Céline, a number of other writers have been suggested as potential influences, many of them on much less solid grounds.

396 *Écrivains* (2010), in particular, is uncharacteristically rich in references to “outside” fictional works. On a little over a page there are more films referenced than in the entirety of Volodine’s corpus to that date. Cf. *E.*, pp. 139-140. There are also rather humorous references, in this book, to fictional novels entitled *Malone au paradis, Macbeth au paradis*, and *Longtemps couché bonne heure*. 
The devil is, of course, in the details when it comes to the effort to systematically close off one’s work to recuperation for literary history or for the suggestion of inspiration or influence. Volodine’s books stand out for their representation of a self-contained literary community. However, once one begins to systematically track literary allusions or intertextual references across the thousands of pages of Volodine’s oeuvre, it becomes clear that while Volodine’s works are much more parsimonious with direct intertextual references than most other literary works, Volodine’s search for a neutral language and for a fully hermetic literary project that admits no filiation or parentage is inevitably belied by the residues of other literatures that remain attached to his fictions, whether consciously or unconsciously. We have already mentioned several examples of ways in which Volodine directly or indirectly refers to other books or artistic works, but one example from the end of Des anges mineurs is particularly instructive with regards to Volodine’s isolationist literary rhetoric. Like many of Volodine’s works, Des anges mineurs ends with a death that suggests the finality of species extinction:

Une nuit, mes vêtements s’embrasèrent. Je me maintins au niveau de la cendre pendant quelque temps, en grelottant et en pleurnichant. Disons quatre ou cinq ans encore. Il m’arrivait d’émettre des gémissements pour faire semblant de parler avec le vent, mais plus personne ne s’adressait à moi. Disons que j’avais été le dernier, cette fois-là. Disons cela et n’en parlons plus.  

While the last sentence here is not a direct quotation of Céline’s famous “qu’on n’en parle plus” which brings to a close Voyage au bout de la nuit, the similarities are more than passing, and many devotees of French literature would doubtlessly find it very difficult to avoid thinking of Céline when they read these final words.  

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397 AM, p. 218.  
Volodine intended for the reader to establish this reference is, in a sense, inconsequential, for in either case, the barriers that Volodine has tried to erect between his fiction and outside literature, or between language and cultural history, begin to crumble. If he intended the reference, the outside has been welcomed in, and the post-exotic fictional universe is now in communication with other literatures. If the reference is accidental or even if it could be attributed to the pure fantasy of an overeager reader, this would still point to the ways in which language inevitably transports cultures, histories and literatures, of the ways in which its neutrality is always compromised. Of course, Volodine urges his reader to imagine that beneath the encrypted surface, these books in fact carry radically different messages from the ones that we are given to read as outsiders or intruders. Perhaps in the language of the post-exotic prison, “n’en parlons plus” is a subtle call to arms and not a declaration of defeat. For our purposes, however, the important thing is that these literatures cannot help but participate in a culture, but refer to different forms of writing, to the histories of particular linguistic and national communities. Volodine systematically aims for pertinence on a global, anthropological scale, and his literatures succeed, in many ways, in achieving this broad applicability, but they are also irremediably part of French literature. Even as they transform and defamiliarize the French language, they carry with them the weight of its history.

Volodine’s very inclusion in this study suggests that the answer to the question of how Volodine’s works enter into contact with different literary traditions will emphasize, in one respect or another, his relation to the romanèsque. It will be the contention of this

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Although the link is more tenuous in this case, the description of total darkness in *Dondog*, p. 84, of the city in which “rien nulle part ne luisait” (which is followed by Schlumm looking skyward), recalls the epigraph from *Voyage au bout de la nuit*: “Nous cherchons notre passage/ Dans le ciel où rien ne luit.” Céline, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

chapter that Volodine does make use of some of the traditional characteristics of the roman esque, particularly as pertains to the construction of counter-worlds to the world of the reader in speculative fiction. However, as we shall soon see, Volodine’s is anything but a writer of a return to the roman esque, and, in some ways, he is also fundamentally opposed to the notion of a renewal of the roman esque or of literature in general. Before we can tackle this last point, however, a few words should be said about how Volodine’s fiction corresponds or does not correspond to our definition of the roman esque.

The easiest way to make of Volodine a writer of a renewal of the roman roman esque is to brand his texts as science fiction and then to discuss how his novels relate to this tradition. This critical move is justifiable in many ways, and several very attentive scholars of Volodine’s work have written precisely on this subject.\textsuperscript{400} Volodine began his career by publishing in a science fiction collection, he was the recipient of the Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire (originally awarded for science fiction, but now awarded to books more generally designated as speculative fiction) for his 1987 novel \textit{Rituel du mépris}, and even after he moved to more ‘serious’ publishing houses, his works continued to conform fairly well to Darko Suvin’s canonical (and contested) definition of science fiction: “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.”\textsuperscript{401} As we have already mentioned, although Volodine has refused to admit the importance of his reading habits to his literary production, it is nevertheless the case that he is a reader of


\textsuperscript{401} Suvin, Darko. \textit{Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre}. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 7-8. The broadness of this definition, which has little specificity in terms of thematic content, makes it easily applicable to fictions such as Volodine’s.
classic Polish and Russian science fiction. Volodine’s unwillingness to be tied to any real-world literary tradition is not subject to exception for science fiction, however, and he has demarcated his fiction from this genre as well as all others. Volodine has consistently spoken of himself as a writer of some form of “littérature de l’imaginaire,” and he has used the term speculative fiction in some of his interviews, but his definitions tend either to lead back inside the post-exotic framework, or to invent categories that are not necessarily particularly helpful to scholars (magical socialist realism, for example).\footnote{On the subject of Volodine’s relationship to fantastic literatures or imaginative fiction, cf. Volodine, “On recommence depuis le début…” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), op. cit., pp. 242-243, where Volodine discusses his relationship with Jérôme Lindon. According to Volodine, Lindon “était surtout intéressé par la forme, par l’architecture [de Lisbonne], alors que pour moi la forme était seulement le prétexte à exposer des visions, de l’imaginaire baroque, et des histoires nombreuses, sombres et violentes” (p. 242). Volodine adds that Lindon was never “un grand amateur de littératures de l’imaginaire” (p. 243) and that Lindon left Volodine’s previous works off the “du même auteur” lists because, for him, “publier des textes littéraires dans une collection de science-fiction relevait de l’absurde, de l’erreur de jeunesse.” (pp 243-244).}

There are also numerous moments within Volodine’s fictions where he implicitly denigrates various traditions of genre fiction.\footnote{Cf. PI, p. 80: “On se croirait dans un mauvais roman d’espionnage.” And S, p. 427: “Ni Les Attentats contre la lune ni Poulailler Quatre ne sont des romans d’aventures.”} Much of Volodine’s fictional production can be understood within the context of a very broad definition of science fiction.\footnote{Too often, however, critics and scholars lazily label Volodine’s novels as futuristic. Some of these works take place in a kind of future that has something like our world for a past, but many of them represent story worlds that are chronologically parallel or anterior to the dates of their publication.} The highly original nature of its alternative “imaginative frameworks” merit, however, a close analysis, for the pertinence of this fiction to the reader is not necessarily the same as that which one finds in many works of science fiction.

When one examines Volodine’s works with regards to Schaeffer’s four features of the \textit{romanesque}, it is really only the fourth feature—a form of mimesis that sets the story world off as a counter-model to the world of the reader—that corresponds seamlessly to
Volodine’s works. Volodine treatment of the other features is not, however, one of straightforward refusal, as was the case, for example, with Echenoz’s refusal of pathos, and it is instructive to analyze the ways in which his works subvert or distort the traditional expressions of the romanesque. The first feature of the romanesque, an emphasis on affectivity (particularly in its extreme manifestations) should, at first blush, be the easiest to dismiss in Volodine’s fictions. His pitch black universes (often literally pitch black, as characters move in total darkness or are buried in soot and ash) are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the roman rose or the sentimental novel. At the same time, when one looks at the whole of Volodine’s work, one finds a surprising number of star-crossed lovers and expressions of undying love. So many, in fact, that to list them all would risk boring the reader—but to limit ourselves to just a few exemplary cases, one might mention Kurt and Ingrid in Lisbonne, dernière marge, Iaikoub and Dojna in Alto Solo, Breughel and Gloria in Le Port intérieur, and Maria and Jean in Vue sur l’ossuaire (perhaps the most openly sentimental, as well as the most brutal of Volodine’s books). In this context, it is interesting that while spy and adventure novels are subject to disobliging remarks in Volodine’s work, the references to love stories or “romans à l’eau de rose” often situate the genre within post-exotic fiction. In Lisbonne, dernière marge, Ingrid is said to appreciate “les românces à l’eau de rose,”

