

Inventing a Vegetal Post-Exotic in the Work of Antoine Volodine

Gina Stamm

The University of Alabama, USA

gmstamm@ua.edu



Abstract

The physical environment plays a key role in the writing of Antoine Volodine, and in that of his “post-exotic” pen name authors. The ruins of human construction and the unwelcoming landscape of the post-apocalyptic world contribute to this literature’s bleak and menacing atmosphere. The ongoing catastrophe portrayed in Volodine’s work is equally environmental, human and political. This article will focus on the environment as agent and as a victim of violence, especially in the novels *Terminus radieux* [*Radiant Terminus*] and *Herbes et golems* [“Herbs and Golems”], and attend to what a specifically literary post-exotic engagement with the environment would look like. In addition to investing the vegetal with agency, the literary production itself acts as a form of political resistance that is dependent on one’s relationship with that world. Volodine applies his extensive power of invention as a linguist to naming herbs as a reparative and political act. The collective of post-exotic writers takes the side of the wild herbs they name and gives a voice to them by creating a place for them in literature. Questions driving my analysis of the vegetal post-exotic in Volodine’s work include: Can resistance take place without solidarity with the environment, and what would that solidarity look like? What communication can one have with the natural environment in the post-exotic mode that follows the cataclysm? Can one speak in the place of plants or other non-human agents? How must language change both what it is telling and how it tells it in a world in which disaster has already occurred and humans are only one of many agents who must contend with its aftermath?

Keywords: Plant studies, ecocriticism, eco poetics, speculative fiction.

Resumen

El medio ambiente juega un papel esencial en la obra de Antoine Volodine, así como en la de sus y alias “post-exóticos.” En el mundo post-apocalíptico ocupado por sus personajes, las ruinas de la construcción humana y un paisaje hostil contribuyen a la atmósfera lúgubre y amenazante de esta literatura. Volodine afirma que la catástrofe en curso representada en su obra es tanto ambiental como humana y política. Este ensayo se concentrará en el medio ambiente como agente tanto como receptor de violencia, sobre todo en las novelas *Terminus radieux* y *Herbes et golems*, y prestará atención especial a cómo sería un compromiso literario post-exótico con el mundo vegetal. Además de dotar a la flora de agencia, la producción literaria en sí misma funciona como una forma de resistencia política dependiente de la relación de uno con ese mundo. Volodine utiliza su gran poder de invención lingüística para dar nombre a las hierbas como un acto restaurador y político. El colectivo de escritores post-exóticos toma partido por las hierbas salvajes que nombra y les da voz al crear un lugar para ellas la literatura. ¿Puede haber una resistencia sin solidaridad con las plantas, y de ser así cómo sería esa solidaridad? ¿Qué tipo de comunicación se puede establecer con el medio ambiente natural en el modo post-exótico después de un cataclismo? ¿Se puede hablar por las las planas o por otros agentes no humanos? ¿Cómo se debe cambiar el lenguaje lo que se cuenta y cómo se cuenta en un mundo en que el desastre ya ha ocurrido y los seres humanos son los únicos de varios agentes que tienen que enfrentarse a las consecuencias?

Palabras clave: Estudios sobre plantas, ecocrítica, eco poética, ficción especulativa.

Antoine Volodine's work spans over three decades, and in it he has created a complex, dreamlike universe that he calls "post-exotic." The novel *Terminus radieux* [*Radiant Terminus*¹] situates the reader explicitly in Siberia after the fall of the Second Soviet Union, in a landscape devastated by war and radiation poisoning. In an interview given at the Mollat bookstore in 2014 (upon the attribution of the Prix Médicis for *Terminus radieux*), the author specifies that in this novel:

It is a universe [...] marked by ecological disaster, because [...] all the nuclear installations [...] in the second Soviet Union have broken down one after another, and the nuclear disaster has made uninhabitable a large part of the planet, perhaps the whole of the planet.² (10:00)

This is, certainly, a catastrophe for the human characters who, according to Volodine, are already in a sense dead and erring in a sort of afterlife in which the author often sets his work. But what is the "ecological" sense of this catastrophe? How has this disaster affected the larger non-human ecosystem, and what role does the environment take going forward, in this world where, according to Volodine, "Nature has gotten the upper hand, and it is true that the human race is on the way to extinction" (1:25)?³ Are we to see this "prendre le dessus" as an indication that humankind and "la nature" are reaching the end of an agonistic struggle? Must one or the other be a winner in the end?