405 It is important to note that they do this without, however, corresponding to what Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls the “romanesque noir” of libertine literature and, notably, of Sade’s novels. They are not simple inversions of the topos of affirmative axiological novels, or of what Schaeffer calls the “romanesque blanc.” Cf. Schaeffer, “La catégorie du romanesque.” In: Declercq and Murat (ed.), op. cit., p. 298.
406 At times the love is literally undying. In Danse avec Nathan Golshem, for example, Djeunifer Goranitzé performs a shamanistic dance which brings the spirit of her dead husband, Nathan Golshem, back to life. Cf. Bassmann, Lutz. Danse avec Nathan Golshem. Lagrasse: Verdier, 2012, pp. 15-16. Likewise, in Songes de Mevlido, the amorous connection traverses pre-life, life, and post-life.
while Kurt’s love is described as “[une] passion épique.” In Dondog, there is a reference to “Des romans d’amour, des post-exotiques.” In Vue sur l’ossuaire, Jean is said to love Maria “comme un héros de roman,” and their interrogator is consistently baffled by the status of their writings as declarations of love, which while being a mode of resistance to the brutal political world in which they live, are also devoid of overt politically subversive content: “[…] les Services désirent des renseignements concrets, pas des foutaises à l’eau de rose.” When one scratches a little bit deeper under the surface, one finds a surprising quantity of sentimentality in Volodine’s work. Almost any of the following passages could find a home in more traditional sentimental novels:

- “Nous avons besoin l’un de l’autre. Nous ne formons qu’un seul être.”
- “Fabien avait l’impression d’avoir toujours aimé cette femme à la folie et d’avoir partagé avec elle des centaines et des centaines de nuits en complicité et en vertige.”
- “Il n’y avait rien de nouveau dans ce nom, il le cherissait depuis qu’il avait accédé à la conscience ou à l’existence. / Et même plus longtemps encore. / Depuis les origines du monde, depuis les origines de la boue j’ai été l’amant de cette femme.”
- “Sans la certitude que Gloria t’attendant, sans cette alliance amoureuse entre vous deux, la traversée de cet univers en éclatement n’aurait pas valu la peine d’être tentée”
- “Je penserai à toi jusqu’à la fin. Quelle que soit la fin, tu me manqueras.”

Such passages suggest the frequency with which Volodine thematizes love as a space of resistance in the violent worlds that his characters inhabit. It would be easy to conclude

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407 L., p. 39, p. 238. See also L., p. 91: “Amour n’est pas un vain mot, fidélité n’est pas un vain mot.”
408 D., p. 284.
409 V., p. 65 and p. 74. Volodine has spoken of this novel in terms of the authorities’ inability to understand that the Jean and Maria’s stories have no concrete political content, and are instead pure expressions of love (which, in this universe, are far from apolitical). Cf. Volodine, “On recommence depuis le début…” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), op. cit., pp. 227-228: “les interrogateurs ne voient pas l’évidence: il n’y a pas d’énigme, le livre scelle une alliance amoureuse que la laideur de la politique et de la guerre ne peut atteindre.”
410 V., p. 34; N., p. 72; N., p. 82; Pl., p. 62; S., p. 212.
that the obvious violence of Volodine’s universes serves to emphasize the characters’ affective ties, and that love is in fact consistently thematized as a space of transcendence. In this case, we would find ourselves, unexpectedly, in a fictional schema that traces the fate of undying love (the conventional search for “le grand-amour-toujours”) in a world that never ceases to present it with obstacles. This schema is, of course, that of a number of traditional manifestations of the romanesque that privilege love and affectivity.

Could it be that beneath all that ash and blood, Volodine is really writing of Romeos and Juliets? The short answer to this question would be no. If there is a persistent emphasis on love as a value of sorts, one which would stand in opposition to the brutality of the political and social universes of the characters, there is no salvational discourse, whether attached to love or to anything else, to be found in Volodine’s work.\footnote{As Volodine put it in an interview, “Laissons de côté le terme rédemption, qui est incongru si on essaie de l’accoller à mes petits post-exotiques ouvrages.” “On recommence depuis le début…” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), op. cit., p. 247.} The undying love and the lost love tropes traverse Volodine’s fictions, and are endowed with urgency and vitality because of the constant obstacles presented by the repressive worlds that these characters live in, but, in addition to the absence of the habitual happy ending, love rarely attains the level of individuation and singularity that it does in traditional romans romanesques. The reason for this is of importance not only to the question of affectivity and the romanesque, but also with respect to the second feature that characterizes the romanesque: extreme actantial typologies, the presence of heroes and villains. The instability of characters in these fictions tends to deny them at once the degree of individuation that grounds the notion of undying love (the individual and even the soul or essence are essential concepts to traditional manifestations of this topic), as well as the notions of good and evil, hero and villain. Love is subject to float between
characters in Volodine’s works. In *Nuit Blanche en Balkhyrie*, Breughel seems to have feelings at various times for both Tariana and Molly, but these two women change forms and are not always recognizable: Molly is horribly disfigured, while Breughel cannot be sure that the prisoner he finds in the second part of the novel is really Tariana (“Sous ses bras grelottait une fille épuisée, en guenilles, qui disait être Tariana et qui, peut-être, l’était”). In *Le Nom des singes*, Fabian Golpiez’s lost love, Leonor Nieves, returns as a nightmarish giant bat creature. In *Songes de Mevlido*, the object of Mevlido’s love returns in different guises (Verena Becker, Linda Siew, Verena Siew) in the various worlds that the protagonist traverses. The tradition of writing about love is a tradition that emphasizes singularity and uniqueness. Volodine’s unstable characters at times fail the most elemental test of love: they are unable to recognize or to identify the person they love, and remain unsure of the other’s identity. What emerges from this instability is an expression of love that tends to dissolve the traditional axis of two lovers and their undying love into a more generalized sentiment of loss, not only amorous (of the loved one, nevermore to be seen), but also existential (of the self), political (of revolutionary ideals), and cosmic (of the human species, of all life).

413 NB, p. 134.
414 N, p. 193-194. Golpiez sees that Leonor Nieves has “dégénéré jusqu’à la mort ou pire encore.” N, p. 200, he is accused of “des amours contre-nature avec des chauves souris du Drapeau.” This example brings up another interesting aspect of the lost love theme in Volodine, which is that of a possible intertext with Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*. Leonor is not Lenore, but is quite close, and is definitely a lost love figure. Different varieties of crow abound in Volodine’s work. In *Songes de Mevlido*, in addition to the presence of a Station Leonor Iquitos, Mevlido makes love with a crow-woman named Gorgha, and sees a crow just before the ‘nevermore’ of his voyage into life (leaving the pre-life state and all his memories behind).
415 In this instance, however, there is more continuity than in the others. Although Mevlido cannot remember his past lives, he is, in a sense, faithful to his promise that he will find the woman he loves in the next world.
416 There are examples to be found from traditional novels where recognition is not achieved, but such moments tend to be temporary and driven by disguise or other types of subterfuge.
The shifting identities of Volodine’s characters make straightforward axiological readings of their conduct (or character essence) problematic. As Lionel Ruffel quite succinctly puts it, “la pratique de Volodine consiste à empêcher la création d’entités subjectives au profit d’identités transitoires, partielles et temporaires.” This practice is so extensive, that it is often only with a great deal of stretching that we can speak of ‘characters’ in many of these fictions. While most readers tend to sympathize with the revolutionary prisoners and despise the torturers working for the repressive regime, in Volodine’s works characters often play both of these roles. One of the fundamental contradictions that characterizes post-exoticism is that “la victime est bourreau.” In Vue sur l’ossuaire, Jean is “reeducated” and forced to torture Maria, before then being tortured himself. In Lisbonne, dernière marge, Kurt is both cop and revolutionary sympathizer (criminal); and the same is true of Mevlido in Songes de Mevlido. In Le Port intérieur, Breughel kills Kotter (the agent sent to find and murder him and Gloria), but then finds himself strangely inhabited by Kotter. Gonçalves and Golpiez alternate between the roles of psychiatrist and patient in Le Nom des singes. The fuzzy or slippery subjectivity of Volodine’s ‘characters’ tends therefore to undermine an association of his fictions with the traditional expressions of affectivity or of extreme actantial typologies in romans romanotesques. As Volodine has suggested, his characters are inhabited by “un pessimisme fondamentale qui entre en contradiction avec les normes du héros

418 PE, p. 39. If the emphasis on marginality and on carceral or psychiatric spaces recalls the work of Michel Foucault, the same could be said of the representation of power, which, in these books, tends to be institutional and structural rather than individual, exercised rather than possessed. Of the numerous scholars who have put Volodine into relation with Foucault’s work, Ruffel, op. cit. (2007) presents perhaps the most complete analysis.
Volodine’s universes do, in a sense, focus on a struggle between good (internationalist egalitarianism) and evil (mafia capitalism), but the characters often find themselves fighting on both sides, or finding their revolutionary ambitions transformed into counter-revolutionary repression. Furthermore, if Volodine’s fictions abound in violence of the sort that characterizes the roman noir or certain types of dystopian science fiction, their oneiric, chaotic narration distances them from the abundant action and extensibility of the third feature of the romanesque. Volodine is more interested in writing the image than he is in producing a propulsive narrative packed with action, and if his stories are indefinitely extensible, they would be so only in the sense of an atemporal, post-historical non-existence, and not in the manner of the serialized novel.

If Volodine’s work is romanesque, therefore, it is primarily because of its engagement with the production of alternate or parallel fictional worlds that operate as counter-models to the lived existence of the reader. As we have already mentioned, Volodine has taken pains to hermetically seal these universes, especially with respect to literary history and national literary traditions, but also, to a certain extent, with respect to historical specificity. It would be absurd to suggest that Volodine wants to eliminate real history from his works—in practically every interview he has ever given he has underlined that he is interested precisely in presenting a kind of fantasized memory of the twentieth century as a century of unparalleled atrocities and violence—but it is nevertheless the case that he elaborates many of his fictional worlds in such a way as to

\[\text{positif/négatif.}\]\footnote{Volodine, Antoine. Personal letter to Lionel Ruffel. Cited in Ruffel, \textit{op. cit.} (2007), p. 63.} \footnote{On the subject of the image, cf. \textit{AM}, p. 3; the chapter in \textit{Écrivains} entitled “La théorie de l’image selon Maria Trois-Cent-Treize” (pp. 119-151); and the ending in \textit{Songes de Mevlido} where he inhabits an image with Verena Becker, an image in which “surtout il n’y aura plus ni avant-image ni après-image” (\textit{S}, p. 430).} \footnote{That he is not fully successful in this task does not mean that the effort is not important to understanding his fiction.}
avoid direct reference to historical events. As we shall soon see, this rather common
tactic of producing a fictional world that is broadly anthropologically pertinent without
any direct reference to culturally or politically specific historical realities creates a
number of difficulties for scholars who rely on rigid epistemological distinctions between
mimetic and anti-mimetic fiction. A close examination of the distancing strategies and
the modes of engagement with real history in Volodine’s oeuvre demonstrates, however,
that the co-presence of estrangement and familiarity should not lead us too quickly to
read these works as either fully severed from the real (or purely fantastic, if such a thing
can exist), or as realist in spite of their dreamlike characteristics.

One need not read Volodine very long to be assured that his fiction is concerned
with creating parallel universes, dream worlds, shamanic trances that break with direct
representation of the real. Many scholars have remarked upon the fantastic aspects of
Volodine’s fictions, with some going so far as to suggest these worlds present a kind of
“huis-clos aréférentiel.”\(^{422}\) This opposition between two modes of representation is
thematized in *Bardo or not Bardo*, where Strohbusch, a former revolutionary who has
changed sides and now works for the police, exhorts Kominform, a terrorist who has not
abandoned the cause and who is dying of a gunshot wound, to wake up to reality: “[…]
on ne parle plus de la révolution mondiale nulle part, tout le monde s’est recyclé… dans
le trafic de pétrole, dans les droits de l’homme, dans le privé, dans la guerre… […] Vis
dans ton époque!”\(^{423}\) Volodine’s entire work presents, in a certain sense, a refusal to live

\(^{422}\) Blanckeman, “Un lecture de *Bardo or not Bardo*,” in: Roche and Viart (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 213. Ruffel has
\(^{423}\) B, p. 24. It is significant here that Strohbusch’s assistant is responsible for a direct transcription of the
reality of the scene. Another instructive example of this sort of formula is found in S, p. 96: “Adapte-toi au
réel.” In this work, the “réel” is the affluent world of the “centre-ville,” as opposed to the fantastic ghetto of
Poulailler Quatre, “ce ghetto incontrôlable, ce monde parallèle sans foi ni loi où se réfugiaient sous-
in one’s time, to the extent that this exhortation commands one to abandon revolutionary ideals or to write a kind of bland, ideologically suspect realism.\footnote{\textit{E}, p. 96, where a writer is said to break from the tradition of “réalisme populaire.”} The imperative at the heart of Volodine’s fantastic creations is essentially that of Dondog: “Allez, Dondog, chamanise, rêve, transforme tout !...”\footnote{\textit{D}, p. 239.} We have already discussed one of the primary ways in which this imaginative transformation of the real is justified within the worlds of Volodine’s narrators and characters, and that is on the grounds of the necessity for \textit{evasion}. The examples of this practice in Volodine’s fiction are numerous, and the subject is discussed at some length in \textit{Le post-exotisme en dix leçons}, but this passage from \textit{Macau} offers a clear summary of the principle of this evasive imaginary activity:

\begin{quote}
En ces temps de lourdes, irréversibles et impardonnables défaites, nous pensons tous que nous cacher au loin, et, en tout cas, derrière des identités d’emprunt, oniriques ou non, aide à supporter l’existence en en concrétisant une autre, pas forcément meilleur et même souvent pire, mais différente.\footnote{Volodine and Aubert, \textit{Macau}, p. 18. On distancing fiction as a protection against the real, for Volodine’s characters, cf. Richard, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 100-101.}
\end{quote}

Passages such as this one suggest a reading of Volodine’s counter-worlds that would make them ripe for the traditional critique of the \textit{romanèsque} as essentially a literature of evasion. The \textit{romanèsque} exists for those who cannot support their own reality, and so seek refuge in another. That this should apply to Volodine’s narrators, however, does not necessarily imply that it applies to the readers of his fictions. There is perhaps a kind of evasion of the real that happens in many types of reading, but it is far from certain that Volodine’s counter-worlds operate in the same way for readers as they do for his fictional

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\begin{enumerate}
\item[\footnote{424}]{\textit{E}, p. 96, where a writer is said to break from the tradition of “réalisme populaire.”}
\item[\footnote{425}]{\textit{D}, p. 239.}
\item[\footnote{426}]{Volodine and Aubert, \textit{Macau}, p. 18. On distancing fiction as a protection against the real, for Volodine’s characters, cf. Richard, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 100-101.}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
characters. Whatever the case may be, there are numerous aspects of Volodine’s fiction that suggest an interpretation of his fictional universes in terms of the creation of a space of pure evasion, that leaves behind the real and fabricates a safe imaginary space. It is this aspect of Volodine’s fiction that has led Lionel Ruffel to assert the “autonomie absolue de l’univers créé, parallèle à notre histoire, à notre monde.”

It might be suggested, however, that instead of or in addition to the drive to create an autarchic imaginary world in which one can evade the real, the systematic distancing effects found in Volodine’s fictions function primarily to endow them with a broad anthropological pertinence. As we have already mentioned, Volodine’s fictions are in many ways exemplary of Bessière’s understanding of the contemporary novel, which seeks a wide context of meta-discursive pertinence, rather than a narrow concern for direct representation of reality. Whether or not one agrees with Bessière, it is clear that Volodine’s engagement with verifiable geographical and historical events tends to be oblique. While it is often said that Volodine writes of a post-apocalyptic future, more often than not his fictions are situated in “univers décalés” or “univers parrallèles.”

Alto Solo (1991), Vue sur l’ossuaire (1998), and Le post-exotisme en dix leçons (1998) take place in what is said to be the 1990s (or a time corresponding more or less to their respective dates of publication), but which is clearly an alternate reality. Likewise, the

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427 Ruffel, op. cit. (2007), p. 49. Cf. also Richard, op. cit., p. 15: “Dans l’œuvre d’Antoine Volodine, l’écart avec le réel référentiel est maximal.” While both these accounts are right to emphasize the ways in which Volodine cuts ties with empirically observable historical reality, the use of the terms “absolue” and “maximal” exaggerates the extent to which Volodine achieves this. An absolute fictional autonomy is perhaps impossible, and would definitely necessitate a textual practice that would be much more rigorously denuded of any referential content or cognitive familiarity (on the level of plot and on lexical and syntactic levels).

428 Pl, p. 108. See also PE, p. 72, where the prisoner speaks of the desire to “décrire des ailleurs parallèles et un au-delà.” The use of “au-delà” is curious in this instance, as Volodine is generally much more preoccupied with writing universes that are “en deçà de la réalité.”
“shaggâ des sept reines” described in *Nos animaux préférés* (2007) is said to have been written “durant une période de cendres [qui s’étala] autour des années zéro.” It would be a mistake to put too much trust in Volodine’s use of verifiable dates, for even when he seems to be writing very close to real history, as in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*, the oneiric fluidity of his fictional universes constantly calls into question any reading in terms of straightforward historical reference. This facilitates a kind of general thinking of reality on the basis of his fiction that is not tied to particularities of historical period or cultural setting.

The combination of Volodine’s cultivation of distance from history and the real, and his explicitly stated pretention to write works that reflect on the twentieth century, its wars, its genocides, its destruction of the revolutionary ideal, has led to a great deal of confusion with regards to how a reader is or is not to interpret the pertinence of Volodine’s work to his or her own reality. Proclamations of the absolute autonomy of Volodine’s work often rub elbows with interpretations that make of Volodine a realist whose works are nothing less than reflections of the violence of the world today.