A number of critics have addressed the presence of animality in Volodine's writing (notably Patrick Rebollar, Lionel Ruffel, and Arno Bertina). Plant life, however, has received much less attention, despite its noticeable presence in two recent works: *Terminus radieux* and *Herbes et golems* (from Volodine's heteronym Manuela Draeger). These two works are the focus of the current study, with attention also paid to passing references in other Volodine and post-exotic works, especially *Le nom des singes* [*Naming the Jungle*], which foreshadowed some of the ways in which plants would appear later in his writing. Here, I propose to examine how different biomes and associated plant life have grown to play an important role in the world of the post-exotic. While Volodine insists that the post-exotic world occurs after extinction, after the dissolution of civilization, after death, he also claims that in *Terminus radieux*: "There is this formidable hope that after death life continues, existence continues infinitely" (2:00).⁴

This article will explore the ways in which vegetal life exists in the post-exotic world, how it appears first as a feature of the setting that reflects the inner landscape of the characters and their mutually exploited status. I will then examine how naming plants can function either to reinforce exclusion from human groups or to include plants within those communities. Volodine shows that only by extending the post-exotic community

¹ Where a published translation exists, book titles will appear in italics. Otherwise the title will appear in my translated English in quotation marks.

² "C'est un univers [...] qui est marqué par le désastre écologique, puisque [...] toutes les installations nucléaires [...] dans la deuxième Union Soviétique se sont déglinguées les unes après les autres, et le désastre nucléaire a rendu inhabitable une grande partie de la planète, peut-être l'ensemble de la planète." (All translations going forward are my own, unless otherwise specified.)

³ "[L]a nature a pris le dessus et il est vrai que l'espèce humaine est en voie d'extinction"

⁴ "[I]l y a cette espérance formidable qui est que après le décès la vie continue, l'existence continue infiniment."

beyond the human can this community participate in what he calls the “morale prolétarienne” [proletarian morality] (11:23) and follow the model set by the vegetal world.

The Vegetal as Part of the Post-Exotic Environment

Even while not explicitly being exploited for their use value for humans (food, medicine, industry, etc.), plants’ images are mediated through the eyes of Volodine’s characters, in a reflection of the dangers they face, and as a receptacle for their fear and other emotions. The absence of plant life can signal the general overwhelming inhospitality of the environment (*Songes de Mevlido* [“Mevlido’s Dreams”], *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie* [“Sleepless Night in Balkhyria”], *Rituel du mépris* [“Ritual of Contempt”]). Whatever cataclysm has occurred has rendered the earth utterly barren for plants and animals alike. But even live plants can also seem to be an isolating force, separating characters from each other either by the appearance of insurmountable distance (in the steppe) or impenetrable forest (taiga). In such situations, the presence of plants is indicative of as great a threat to the characters’ survival as the desolation their absence would signal. The green of the steppe is described as “an aggressive green [...] whose abnormal presence inspired fear” (218).⁵ by the narrator of *Terminus radieux*, and both the steppe and the taiga are described as lacking in appeal to the observer, despite their vigorous greenery: “Seeds, flat green, bright green, stalks. No flowers. Grasses that evoked nothing besides dullness and absence” (27).⁶

Flowers are the part of a plant that signifies a relationship to other living beings—exposing the plant to pollination by animals who are attracted by the flower. They traditionally indicate the fecundity of nature; they are the objects of desire of the insects or birds who feed there and transfer pollen, and of humans who eat their fruit. In the irradiated taiga, there is no longer a point to the display of flowers. There is no one to pollinate them, and they may no longer even need that pollination, living as they do in a sort of permanent half-life. The plants have retreated from the participative reproductive cycle that required the presence of animals. In the absence of verbal language, the plants’ indifference to the presence of the humans in their midst is spelled out in their form.

The jungle, on the other hand, is full of fruit, full of reproductive power, but is no more hospitable to the human inhabitants of *Le nom des singes*. The opulent fertility of the jungle is overblown, passing over into the rot of the fruit that would otherwise sustain human life. This fruit in fact becomes more associated with death, as the indigenous dead in *Le nom des singes* are dispatched in a canoe full of rotting fruit. The plants themselves and the climate that permits their proliferation contribute to the dilapidation of human constructions, whether or not those constructions are still in use. Rot encourages plants’ life cycle over the long term, while inhibiting human comfort and the permanence of human civilization. The presence of the plants shows that the degree zero of survivability

⁵ “un vert agressif [...] dont la présence anormale faisaient peur.”

⁶ “Graines, vert terne, vert brillant, épis. Nulle fleur. Herbes qui n’évoquent rien, sinon la fadeur et l’absence.”

for any life exists, but their flourishing is at odds with that of material culture, including writing. The dictionary written by the author of the names referenced in the book's title becomes another casualty in the long list of disintegrating books in Volodine's corpus, victims of the same disasters that threaten the living beings (radiation in *Terminus radieux*; exposure in *Nuit blanche in Balkhyrie*).