Volodine does not help matters by alternating between the suggestion that his work is intended to solicit reflection on reality, and the suggestion that his work should not under

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429 *AP*, p. 53. It is interesting that in this book dates are sometimes used as coded references to the cell numbers of prisoner-writers.

430 Volodine has emphasized this point in interviews. When asked about the ways in which *Le Nom des singes* might refer to the history of Latin American guerrilla movements, Volodine responded: “C’est pourquoi, même s’il est possible que les lecteurs, en lisant *Le Nom des singes*, se rassurent en interprétant le livre comme une exploration des guérillas latino-américaines et une rumination sur les conditions du combat en atmosphère équatoriale, mon projet était différent. Mon souci était de pénétrer dans l’image amazonienne pour en faire un territoire hermétique, universel, d’où on ne pouvait sortir que par l’utopie, le rêve ou le délire, ou encore par la mémoire falsifiée.” Volodine, “On recommence depuis le début…” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.

431 This statement is obviously valid only for theorists who believe that fiction *can* refer to reality in some way or another.
any circumstances solicit reflection on reality. A scholar looking to affirm that Volodine’s fictional worlds are entirely separate from historical reality could find ample evidence in *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons*—where it is stated that in post-exotic fiction “Les références au monde extérieur déperissent, elles perdent une bonne part de leur pertinence”\(^{432}\)—or through an analogical reading of the literary projects of Volodine’s writer-revolutionaries:

Toutefois, *Rue des mendiantes* n’est pas organisé comme le sont les romans d’anticipation et, contrairement à ceux-ci, il n’abonde pas en métaphores offertes au lecteur pour un décryptage sans peine. Les équivalences et les analogies dans *Rue des mendiantes* existent, mais il s’agit plus de coïncidences que de correspondances voulues, et le monde mis en place par la narration ne renvoie qu’à lui-même. Il est clos, fabriqué avec une réalité familière tellement distordue qu’elle n’est pas transposable. Il faut l’admettre comme tel et non y voir une description décalée du nôtre.\(^{433}\)

Such passages need not be read as exemplary of the author’s own literary ambition, but this is far from the only example of a rhetoric of total literary self-sufficiency in Volodine’s work. One need not look very far, however, to find counterexamples where Volodine’s fictions suggest an absolute isomorphism between represented world and historical reality:

Je parle la langue d’aujourd’hui et nulle autre. Tout ce que je raconte est vrai à cent pour cent, que je le raconte de façon partiellement allusive, prétentieuse ou barbare, ou que je tourne autour sans le raconter vraiment. Tout a déjà eu lieu exactement comme je le décris, tout s’est déjà produit ainsi à un moment quelconque de votre vie ou de la mienne, ou aura lieu plus tard, dans la réalité ou dans nos rêves. En ce sens, tout est très simple.

\(^{432}\) *PE*, p. 56.

Les images parlent d’elles-mêmes, elles sont sans artifice, elles n’habillent rien de plus qu’elles-mêmes et ceux qui parlent. 434

One can make this statement consistent with the prior affirmations of total literary autossufficiency if one argues that it is intended for a reader within the post-exotic universe (where everything recounted could be, theoretically, entirely true). There is another way, however, in which passages such as these hint at Volodine’s engagement with traditions such as Magical Realism, for which Volodine has expressed his admiration. 435 To invoke Magical Realism is perhaps to stir up a hornets’ nest, however, as the term’s precise definitions are subject to fierce debate.

What is essential about this vacillation between absolute hermeticism in a literature of pure fantasy and absolute fidelity to the real in a realist literature, where the violence of the represented world is analogous to real-world violence, is that it points to a fictional strategy which aims to maximize both distance from the real and pertinence to reality. The habit of labeling fictions as either mimetic or anti-mimetic, as either directly referring to the real or as exploring the imagination or the natural potentialities of language, has led to an inordinate amount of complex reasoning to demonstrate something which is highly common, and perhaps even a definitional feature of almost all fiction: the use of distancing effects in a representation that is nevertheless read for pertinence to the real. Thomas Pavel goes so far as to make distance and pertinence the two principles that are at the heart of fictional reference: “La référence dans la fiction

434 AM, p. 186. See also AM, p. 187: “Ces faits n’ont rien à voir avec l’invention romanesque, ils coïncident avec une vérité vraie à cent pour cent et ne méritent pas d’être alourdis par des développements lyriques superflus.”
435 Volodine has said of Magical Realism, for example, “Ce que j’aime dans cette littérature? En une phrase: la démesure épique, liant indissolublement un peuple, sa parole et son destin ; la fusion absolument naturelle entre fantastique et littérature à essence réaliste.” Cited in Ruffel, op. cit. (2007), p. 70. On the next page, Ruffel cites Volodine’s intriguing statement that he is interested in writing “une sorte de réalisme socialiste magique.”
repose sur deux principes qui, tout en se retrouvant ailleurs, ont depuis toujours formé le
noyau de l’ordre fictionnel : le principe de la distance et le principe de la pertinence.”

Volodine seems to encourage a reading of his works that would emphasize the pertinence
of the represented work to the reader’s own existence:

Car ici la mémoire universelle du malheur n’est pas récupérée pour étayer
des romans à prétention historique, et, encore moins, pour se rattacher
fallacieusement à une littérature de témoignage. Elle est offerte à
l’intérieur d’une fiction dont les repères territoriaux et temporels ont été
volontairement distordus ou effacés. Au lecteur ou à la lectrice de faire
travailler alors sa propre mémoire personnelle pour y retrouver telle ou
telle tragédie précise qui le concerne plus que d’autres et qui alimente ses
dégoûts, ses peurs et sa pitié.  

What this passage makes explicit is the link between the abstraction or distance of the
story world from the real, and the concomitant availability of these story worlds to be
integrated into the reader’s particular circumstances and understanding of history and
reality. The question should not be, therefore, if it is possible for such extreme realities to
be read in terms of real-world situations—it is not clear that we can help but do so—but
why extreme counter-models are of particular interest to Volodine’s understanding of
history. We need not opt for a reading of Volodine that makes his universes strictly
separable from our own, or which reads them as a mirror onto our own reality (which our
ideological blinkers hide from us in everyday life). The distancing effects of the
romanèsque are always deployed as a means of making pertinent observations about life
(including that part of life that is the elaboration of fictional narratives), and Volodine’s
violent nightmare worlds are no different. What they demonstrate, in fact, is the ways in

discussion of fictional distance.
which a certain degree of abstraction can be used to multiply the contexts in which an
historical and, perhaps, political message can be received as pertinent.

We must be careful, however, when explaining how Volodine’s texts broadly
follow the same rules that govern other fictional representations, not to let the whole of
literary history back into Volodine’s highly (though not fully) autarchic literary universe.
Volodine appropriates a form of the romanesque that is concerned with the construction
of counter-worlds to the world of the reader. He does so—and this point is of great
importance to an understanding of his broader view of history—without recourse to a
“retour au romanesque.” If Jean Rouaud argues for a retour du romanesque in order to
affirm one literary tradition against another, in order to place himself within a genealogy,
and in order to propose what he sees as a future for writing, it is not clear that Volodine’s
intentional or accidental engagements with other forms of writing offer any coherent
reading in terms of literary history or a future for literature. Volodine is doubtlessly a
writer who makes use of some of the strategies of the romanesque, in particular those that
make use of counter-models to the world of the reader. His relationship to the
romanesque, however, differs from many contemporary authors in that it does not seem
concerned with affirming the vitality of old forms in opposition to the modern tradition,
or with renewing old forms through a systematic deconstruction of their conventions. In
this sense, Volodine’s fiction does not lend itself easily to the habitual justifications given
for works that are characterized as participating in the “retour du romanesque” in the
contemporary period. It could be said that Volodine writes a very particular type of
romanesque, but without return, without any strong sense of belonging to literary history,
and, perhaps, without proposing, even implicitly, a real future for fiction. Volodine’s
writing at once stubbornly clings to a revolutionary ideal, while at the same time remaining fundamentally pessimistic with regards to revolution (real and literary). It is a literature that the reader identifies, in interesting ways, as romanèsque, without being able to say definitively that it has the same ends as traditional romans romanèsques or as contemporary returns to traditional forms.

Why Read Nightmares? Politics and Nihilism in Volodine’s Romanesque

There is a problem with Volodine’s particular brand of broad anthropological pertinence, and that is the problem of what to do with it. Its categories of reference are so broad, and its vision is so persistently pessimistic, that it is hard to read Volodine as a writer who proposes any easily definable political or literary project. Volodine writes about revolutionaries who will not abandon their principles in a world where capitalism seems to have triumphed, and where revolution seems to inevitably descend into barbarism and repression. His works do not, however, have the tenor of a call to arms, and his worldview consistently emphasizes pessimism and defeat— to the extent that one might almost say that Volodine is primarily concerned with a poetics of revolutionary defeat. It is nevertheless the case that scholars of contemporary literature are virtually unanimous in declaring Volodine an author whose texts are undeniably political. An understanding of the stakes of Volodine’s engagement with a literature of distance, that creates a counter-model to the world of the reader, must take into account the contradictory co-presence of political content and nihilistic rhetoric in Volodine’s work. It is the opinion of this study that while it makes no sense to affirm that Volodine is not political, there is
nevertheless an interest in taking seriously the potential ramifications of Volodine’s nihilism.

The first thing that should be said about the political situations that are represented in Volodine’s stories is that the overwhelming majority of them are post-historical nightmares characterized by a kind of endless present without hope for positive political change. One of the important definitional features of contemporary French literature, and particularly that of the nineties, is a disillusionment with the revolutionary Marxist ideal, and the notion of the (perhaps definitive or final) triumph of neoliberalism. If Francis Fukuyama cannot be said to have too many acolytes in the French literary world, numerous authors at one point or another seem to have balefully accepted that he may be right. Very early on in *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons*, it is emphasized that many post-exotic stories presuppose the idea of an “ultime défaite.” Throughout Volodine’s work, one encounters formulations of this essential pessimism that accompanies the realization that the revolutionary ideal no longer has any hope of succeeding. The most commonly cited passage on this subject is the beginning of *Le Nom des singes*, which seems to establish the death of the revolutionary ideal as the foundational principle that guides the novel’s characters through their dystopian world: “La révolution était morte une fois de plus et même très morte. J’avais honte d’avoir participé à ce ratage.” To this succinct formulation of the death of revolution one could add the constatation in *Vue sur l’ossuaire* that clandestine resistance to the totalitarian

438 The famous quote on this subject, which has been attributed to a number of different sources, is that it is now “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” For Volodine, this seems to be true, but this triumph of capitalism is coterminous with the end of the world.
439 *PE*, p. 13.
440 *N*, p. 9.
world is nothing but a literary fantasy.\textsuperscript{441} The same impression is given by the passing remark in \textit{Le post-exotisme en dix leçons} that it has been a long time since anyone has tried to liberate these political prisoners.\textsuperscript{442} The prototypical Volodinian story world is one in which the absolute defeat of revolution has already been accomplished, and the prisoners speak without hope of rekindling revolutionary fervor, knowing that “nous avons été comme à jamais dépossédés de la joie de refaire le monde.”\textsuperscript{443} Revolutionary passion is intact and violent in Volodine’s characters, but it is also purely residual, without hope of meaningful impact on the real course of events, which is to say, on the interminable political stasis that is now humanity’s lot.

The depth and conviction of this pessimism stems from the characters’ belief in the much-observed truism that revolution seems inevitably to engender repression and totalitarianism, to become an empty parody of its own noble pretentions. In an interview, Volodine responded to the question of his interest in “les ruines de l’épique” in the following manner: “Par l’épique, par l’épopée révolutionnaire, oui, et aussi par les ruines en général. Mais je me sens encore plus attiré par cet extraordinaire et, semble-t-il, inévitable basculement de la révolution vers sa caricature ou sa trahison.”\textsuperscript{444} Volodine’s characters inhabit a fundamentally untenable space in which the revolutionary ideal of internationalist egalitarianism is the only value worth affirming, but in which every concrete attempt at revolution is doomed to be reappropriated by capitalism or by

\textsuperscript{441} Cf. \textit{V}, p. 17: “Les réseaux clandestins n’existaient pas, c’était une invention littéraire qu’elle-même avait contribué à forger.” And \textit{V}, p. 18: “Les filières souterraines appartenaient au domaine des contes, et dans la réalité, loin des féeries romanesques, il y avait seulement deux systèmes totalitaires très semblables.” The description of the prison in which Maria is tortured is also of interest to the present subject: “Une atmosphère de nuit sans histoire régnait dans le centre de détention” (\textit{V}, p. 12).

\textsuperscript{442} \textit{PE}, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{443} \textit{AM}, p. 95.

repressive totalitarian government. This transformation is suggested in a bitterly ironic sense by the names that are given to the various repressive regimes in Volodine’s work: *la Fronde, le Paradis, la Renaissance*. In addition to these examples, which are taken from books where the political delineation between good and evil is fairly easy to establish (even if some of the characters straddle the line separating the two sides), there are numerous times in Volodine’s work where it is unclear who, precisely, is fighting for revolution, and who is fighting for repressive order or capitalism. In *Le Nom des singes*, an aside suggests this ambiguity: “Fabian, donc, avait toujours eu du succès auprès des petites Indiennes, les filles faciles et les prostituées ou les demi-prostituées qu’il recherchait quand il n’était pas occupé à défendre la révolution avec les armées gouvernementales ou avec les colonnes insurrectionnelles.” In passages such as this one, it is unclear how revolution is to be understood, and which side can legitimately claim the right to be fighting for revolution in a larger sense than just the transfer of power from one repressive government to another. The Volodinian hero is thus characterized by a paradoxical affirmation of revolutionary ideals (internationalist egalitarianism) that has lost all faith in the ideal of revolution (as praxis).

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445 It is interesting to note that *le Paradis* is also called “Les Îles,” which perhaps ironically refers to the tradition of the island as utopian space.

446 N, p. 68. Also see D, p. 187: “[…] la révolution s’étendait et prenait des formes imprévues, démentes et affreuses, absurdes et affreuses, concentrationnaires et affreuses.” And D, p. 206 : “l’obsène parodie de révolution qui avait remplacé la révolution mondiale.” Perhaps the most striking example of this seemingly inevitable process of revolution degenerating into a caricature of itself is to be found in the descriptions of the “séances d’autocritique” in *Songes de Mevlido*. Cf. S, p. 10: “C’était une séance d’autocritique bâclée, une de plus : un moment théâtral qui avait sa raison d’être autrefois, deux ou trois cents ans plus tôt, au temps où les guerres contre les riches n’étaient pas toutes perdues, mais qui aujourd’hui, à la fin de l’histoire – pour ne pas dire la fin de tout –, avait dégénéré en pure sottise rituelle. […] Rien n’aurait changé dans la société ni dans les mœurs de la police. On serait simplement allé ensemble un peu plus loin dans la défiguration des valeurs révolutionnaires. On aurait fait à contrecœur un petit pas supplémentaire vers la barbarie et la mort de tout espoir.”
The status of these voices that speak of a violent need for revolution in a world where revolution is either impossible or becomes a parody of its fundamental ideals explains the persistence with which Volodine’s fictions return to the idea of an end of history, of a torturous post-existence “flottant sans fin dans un enfer sans flot ni flammes.” Volodine’s fictional worlds represent post-historicity in several manners. First, these worlds are post-historical in the sense that the dominant intellectual currents have abandoned the Marxist model of historical development: “j’entendais la rumination amère de Bartok sur sa paralysie et sur l’absurdité sanglant qui avait désormais remplacé la logique marxiste de l’histoire.” They are also post-historical to the extent that what has replaced the Marxist model is not another conception of historical development, but an eternal present characterized by violence that is at once absurd and interminable. This feeling of living an ahistorical present is found in almost all of Volodine’s works. The following examples suggest the variety of inflections given to this idea:

- “[…] nous avons devant nous leurs valeurs démocratiques conçues pour leur propre renouvellement éternel et pour notre éternelle torpeur.”
- “Comment, toi, tu pourrais modifier le présent ? Même la révolution mondiale n’a rien pu changer à la saloperie du monde.”
- “[…] elle pose la question de l’attente éternelle, de l’engluement dans l’image fixe ; elle n’a plus la force de partir et sa souffrance est comme le ciel – péniblement infinie.”
- “ Car même les moins découragés d’entre nous, même les plus battants, déjà à cette époque ne prétendaient pas pouvoir infléchir le cours des choses. La pleine lune éclairait le dernier état de la barbarie humain avant la fin, avant notre fin, et, quoique nous eussions pu entreprendre, elle continuerait à baigner, de sa lumière ensorcelante, le final naufrage. Elle continuait à illuminer les ghettos, les camps, les ruines, le capitalisme absolu, la mort, notre mort, la mort des nôtres.”
- “ Ils considèrent que le XXe siècle a été constitué de dix décennies de douleur à grande échelle, et que le XXIe siècle s’est engagé sur la même route, car les…

447 AP, pp. 68-69. The exaggerated alliteration of this formula points to Volodine’s at times surprisingly playful style.
The frequency with which Volodine returns to a description of society as doomed to post-historical repetition of the extreme forms of violence that characterized the twentieth century suggests not only a conception of human social and historical development (or lack thereof), but also an intriguing dual justification for the consistent recourse to the writing of extreme counter-worlds. On the one hand, these fictional elsewheres are spaces of escape, oneiric mutations of the brute violence of reality. On the other hand, they suggest a vision of the world in which the dominant aesthetic and political ideologies cannot recognize revolutionary passion, or the realities of our world, except as bizarre dreams.\footnote{AM, p. 46; D, p. 242; AP, p. 84; S, p. 277 (see also PI, p. 121: “une conception naufrageuse du présent”); E, pp. 34-35. \textit{Songes de Mevlido} is particularly rich in passages with explicit description of social conditions. Cf. S, pp. 420-421; and S, pp. 199-200: “Les classes dirigeantes se sont gangstériées, les pauvres obéissent. Les uns et les autres se comportent comme s’ils s’estimaient déjà morts et comme si, en plus de ça, ils s’en fichaient.”} This latter understanding leaves some space for a more concretely political reading of Volodine’s fiction, a reading which would view the strangeness of his worlds as an indictment of our own inability to lucidly confront the nightmarish realities of our shared history and of our present world. It will be recalled that the \textit{roman-esque} is characterized not only by forms of spatial-temporal distance of imagined story worlds, but also, frequently, by forms of social distance. There is some interest in reading Volodine’s parallel realities as analogical to our own world (sometimes divided into first-, second-, and third-world existences), to our own stratified social realities.