The taiga and the jungle play on the dual significance of plant fertility evoked by Michael Marder in the essay "To Hear Plants Speak." On the one hand, a traditional Freudian interpretation equates plant reproduction with human sexuality and reproduction—the flowers missing from the taiga show the irrelevance of this display in the post-apocalypse. On the other, a perspective highlighted by Georges Bataille focuses on the rot inherent in continued plant life, ubiquitous in Volodine's jungle "coupl[ing] flower symbolism with [...] decay, which, alongside growth and metamorphosis, is proper to plants. His flowers bespeak death, the ever-present shadow and source of meaning for earthly existence, be it vegetal or human" (Marder 110). Rather than being a sign of life, their flourishing is an uneasy *memento mori* for the characters at the center of *Le nom des singes* who do, in the end, nearly all die in the jungle on the way to found a new city.

While the appearance of plants indicates or is perceived as a threat by many characters in Volodine's universe for the reasons already discussed, vegetal life is not the underlying danger. The best example of this misattribution is the fears of the soldier Kronauer, the central character of *Terminus radieux*. Kronauer is originally hesitant to enter the taiga to look for food and water because he associates it with the death of his parents, who fled concentration camps into the forest, never to be seen again (13). But despite this fear of the taiga, it is in the end preferable to the camps, as indeed for Kronauer it is preferable to the tender mercies of the pursuing fascists; it is the lesser of two evils, the greater being human. Kronauer himself does not fall victim as he feared to the dangers of the taiga, but to radiation poisoning from the meltdown of the nuclear reactors installed in this remote location to power human settlements in places that, due to their isolation and climate, are inhospitable to them. The association of these reactors with civilization tempts groups of fleeing soldiers to stay close to them, despite the certain death that spews from them (10).

The taiga harbors another very real danger to Kronauer: the hostility of the shaman Solovieï. The taiga surrounding his *kolkhoze* is dangerous not in itself but as an instrument of the shaman's will: "The old forest is a place belonging to Solovieï. It is the entrance to the world of Solovieï [...] You move in the vegetal darkness, you try to move and to think in order to get out, but in the old forest, you are first and foremost dreamed by Solovieï" (87-8).⁷ It is not only modern industrialized civilization that Volodine portrays as destructive. There is no idealized, autochthonous way of life that serves as a model for returning to nature. Despite his return to ancient magical practices, Solovieï does not demonstrate any more respect for the taiga than did those who filled it with radioactivity. There is no privileged relationship between the forest and Solovieï to make him a kind of

⁷ "La vieille forêt est un endroit qui appartient à Solovieï. C'est l'entrée des mondes de Solovieï [...] On bouge dans les ténèbres végétales, on essaie de bouger et de penser pour en sortir, mais dans la vieille forêt, on est avant tout rêvé par Solovieï."

environmental defender or hero. Rather than having a special regard for the forest and allying himself with it, Solovieï instrumentalizes it as he does everything inside “his” dreamscape around the *kolkhoze* of *Terminus Radieux*. The shaman’s daughter Samiya Schmidt eventually rebels against him for all the wrongs he has done within his little fiefdom of the *kolkhoze* and rebukes him for this instrumentalization. She demands that he “stop entering into her sisters as into territories of lifeless flesh, with no thought or sensitivity” (322).⁸ Solovieï’s spirit enters the bodies of all beings without concern for their autonomy—he instrumentalizes everything, regardless of it being alive or not, plant or animal. The most immediate threat that the taiga poses to Kronauer and others as an instrument of Solovieï is not a function of its own hostility toward humans, but rather of their equal vulnerability and abasement before the hubris of one individual who needs to bend all other beings to his will. The shaman even tries to extend his power beyond that of life and death—he does not allow his villagers to die, and tries (albeit unsuccessfully) to reanimate Vassilissa Mirachvili, Kronauer’s companion in arms, felled by radiation poisoning. After an indeterminate amount of time has passed (centuries? millennia?), Kronauer finds himself free, once more wandering about the forest in the company of Samiya Schmidt:

They had to detour around surfaces where their feet began to be sucked down by. The mud. They feared falling into marshy traps and not being able to get out. From time to time, from under the humus bubbled up muddy water or black oil, or the two disagreeably mixed together. The oil came from former cities that had been covered over, or from former military bases. The taiga had finished by imposing itself over the ruins, it had needed only a few centuries, but industrial pollution remained omnipresent if ghostly, indicating that it would need millennia to disappear. (475)⁹

Even in the distant future, the effects of occupation of the taiga have not been eliminated but have mixed with the dangers of the taiga itself; the forest, having incorporated the cities or military bases, is no longer a refuge from them.