If the post-historical seems almost a prototypical paradigm for political hopelessness, there is, therefore, also a reading of Volodine’s fiction which interprets the
(seemingly) definitive end of political progress as the necessary condition for a political rebirth. This is the conclusion that virtually all of the studies of Volodine’s work eventually reach. In addition to the fact that Volodine’s fictions are undeniably thematically political, and in addition to the various ways in which their fictional worlds can be read as metaphorically political, it has been argued that Volodine’s fictions are political in the more fundamental sense of a symbolically engagement with the base elements of politics as economy of visibility and as what Jacques Rancière has defined as a “partage du sensible.”451 Lionel Ruffel and Claire Richard, among others, have offered insightful accounts of how Rancière’s thought helps us define the political stakes of Volodine’s work.452 In this reading, Volodine’s recuperation of the romanesque could be argued to be a unique expression of the political potentialities of writing in the contemporary period. The extent to which Rancière correctly identifies the manner in which aesthetic activity is political is, however, subject to debate. The present study has neither the pretention to refute Rancière’s aesthetic philosophy, nor to repeat the conclusions that scholars such as Ruffel or Richard have already reached. While one can argue, on the basis of theories such as those of Rancière, that certain texts are more or less political, it makes no sense, on a basic level, to argue that a text is not political. Any text (even, and in some cases particularly a nonsense text) is susceptible to be read politically or to serve as a foundational act for the formation of political community.453

452 Cf. Richard, op. cit., pp. 10-15. And: Ruffel, op. cit. (2007), ch. IV. Additionally, Ruffel’s reflection in Le Dénouement (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2005) is of interest to the subject of the process of renewal effected by the writing of the end or the post-existence.
453 The frequency with which this occurs and the types of texts around which this occurs are important questions, however. It should be remembered that Mitt Romney’s advisers worried that the use of three
The judgement of the degree of political influence that texts have in particular societies, or of their success or failure in political terms, is a much trickier issue. Volodine has always stated that his fictions are political. He has also stated that he does not believe that literature has real-world revolutionary potential: “la littérature ne sert pas à faire la Révolution, la littérature ne sert pas à faire la guerre contre quiconque, la littérature est arrivée à un point de son histoire où sa force dans les événements socio-historique est absolument nulle.” Supposing we accept that Volodine’s writing is political, following the definitions of theorists like Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben, when and how should we evaluate the effects of this politicality? It is unlikely to satisfy many critics who hail the political aspects of Volodine’s fiction if this politicality is wholly impotent, if Volodine merely says, like one of Donald Barthelme’s characters, “I’m extremely political in a way that does no good to anybody.” What would it mean for Volodine’s work to be successfully political? When could we say that it has failed? Such questions are not meant to discourage any reading of a work in terms of political stakes, but they haunt efforts to marry aesthetics and politics in a global sense.

One aspect of Volodine’s fiction that has been widely remarked upon, but less systematically explored, is its obsession with species extinction and nihilist thought. It is

words, “Believe in America,” made his slogan less effective than Barack Obama’s one-word “Forward.” It is perhaps the case that the stultifying simplicity of politically effective discourse leads academics to formulate more complex and abstracted notions of politicality that permit them to focus on interesting texts without entirely abandoning politics as a subject of inquiry.

On this subject, one can think of the sustained debate concerning the extent to which the writers of the Enlightenment did or did not help to provoke the French Revolution. He does not, however, argue that they have any special insight into political or ethical issues. Cf. Volodine, “On recommence depuis le début...” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), op. cit., p. 228: “Ce n’est pas parce qu’on sait fabriquer du texte romanesque que l’on est soudain plus subtil que les autres sur des problèmes de politique ou d’éthique.”

Ibid, p. 244.

perhaps the case that we are so eager to make Volodine’s literature not just political—for there is a politics of pessimism as well—but constructively political, that its constant engagement with anthropogenic extinction scenarios tends to be downplayed. Indeed, another important way in which Volodine’s works can be said to represent a reflection on the state of the human race after the end of history, is through their sustained reflection on the extreme end point of human history: species extinction. Volodine’s fictions often stage situations in which the last member of the species dies out, or in which the book positions itself as an (impossible) message to whatever species will live on after human existence, most often cockroaches or spiders. On this subject, Volodine’s endings—which are almost all death scenes on an individual or species level—leap immediately to mind. *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons* ends, significantly, with sentence fragments suggesting that this voice will be the last of its kind:

Le post-exotisme s’achevait là. La cellule sentait le monde décomposé, l’humus brûlant, la fièvre terminale, elle empestait les peurs que les animaux les plus humbles, et je le regrette, ne trouvent jamais les mots pour dire. Il n’y avait plus un seul porte-parole qui pût succéder à. C’est donc moi qui

While this practice of sentence fragments has been discussed, notably in *Le post-exotisme en dix leçons*, as suggestive of the unsaid, of the encrypted part of every post-exotic story,

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458 This is, of course, true not only for scholars of Volodine’s work, but across disciplinary fields. Because species extinction is generally regarded as having a very low probability of occurring, there is very little research into the topic beyond the speculative realms of science fiction. Even in science fiction it is a relatively rare occurrence (none of the films on WWIII, for example, end with the total destruction of the human race), perhaps because post-human existence is fundamentally of no concern to humans. Theorists such as Dominiq Jenvrey have asserted that this ability to think alternative futures that are underexplored by science is perhaps one of fiction’s primary tasks. Cf. Jenvrey, Dominiq. *Théorie du fictionnaire*. Lyon: Questions Théoriques, 2011.

459 The idea that spiders will succeed where humans have failed is present in both *Le Nom des singes* and *Songes de Mevildo*. The former ends with the recitation of revolutionary propaganda to a colony of spiders, while the latter imagines a more just society of spiders replacing humans.

460 *PE*, p. 85.
these final sentences also exemplify linguistically the extinction of the writing
community.\footnote{461} The joining of speech and life is present throughout Volodine’s work,
which persistently evokes 1001 Nights, and the symbolic end of writing that closes every
work often corresponds with a broader extinction of the individual or the entire human
species. This is the case in Des Anges mineurs, where what seems to be the last human
utters last words (“n’en parlons plus”), and in Songes de Mevlido and Nos animaux
préférés, where the few remaining speaking or writing creatures are threatened with
imminent disappearance. While it could be objected that death is, in a sense, a natural
way to impose an ending on a book, Volodine’s fictions are littered with references to
species extinction, human and other.\footnote{462} In addition to references to suicide,\footnote{463} murder\footnote{464}
or ethnic cleansing,\footnote{465} in which the death of individual or collectivity are susceptible to
be read as symbolic of the fate of humanity at large, if one opens to a random page of
Volodine’s work, one is likely to find some reference to the extinction of mammals\footnote{466}
or of the entire human species.\footnote{467}

Before rushing to draw conclusions from this prevalence of references to human
extinction, it might be objected that Volodine’s works abound in afterlives, rebirths,

\footnote{461} Other examples of endings that thematize death in one sense or another are to be found in: L, AS, NS, PI,
NB, V, AM, D, E, and Macau (Volodine and Aubert). Additionally, several of Volodine’s books have
endings that are more ambiguous, but which, nevertheless, suggest death: EF (“les gouttes créptaient,
comme des flammes”), R (“Cela porte peut-être un beau nom, mais une chose est certaine, cela ne s’appelle
pas l’aurore”), and S, for example.
\footnote{462} As we have already mentioned, the human/animal distinction is complicated in Volodine, and the two
should never be read as strictly opposed to one another.
\footnote{463} Notable examples include AS, p. 126; V, p. 34; E, p. 186.
\footnote{464} All of Volodine’s work contains murder.
\footnote{465} This topic is most fully developed in Dondog.
\footnote{466} Cf. V, p. 22, 44, 80, 82, 95, 108.
\footnote{467} In addition to the passages cited above, notable examples include NB, p. 75 (“notre extinction
commune”); NB, p. 142 (“l’extinction totale de tout”); AP, p. 144 (“Et les générations futures, c’est des
conneries aussi. On n’aura plus de successeurs, on va s’arrêter là”); and S, p. 200 (“[l’humanité] était entrée
dans sa phase d’extinction”).
metempsychosis, and identity blending of all types. Volodine himself has the following to say about death in his books: “[…] dans le post-exotisme mourir ne signifie rien, […] après la mort on continue à parler et à agir comme si aucune frontière n’avait été franchie, et aussi […] on peut mourir plusieurs fois de différentes manières […]”468

The fact that Volodine’s literature presents myriad fictional strategies for cheating death—the assumption of a collective voice, reincarnation, multiple planes of existence, etc.—is not, however, necessarily evidence against Volodine’s fiction as the site of an interrogation of mortality, on the individual and species scale. For Volodine has also explained his fiction as a response, in part, to his horror at the idea of death: “je ne supporte pas l’idée que la conscience s’arrête sans possibilité de reprendre.”469 Just as Volodine has affirmed that his texts are political within the context of the post-exotic universe, while denying their capacity to effect political change in the real world, Volodine does not believe that literature has any magical powers for the real, biological, atheist human: “Reste qu’insulter la mort n’apporte qu’une satisfaction passagère. Le néant existe, il est horrible, il est indicable, il est intransformable, il est la réalité et, une fois de plus, on se rend compte que la parole, en face de la réalité, ne peut rien.”470 Death is often far from final in Volodine’s works, but this fact does not, in the end, defang his reflection on species extinction. On the contrary, the non-finiality of death in these stories underlines the finality of death in real existence, and therefore participates in rather than annuls Volodine’s nihilistic discourse.

468 Volodine, “On recommence depuis le début…” Interview with Jean-Didier Wagneur. In: Roche and Viart (ed.), op. cit., p. 262. Reincarnation is not always painted in a positive light in Volodine’s works. In Bardo or not Bardo, for example, the characters are often concerned with escaping reincarnation. In one nightmarish scene, a character is forced into reincarnation as a spider.
469 Ibid., p. 272.
470 Ibid., pp. 272-273.
At the same time as Volodine’s fiction looks away from the void and escapes into other worlds where life and death follow different patterns and rules, he also draws attention to the impossibility of any meaningful evasion. Volodine’s fiction cheats death, but it is also, on a more fundamental level, a literature of the dead for the dead, which is to say, a literature which reflects on its own impending unintelligibility and historical destruction. The anxiety induced by Borges’s imagination of a language which is identical to the one we speak, but which has entirely different meanings, is relevant to this aspect of Volodine’s literary project. As we mentioned before, one of the major types of encryption imagined by Volodine is that which death and time effect. As Ingrid says of her book in *Lisbonne, dernière marge*: “J’aurai une pensée incommunicable de morte, des souvenirs de morte, incompréhensibles et codés.”

Volodine’s thematicization of encryption is intended not only to wall the work off from critical interpretation, but also to suggest a radically pessimistic, but perhaps not unrealistic, conception of human existence (individual and collective) and its finalities.

As easily as Volodine could be considered a political writer, he could be read as a writer of nihilist fables, in which human thought and life are inevitably extinguished and swallowed up in non-meaning. Indeed, the word nihilism occurs with a great deal of

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471 *L*, p. 17.
472 Although there has been much debate about whether or not Nietzsche should be considered a nihilist, when I speak of Volodine’s nihilism or his writing of nihilist fables, I am thinking of existential nihilism of the sort that one finds in some of Nietzsche’s writing. Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.” In: *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870s* (ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale). Atlantic Highlands: Humanity Books, 1999. p. 79: “Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of ‘world history’, but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. –One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And
regularity in Volodine’s work, in which the post-exotic writers are consistently described as nihilists. This aspect of his writing casts a new light on Volodine’s practice of creating worlds that inhibit readings of direct pertinence to political or historical realities. In some ways, the ambiguity of these political situations produces pertinence to broader contexts, but in others, it suggests a view of the future in which no human is left to meaningfully interpret the text. That Volodine’s texts are written by the dead for the dead, that the revolutionary slogans are recited to spiders, that the revolutionaries take the forms of animal-human hybrids (bird-people, cockroach-people, elephant men), speaks to the future that these texts envision for themselves. Perhaps the only writing that can reasonably hope for literary posterity, in Volodine’s worlds, is one that takes on the impossible task of writing for the non-human creatures that will survive the human race. These texts testify to their own existence, they speak of violent political realities, they proffer revolutionary slogans, but they constantly reflect on the possibility that there is no reading community capable of understanding or using them.

These nihilist reflections lead back, of course, to the familiar paradoxes of nihilist thought (why live or write if life and writing are meaningless?, etc.), and Volodine himself seems well aware of this fact. He has spoken of his fiction in terms of an essential paradox: “tout est vécu dans un paradoxe : continuer à discourir depuis un point où tout when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no additional mission which would lead it beyond human life.” Nihilism, in this chapter, will refer to this sort of thought. This derisive view of human intelligence resurfaces in numerous passages in Volodine’s work. Cf. AP, p. 23: “[…] produisant une bave que, dans la langue qui ici sert de langage, nous appelons parfois l’intelligence.”

473 Cf. PE, p. 76 (“Ils regrettent souvent de devoir nier, mais ils sont nihilistes”); AP, p. 54 (“l’amertume nihiliste”); S, p. 279 (“Ma vie ressemble à beaucoup d’autres. Elle ne ressemble à rien./ Elle n’a aucune raison d’être”); E, p. 95 (“un geste d’adhésion aux philosophies du néant les plus radicales”).
discours est inutile et ridicule."\(^{474}\) It has been remarked numerous times that literary nihilism is perhaps a contradiction, and that the purest expression of nihilist thought is silence or even suicide. Volodine’s work is highly ambivalent when it comes to both silence and suicide. Its characters are often in situations of compulsory speech (the interrogation), and frequently say that they would prefer silence.\(^{475}\) It would be difficult, however, if one does not have recourse to theories of textuality as voice of silence, to interpret Volodine’s prolific literary production as systematically tending towards silence. The same objection could be raised for his treatment of suicide. Volodine’s characters are certainly not opposed to suicide, but they often reject this solution to their misery. 

Écrivains could be read as exemplary of Volodine’s ambivalence with regards to the subject of suicide.\(^{476}\) The first story of this collection is that of a writer who puts a gun to his head every night, but cannot pull the trigger, while the last story tells of writer who, ultimately, hangs himself. While it would be tempting to read this structure as a progression, it more likely speaks of an ambivalence that inhabits most of Volodine’s fiction. The nihilistic content of his writing is constantly in tension with the fundamental positivity of life and, especially, writing. To live is to make meaning, local and ephemeral, even when one lives with the fundamental conviction of the ultimate meaninglessness of life. Likewise, the very act of publishing literary works suggests a step towards others, towards communication and community that renders any writing of a fundamentally pessimistic nature extremely difficult. The act of burning one’s


\(^{476}\) While, unsurprisingly, the intertext is not explicitly stated, the reflections on suicide and existence in \textit{B}, ch.6 (“Dadokian”) strongly recall Camus’s engagement with the subject.
manuscripts speaks of nihilist belief much more eloquently than any published tract possibly could. My point here is not that Volodine, like all writers of nihilist proclivities, is condemned to contradiction, for Volodine himself admits this contradiction and lives comfortably within it. Rather than jump to the conclusion that Volodine’s literature inevitably fails to exemplify the negativity that it represents in its story worlds, we should consider how Volodine, like many of the great nihilist writers, uses nihilism as a thought experiment, one that is aimed not only at existential reflection, but also at our construction of narratives concerning literature, its evolution or progress.

Almost every scholar of Volodine’s work winds up transforming his negativity back into positivity, alchemically distilling politicality from his pessimism, summoning forth the phoenix of a new literature from the ashes of his post-historical prison worlds. Many of the best readings of Volodine offer very persuasive accounts of how this might be accomplished, and it is not the intention of the present study to invalidate such endeavors. There is an inherent positivity in theory and literary studies as well, one that seeks to find new meanings or interrogate existing meanings, to fabricate reasons to read and write while challenging old ones. Our construction of literary periods tends to follow some form of this logic, even when it is calling for a return to something. What Volodine’s nihilistic representations of a world in which life and meaning fade away, in which the only message that has a chance to survive is one that could be read by cockroaches or spiders, ask the reader to consider, if only temporarily, is the idea of a last message. This message can no longer return to any past—that past has been wiped away and its values are, at best, residual—and it has no future. In a literary world where pastiche and parody, innovation and imitation, loving homage and polemical refusal seek
to trace the outlines of what a new or renewed literature should look like, Volodine’s texts stand radically apart. They ask to be read as severed from literary history and literary future, as fables of fiction that stage their status as last texts. If the human race and the thing we call textual literature are not infinite, some text will be the last one; Volodine invites his reader to imagine that this is the text he or she is reading. That Volodine’s books ‘fail’ to achieve this status as last text is inevitable, but the project itself at once necessitates a distorted recuperation of the *romanèsque*—refusing its values and its actantial typologies while producing extreme speculative worlds—and severs any tie with the discourse of the “retour du romanesque” as a program for a new literature. Just as the paradox of another sort of nihilism, this time of the epistemological variety, is to have the absence of meaning always transform itself into meaning, the radical alterity and disconnection with literary history that Volodine asserts for his literature inevitably becomes a position within that very history. We cannot help but read positively, and our reading is inevitably informed by our cultural background and by a desire to construct meaningful human and literary communities. Volodine’s nihilism brings us, temporarily, to a place where this positivity comes to an end, to a point of no return which is also a place without future, for humans and their words.
Conclusion

If there is a lesson to be learned from the diversity of literary works that emerge around the notion of the roman Esque and its supposed return in contemporary literature, it is that we must be careful not to hastily essentialize these various “écritures romanesques.” A selective reading of the vast corpus of contemporary works that might be considered in one sense or another roman Esque could easily lead us to champion or to dismiss some hypostatized concept of a unitary “retour to roman Esque.” What one finds, however, when one examines the works of authors like Jean Echenoz, Jean Rouaud and Antoine Volodine, is the openness of the category of the roman Esque, its availability to a number of different types of recuperation, its susceptibility to be enlisted in a variety of theoretical and aesthetic postures.