From Discrimination to Intimacy

As a setting, plants are portrayed as a large vegetal mass, rather than as individual beings or even species. They are distinguishable only to the degree that they signal the differences between the taiga, the steppe or the jungle. The knowledge of individual plants, however, functions in Volodine’s work to designate group membership, for better or for worse. This is often tested through knowledge of plant names. In *Le nom des singes*, Golpiez occupies a liminal position as a “Jucapira” whose belonging to the indigenous population is considered imperfect by the other members of an indigenous revolutionary group. When he is exhorted to speak by the “psychiatrist” Gonçalves, the doctor not only

⁸ “Cesser d’entrer dans ses soeurs comme dans des territoires de chair inerte, sans pensée ni sensibilité.”

⁹ “[I]ls devaient contourner des surfaces où leurs pieds commençaient à se faire aspirer par la boue. Ils craignaient de s’aventurer dans des pièges marécageux et de ne pouvoir s’en extraire. Sous l’humus par moments glougloutait de l’eau vaseuse ou de l’huile noire, ou les deux désagréablement mêlées. L’huile venait d’anciennes villes qui avaient été recouvertes ou d’anciennes bases militaires. La taïga avait fini par s’imposer au-dessus des ruines, il n’avait fallu que quelques siècles, mais la pollution industrielle restait omniprésente quoique fantôme, et indiquait qu’elle aurait besoin de millénaires pour disparaître.”

demands that he speak (“Narrez! [10]) but that he name all of the trees and plants that he sees in his memory images using the correct Indian names: “Your vocabulary, Golpiez! Gonçalves cried excitedly, “Your language! You are not the only Indian in the room! We are among Jucapiras!” (17).¹⁰ The stakes of this ability to name plants is even higher in the official interrogations to which Golpiez must submit on pain of torture, the names of plants becoming the Shibboleth by which his authentic indigeneity is tried:

They tested my vocabulary knowledge, showing me the trees that grew beyond the palisade, behind the crocodile pool; they invited me to name the trees with the Auguanie pronunciation, quickly and without making mistakes, and no matter the quality of my performance, there were always one or two Auguanies to say: Jucapiras’ nasals sound like imperialist diphthongs. (37)¹¹

As for Solovieï, there is no privilege of the autochthonous in their relationship to plants. The Auguanies may have many names for plants, but they use these to interrogate another human; the reader does not see them practice any closeness with the plants themselves. They behave like their “imperialist” opponents, the imperialists who operate the oppression of the post-exotic community throughout Volodine’s work.

In *Terminus radieux*, the revolutionary hero-turned-Solovieï-ally Mémé Oudgoul’s test of Kronauer’s ideological soundness includes asking him for the names of plants learned from his scientist wife in order to compare them with the names she herself knew. Kronauer’s answers are somehow unsatisfactory and convince Mémé Oudgoul of his enemy status. As with Solovieï’s magical link to the taiga, the questions arise whether insistence on proper nomenclature represents a close relationship to the plants or to the natural world, and whether knowledge of plant names represents power relative to plants themselves or only to those who do not know the correct names.

The naming of plants or the sharing of that knowledge can, however, be the basis for a more positive or at least inclusive sense of community. Intimacy between individuals can be triangulated through a relationship to the natural world. Golpiez, recounting his relationship to the judge Pomponi (of whose death he is accused in *Le nom des singes*), tells how, “we would walk together in the jungle, in the direction of the Mapiupi ponds. [Pomponi] taught me the names of the trees” (158).¹² Golpiez’s focus is on his personal relationship with the judge (despite the latter’s status as a political enemy), developed over the course of their immersion in the world of the jungle, while his interrogators can only see his imperfect belonging to their faction in his need to be taught the names.

An intimate human relationship reinforced by the cultivation of a relationship to flora also appears in *Terminus radieux*. Kronauer’s internal recitation of the names of the herbs or grasses of the steppe evokes the memory of his dead wife:

¹⁰ “Votre lexique, Golpiez! S’échauffa Gonçalves. Votre langue! Vous n’êtes pas le seul Indien dans la salle! Nous sommes entre Jucapiras!”

¹¹ “On testait mes connaissances de vocabulaire, me montrant les arbres qui poussaient au-delà de la palissade, derrière le bassin aux jacarés, on m’invitait à nommer les arbres avec la prononciation auguanie, à grande vitesse et sans me tromper, et quelle que fût la qualité de ma prestation, il se trouvait toujours un ou deux Auguanies pour dire: Les nasales des Jucapiras ressemblent à des diphtongues impérialistes. »

¹² “Nous marchions ensemble dans la selve, en direction des étangs de Mapiupi. [Pomponi] m’apprenait le nom des arbres.”

She was a member of a scientific team that worked on the nomenclature of non-cultivated grasses and wild herbs in general. Kronauer didn't share this scholarly approach, and he remained forever unable to help her in her complicated classification, but he had learned to see herbs as something other than an anonymous vegetal mass.¹³ (30-1)

His tender relationship with his wife also involves learning to see plants as individual beings as she did—he becomes more empathetic overall, more able to consider the existence and needs of other beings. Rather than just the mass of non-human inanimate green, plants are considered as individuals. This is the first step in an ethical stance that would consider plants in and of themselves, escaping from what critical plant studies considers to be the disease of “plant blindness:”

The inability [...] to discriminate among different kinds of flowers or trees tends to lump the entire plant kingdom under a single perceptual category: a category of things that are alive like we are, but alive in a way that is utterly different, closed off from our capacity for empathy, omnipresent but unknown. (Laist 14)

By learning to distinguish between the different kinds of plants, Kronauer no longer sees them as this alien mass, shutting them out as this “closed off” kingdom. He is able to conceive of them as part of a group and as individual beings, part of the larger post-exotic community. According to Lucas Hollister, the post-exotic is: “a literature that situates itself—or at least tries to situate itself—outside the outside, beyond the exotic as the opposite of the native, beyond the enemy as the opposite of the friend” (215). Kronauer's relationship to plants, through the practice of naming, becomes post-exotic itself, in a sense.

In both *Terminus radieux* and *Le nom des singes*, the recitation or repetition of plant names is also a poetic activity. Lists, catalogs, and dictionaries appear in many of Volodine's works. They give their name to *Le nom des singes* and are considered to constitute a literary genre of their own in *Écrivains*. As with the interrogations, these lists and names do not necessarily communicate any content, and instead serve other functions. For example, Gaspard Turin explains the “negative” functions of Volodine's lists that ‘block’ language or refuse to obey the command of non-communicative speech. However, Turin also points to their ‘positive’ function:

In its positive function, lists are a resurgence of work by the narrative voice on its own memory. To take up L. Ruffel's words, “to make a work of memory and to give oneself over to the task of inventory” are two activities that go together. The technique of survival pairs itself with a litanic mnemonic recitation [...] an oral and direct transmission, from a narrator who would most likely be a storyteller or a rhapsode [...] it is also an exercise of the use of speech, a reference for the beauty of signifiers, pleasure, bliss of the word: to *tekhné* he opposes a *poiësis*. (91)¹⁴

¹³ “Elle était membre d'une équipe scientifique qui travaillait sur la nomenclature des graminées non cultivées et des herbes sauvages en général. Kronauer ne partageait pas avec elle cette approche savante, et il était resté à tout jamais incapable de l'aider dans sa classification compliquée, mais il avait appris à voir les herbes autrement que comme une masse végétale anonyme.”

¹⁴ “Dans sa fonction positive, la liste est une résurgence d'un travail de la voix narrative sur sa propre mémoire. Pour reprendre les propos de L. Ruffel, “faire œuvre de mémoire et se livrer à un devoir d'inventaire” sont deux activités concomitantes. La technique de survie se double d'une mnémotechnique récitation litannique [...] une transmission orale et directe de l'information, d'un narrateur qui serait plutôt conteur ou rhapsode [...] C'est aussi un exercice d'usage de la parole, une révérence à la beauté des signifiants, une jouissance, une volupté du verbe : à la *tekhné* s'oppose une *poiësis*.”

The recitation becomes a practice in itself, in addition to the work of the development of memory. It can reinforce one's own voice and mind in the face of a power that seeks to crush them.

In *Terminus radieux*, recitation has a positive function as a practice of physical joy shared between individuals, as can be seen in Kronauer's relationship to his wife: "He had in mind hundreds of names, lists that he had seen her establish with patience when he lived with her, that he had reread with her, that they had recited together as if they were endless post-exotic litanies" (31).¹⁵ At the same time that learning about individual plants deepens Kronauer's relationships to those plants and to his wife, the list of names becomes a song in which their voices are commingled, which the narrator compares to a litany, a genre that combines both music and prayer, and traditionally takes place among a community united by faith.

The idea of a plant-based litany had already appeared in a 2012 text by Volodine's heteronym Manuela Draeger. *Herbes et golems* is made up of three "shaggås"—a genre invented by Volodine, referring to sets of seven texts, either lists or narratives, accompanied by an introduction. The first and third shaggås in *Herbes et golems* are lists of plants, demonstrating two of the positive functions of listing names. Beyond creating a personal relationship between individuals, the "Shaggå de la voix et des herbes" ["Shaggå of the Voice and of Herbs"] shows how the poetic practice of naming plants creates a larger community of resistance metaphorically linked to a liberty attributed to plants the mselves:

Women here accumulate neologisms and fashion a parallel linguistic community, that only they have the power to roam through and live in. They recite their immense freedom, they tread the paths of words that no shadow has traveled nor could travel. They walk together in total pride. It is for us to take up their strange litanies.¹⁶ (9)

The practice of repetition or performance of this shaggå is one of the few moments of joy and exuberance within the carceral universe of the post-exotic. The women reciters are prisoners, condemned to spend the rest of their lives confined within the physical walls of their cells. And yet the repetition of plant names is a pleasure, not drudgery. The plants represent a place of freedom of movement as well as freedom from threat which allows the women to experience an internal freedom that escapes their interned condition.