The work of Jean Echenoz, with its particular blending of high and low, of ironic distance and propulsive or immersive narrative techniques, seeks to revitalize the novel with an intelligent and playful mixture of seemingly contradictory literary practices. In the process, Echenoz explores the tension between these novels that are at once enchanted, with their voyage into relatively uncharted literary waters, and concerned essentially with a disenchanted representation of contemporary emptiness. Their recuperation of the traditional axiological dimension of the roman Esque serves primarily to underline the distance that separates the spiritually or socially meaningful worlds—one is tempted to call such worlds full, bursting at the seams with amorous and agonistic possibility, with ethical and moral proving grounds—from the absence of values or of meaningful orientations for existence in a contemporary world that is alternately complex (to the point of unintelligibility) and empty (to the point that any meaningful social or
The spiritual connection seems impossible. The conjugation of this oblique but poignant reflection on contemporary existence and an attention to writing that displays itself in the stylistic jubilance of Echenoz’s impish, ironic, and loving riffs on conventional genres, has captured the imagination of many writers of the past thirty years. If he is sometimes suspected of being a little bit too fun, a little bit too lightweight and breezy, the variety of authors who have avowed Echenoz as a source of inspiration or who have spoken of him as a writer who found a way out of a sort of aesthetic dead-end, suggests the seriousness of his particular type of frivolity.

Jean Rouaud, on the contrary, recuperates the tradition of the roman esque in order to propose a willfully anachronistic literature of values, which affirms belief in truth and justice in opposition to the empty ideology of exploitation that characterizes bourgeois society in its various guises, including 20- and 21st-century scientific and scientistic thought. Following in the footsteps of Stevenson and other intrepid adventurers in literature and in life, Rouaud seeks to reconnect the contemporary roman esque with an artistic genealogy that privileges slowness over speed, poetry over rational thought, the meanderings of the roman esque over the utilitarian prose of naturalism. This apologia for the roman esque as a ‘slow’ form of thought and literary practice is inhabited by numerous contradictions, many of which stem from a problematically oversimplified account of literary history since the end of the nineteenth century. Jean Rouaud is, in this sense, exemplary of a broader trend in contemporary literature which affirms the “retour du roman esque” as an explicit and often violent rejection of a broad range of literary movements and theoretical postulates that characterized the fifties, sixties, and seventies: formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism (in some of its variants), textualism, the
Nouveau Roman, the Roman Tel Quel, Oulipo, and so on and so forth. If the violence of this reaction hints at the feelings of persecution and exclusion that some felt during the prior literary epoch, they also resurface with surprising regularity in literature of the last five years. Rouaud’s recent fiction opens interesting doors when it reflects on literature as an art of slow thought, not susceptible to easy instrumentalization; it points to a more pernicious trend in contemporary fiction, as well. There is a danger that the “retour du romanesque” will be a kind of eternal return, a regurgitated polemical discourse that nourishes itself on resentment and that has recourse to an unnuanced reading of the prior literary generation.

Antoine Volodine is interesting largely for the singularity of his literary project, which invents its own community of writers and readers, its own aesthetic category and genres, and its own literary history. Volodine manifests a will not to return to any recognizable romanesque of our world (even if his literature recalls Russian and Polish science fiction, among other traditions), but to create a hermetic fictional world that is interpretable only on its own terms. This is undertaken primarily through the thematization of encryption, which leads the reader to doubt that the message being read is fully intelligible. The ambition to seal off post-exotic literature from the outside world is perhaps doomed to failure, but it nevertheless sets the stage for an interrogation of the possible or impossible futures of literature, and, to a certain extent, the human race. While Volodine’s eschatological reflections are most often seen as a opening onto a more positive political orientation—an orientation that is not only thematic, but which also practices a performative politicality through its negotiation of visibility and its creation of shared communities of meaning—there is also some interest in leaving Volodine his
radical pessimism or nihilism, in seeing his literature as a reflection on what a last text might look like. This position is bound to be contradicted by immediate reality, and if it were not, no one would be around to know it, but, to the extent that such a thing is possible, Volodine pushes his readers to reflect on the end points of meaning and life, on the breakdown of intelligibility, on the extinction of species, on the ultimate finalities that are elided in our conventional histories, whether literary or other. In this manner, they explore the outer limits of the counter-worlds of the roman esque, while working at every turn to sever ties with traditions of literature and with conceptions of future literary communities.

The roman esque can tell us many things about contemporary literature, its relations to past literary projects, its aspirations for literature going forward. One of the things that the chapters in this study have tried to suggest is the extent to which the critical community tends to be divided between interpretations of the roman esque that focus on its critical or second-degree component, which make of it a continuation of the more deconstructive projects of mid-century French fiction, and interpretations that focus on its first-degree engagement with story, its “re-enchantment” of the novel, its embrace of “la fiction fictionnante.” The risk with both of these positions is that the first tends to make the new roman esque very Nouveau Roman-esque, while the second tends to lead back to the familiar accusations of naivety, conventionality, or even ideologically retrograde stupidity. The difficulty that many critics have had defining the interest of the “retour du roman esque” without reverting to one of these positions speaks, in my opinion, to the challenge that contemporary literature poses to literary studies. This challenge is that of reconciling “naïve” and critically sophisticated reading modes, the
adventure of a writing and the writing of an adventure, immersion and critical distance.

There does not seem to be a single name for the impulse to reconcile these readings in contemporary literary studies, but it is found in various guises across a number of the discipline’s sub-fields. It is this project of uniting everyday or naïve reading with critically rigorous and ideologically vigilant serious or scholarly reading that Jérôme David eloquently evoked in a recent article on the subject of *bovarysme*:

> On peut se demander, en effet, si la justification des études littéraires ne passe pas, aujourd’hui, par la réconciliation de la ‘lecture savante’ et de la ‘lecture courante’. Et ce, pour plusieurs raisons : parce que l’idée selon laquelle ces deux lectures seraient incompatibles, sinon exclusives, fut le fruit d’une époque où les ambitions de la critique étaient différentes, et où le statut de la littérature à l’école ou à l’université était suffisamment garanti pour qu’un enseignement déconcertant ou subversif, fondé sur une rupture avec le sens commun, n’y soit pas dénoncé, pour son absence de lien avec la ‘vie courante’, par des instances administratives soucieuses de professionnalisation ou des élèves anxieux d’obtenir leur validation. Parce que cet écart entre les deux lectures s’est lentement creusé, sous l’effet d’une sorte de force d’inertie conceptuelle, jusqu’à emprisonner les chercheurs et les enseignants dans un écheveau de notions incapables de rendre compte de leur passion pour la littérature, avec pour conséquence de transformer leur discours professionnel en un psittacisme parfois douloureusement vécu (dit-on jamais pourquoi on travaille parfois sur un écrivain durant vingt ans, au détriment de tous les autres ? et trouverait-on les mots pour le dire, si seulement on le voulait ?). Parce que la lecture ‘courante’ ou ‘naïve’ semble ne pas concerner seulement les autres, mais court-circuiter les clivages du savant et du populaire, du légitime et de l’illégitime, du sérieux et du frivole.  

If the category of the romanesque is so broad that it sometimes risks becoming a critical catch-all which would exclude only the most rigorously hermetic and sense-less avant-garde texts, the “retour du romanesque” remains important precisely because, with its incorporation of ‘low’ into ‘high’, with its fictional strategies that seem to ask for both immersive readerly engagement and reflection, it forces us to ask the question of how

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these reading styles can be brought into dialogue with one another. At worst, the “retour du romanesque” is but a name for a hasty and dismissive reading of many of the great writers of the fifties, sixties and seventies; at best, however, it names a literature which engages the two readers, naïve and serious, emotional and intellectual, that not only define divisions within reading communities, publishing houses, and literary genres, but which also coexist within the vast majority of scholars of literature. If there is a future for the romanesque in ‘serious’ fiction, it almost certainly lies in the reconciliation of these two readers. It is my hope that the present study has pointed to the interest in this project.
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