Key to this experience of freedom through recitation is its collective nature. The narrative voice, signed not by individuals but by two "collectives" and a "cell" (12), consistently uses the "nous."

More than an act of poetical or political subversion, it was a concentration exercise, a moment of mental gymnastics at once salutary and playful. Leaving to one side what tore us apart elsewhere, we let ourselves be swept along in an agreeable undertaking of fraternal emulation, of collective excitation, at bottom more therapeutic than literary. This

¹⁵ "Il avait en tête des centaines de noms, des listes qu'il l'avait vue établir avec patience quand il vivait avec elle, qu'il l'avait relues avec elle, qu'ils avaient déclamées ensemble comme s'il s'agissait d'interminables litanies post-exotiques."

¹⁶ "[D]es femmes ici accumulent les néologismes et façonnent une communauté langagière parallèle, qu'elles seules ont pouvoir de parcourir et d'habiter. Elles récitent leur immense liberté, elles foulent des chemins de mots que nulle ombre hostile n'a parcourus et ne saurait parcourir. Elles marchent ensemble en pleine fierté. À nous de reprendre leurs litanies étranges."

excitation comforted us at the same time that it revived in us the visions of the steppe.
(10)¹⁷

The relationship described here is not of an individual self to another individual, but of each member of the group with all others, the experience of being part of a whole. And the movement of repetition reinforces the kinship among the members of the community. It turns them toward the condition of possibility for the establishment of a community not based on ethnic or ideological lines, but rather on the occupation of a common space and a common experience of destruction or degradation of that space: “The steppe, the deserted prairie, the monotony of the high plateaus, the hills crushed by the sky are the point of departure and of arrival of our freedom, of our solitude and of our dreamlike solidarity with the difficultly red planet and its living dead population” (10).¹⁸ Unlike lists of plants previously discussed, the collective narrative voice refers not only to the independent existence of the plants, but also to the situated existence of those plants as part of a shared environment and as victims of a common environmental disaster. The steppe, with its sparse distribution of humans and animals in among other species, is the state of equilibrium and freedom from which the human “horde” [“hoard”] or “foule” [“crowd”] (10) spread and to which it returns, but with its biological resources diminished. The idea that freedom would be envisioned as a steppe and not, for example, a meadow or field, gestures toward the idea that freedom is not the same thing as ease of life, that even in their dreams survival is a struggle alongside other forms of life.

Inventing Plant Writing

The status of the plant names in the “Shaggâ des voix et des herbes” is, however, purely and self-consciously literary, without reference to the real world: “The actresses are real but already dead the herbs are living but imaginary [...] We are giving voice to those who have lost it, we give sap to those no one has known [...] Women speak the prairie and multiply here inventions and neologisms”¹⁹ (11-2). The self-conscious nature of the fabulated names serves as a placeholder for the plants with which these women have no contact in prison. They elaborate a space that may be occupied by plants, but do not presume how that will actually take place. The pronoun “celles” can be taken to represent both actresses and plants, who equally need voice, sap, and recognition. “Sève” is both a plant’s sap and, metaphorically, lifeblood, further blurring the line between plants and actresses. This parallel between the actresses and plants shows how those who

¹⁷ “Plus qu’un acte de subversion poétique ou politique, c’était un exercice de concentration, un moment de gymnastique mentale à la fois salutaire et ludique. Laisant de côté ce qui ailleurs nous déchirait, nous nous laissions entraîner dans une agréable entreprise d’émulation fraternelle, d’excitation collective, au fond plus thérapeutique que littéraire. Cette excitation nous soulageait en même temps qu’elle ranimait en nous les visions de la steppe infinie.”

¹⁸ “La steppe, la prairie déserte, la monotonie des hauts plateaux, les collines écrasées de ciel sont le point de départ et d’arrivée de notre liberté, de notre solitude et de notre solidarité onirique avec la planète difficilement rouge et ses populations morts-vivantes.”

¹⁹ “Les actrices sont réelles mais déjà mortes, les herbes sont vivantes mais imaginaires [...] Nous redonnons voix à celles qui l’ont perdue, nous donnons sève à celles que nulle n’a connues [...] Des femmes disent la prairie et multiplient ici inventions et néologismes.”

are silenced (those who have lost their voice) and those who have never been recognized (those that no one has known) are victims of the concentrationary dynamic that would try to erase them. By giving a voice and names to women and plants, they give them a place in writing that they can come to occupy.

The stakes of naming anything, as a general practice, are discussed throughout the post-exotic oeuvre, often within the context of lists. To what extent does using something's name involve any knowledge or consideration of it? Another version of this question can be found in one of Volodine's early works, *Lisbonne dernière marge* ["Lisbon Final Margin"]:

She was amused by these linguados, peixes-séparas, solhas, tamboris, espadartis, pescadas that paraded in front of Kurt's eyes without awakening in his mind anything but a vague picture with blurred outlines, a lone image of anonymous fish scarcely living or scarcely dead and deprived, in spite of its flagrant reality, of all reality [...] 'Essay topic,' she said. 'Does the meticulous enumeration of the individuals of a given species favorize or impede the identification of that species?' (151)²⁰

We can consider the whole of the post-exotic, and particularly the development of the shaggå as a genre, as an experimental answer to this prompt. The "anonymous" status of fish in the above quote seems to confirm that without a name, there is no reality, no physical definition of a being's boundaries, no life or death. However, the enumerations present in the post-exotic give a physical and material place (within the literature) for challenging identification of a "given" species, blurring the lines between traditional generic distinctions as in the "Shaggå de la voix et des herbes," where the distinction between actresses and plants is troubled. This enumeration may not help to identify a *given* species, but it provides a new space to the individual members who may reconstitute themselves in new categories.

The third shaggå of *Herbes et golems*, "Shaggå de la révolte des humbles simples" ["Shaggå of the Revolt of the Humble Simples"] by Manuela Draeger directly addresses the issue of naming as domination and invention, and the need for new names and categories. The introduction to this text claims to be a "Communiqué du comité de soutien aux ivraies" ["Commiqué of the Committee of Support for Weeds"] (71). This document explains how exactly the committee intends to support the "ivraies," a category narrower than that of the "herbes" of the book title and that designates those plants not useful for human purposes. The expression "séparer le bon grain de l'ivraie" is the equivalent of "separating the wheat from the chaff" where the (morally) good is what is useful, what serves us, and the bad that which we cannot use. It is the latter that the committee supports, giving itself the following tasks:

Inventory their innumerable denominations in an accessible and popular language that stands without concession against the enemy's Latin, against the enemy's churches' Latin, the enemy's agricultural dictionaries [...] respects all herbs without distinction without establishing any hierarchy whatsoever between them, without proceeding to a classification of any order that might be, and, in particular, it refuses to divide them into

²⁰ "[E]lle s'amusait à ces linguados, peixes-séparas, solhas, tamboris, espadartis, pescadas, qui défilait sous les yeux de Kurt sans éveiller dans son esprit autre chose qu'une vague image aux contours flous, une unique image de poisson anonyme, à peine vivant où à peine morte et privé, en dépit de sa réalité flagrante, de toute réalité [...] Sujet de dissertation, fit-elle. L'énumération méticuleuse des individus d'une espèce donnée, favorise-t-elle ou contrarie-t-elle l'identification de cette espèce ?"

vegetables consumable and non consumable, fodder or not fodder, useful to herds and shepherds or not, poisonous or not. (75)²¹

The new kind of list proposed by the “Comité de soutien” has two functions: first, to give all who read or recite the names equal access to the same information by articulating them in common language. Once there are words in the language of the common people to identify plants, they have the same ability to distinguish, as Kronauer did, between the members of an “anonymous vegetal mass.” The names of plants can no longer be used as a tool of mastery or mystification among different classes of people—church, science, and farms do not have privileged access to plant knowledge, and this knowledge cannot be used to distinguish between people who know and people who don’t (i.e. when Kronauer didn’t know the same names of plants as Mémé Oudgoul). Second, the new kind of list changes the attitude of those referring to the plants themselves. The naming conventions of the “enemy,” in addition to the previous uses of lists as a tool of domination over those who are forced to recite them, participate in what Lucas Hollister refers to as a practice of: “[S]ymbolic violence, the violence involved in naming and localizing something in a system of meaning. From this perspective, all of Volodine’s fictions could be read as an extended reflection on the ways in which, to borrow Nancy’s formula, “naming equals domination” (2016, 45) (217). The old categories refer to plants only in terms of their usefulness to humans, as if they existed for us rather than as independent beings with networks of relationships that go beyond their use.

While the names of the plants in the “Révolte des humbles simples” are not those with which readers are familiar, they represent the network of plants living in the post-exotic world. The question is no longer “what can it do for/to me?” Draeger breaks down the system of binaries condemned by the *comité*, and creates a new, more qualitative system of classification, asking rather: “what is its relationship to the world around it, to the passage of time?” The new system of classification presented in this text includes categories such as “Herbes qui frémissent sous la lune” [“Herbs/grasses that tremble beneath the moon”] (81) and “Herbes qui restent droites face au vent” [“Herbs/grasses that remain standing before the wind”] (93). Any reference to these plants must in this text refer to the way they interact with the space around them, to their own behaviors. This kind of a relationship to plants recalls the theories and practices of botanist and writer Gilles Clément. In his *Éloge des vagabondes* [*In Praise of Vagabonds*], Clément catalogues the movement of plants and their seeds around the world both with or without human vectors, what they have or have not been used for in the past. In addition, Clément reveals how our vision of where plants should or should not be and whether they are desirable or “pests” have nothing to do with the flourishing of the plant itself or its real impact on the environment (loc 53). Such knowledge can be culturally relative or even

²¹ “[R]ecenser leur dénominations innombrables, dans une langue accessible et populaire qui sans concession s’oppose au latin de l’ennemi, au latin des églises de l’ennemi, des dictionnaires agricoles de l’ennemi [...] respecte toutes les herbes sans distinction, sans établir entre elles une quelconque hiérarchie, sans procéder à un classement de quelque ordre qu’il puisse être, et, en particulier, il refuse de les diviser en végétaux consommables et non consommables, fourragers ou non, utiles aux troupeaux et aux pâtres ou non, vénéneux ou non.”

arbitrary, and leads to attempts to eradicate species for human benefit—or in the name of the idea of diversity of which some humans are the arbiters, for the benefit of beings higher on the scale that a subset of humans has established.

Eliminating a hierarchical relationship to plants means respecting the space occupied by them. But this does not mean creating conservation groups or laws to protect specific plant species. Both Clément and the committee members in *Herbes et golems* are extremely critical of such practices that reinforce the human/nature binary when it is the former who decide which plants are worthy of conservation. Moreover, conservation groups are often allied with those whose desire is to preserve their own cultural group's relationship to the natural world at the expense of the flourishing of the organisms adapted to their biome. As Clément explains:

Such a project [...] finds unexpected allies: ecological radicals, those holding onto nostalgia; nothing should change, diversity depends on it [...] I observe life in its dynamics. With its normal rate or immortality. I don't judge but I support energies susceptible to invent new situations.²² (loc 42)

Similarly, in *Herbes et golems*, the “communiqué” establishes the “comité du soutien aux ivraies”'s resistance to traditional forms of environmentalism:

The community of support for weeds shows no sympathy for such and such organization linked to safeguarding official or tamed plants, and even the preservation of plants from seed stores or from offices of agronomy or from gardening. These organizations, all clearly complicit in commercial or farming systems that are attentive exclusively to the interests of featherless two-feet, leave the community indifferent.²³ (Draeger 79)

Clément proposes the idea of a “jardin planétaire” [planetary garden] which allows the free movement of “vagabond” plants to participate in the “brassage planétaire” [planetary mixing] which promotes new combinations of plant life to the extent that they can live in a given biome—climate being the only limiting factor to their vagabond activity. The “Comité de soutien” expresses an unsurprisingly more radical position, proposing to physically keep exploitative humans out of the area occupied by the weeds, with violence if necessary. This could be considered the logical end to a refusal to hierarchize the value of different kinds of life. However, as with any political ideology—the foundation of the Second Soviet Union or the “Bolsheviks” who appear throughout Volodine's work as sympathetic but ultimately pathetic figures—adherence to that ideology at the expense of community, at the expense of a “morale prolétarienne,” contains within it the seeds of its own destruction.²⁴ By shutting themselves off from plants, the *comité* limits the

²² “Un tel projet [...] trouve des alliés inattendus : les radicaux de l'écologie, les tenants de la nostalgie. Rien ne doit changer, notre passé en dépend disent les uns ; rien ne doit changer, la diversité en dépend disent les autres [...] J'observe la vie dans sa dynamique. Avec son taux ordinaire d'amoralité. Je ne juge pas mais je prends parti en faveur des énergies susceptibles d'inventer des situations nouvelles.”

²³ “Le comité de soutien aux ivraies ne manifeste aucune sympathie pour telle ou telle organisation liée à la sauvegarde de végétaux officiels ou domptés, et même à la préservation de plantes venues de graineteries ou d'officines d'agronomie ou de jardinage. Ces organisations, toutes clairement complices de systèmes commerciaux ou fermiers qui restent à l'écoute exclusive des intérêts des deux pieds sans plumes, indiffèrent le comité.”

²⁴ Volodine even pokes fun at the idea of post-exoticism itself as an ideology in *Terminus radieux*, when Kronauer gets exhausted with reading militant post-exotic writers and starts asking for novels by authors like Jack London.

possibilities of forming the community imagined in the “Shaggâ de la voix et des herbes.” The violence the *comité* threatens in defense of plants turns against them, in that it is also violence towards the creative possibilities of such a community, including both human and plants.

Vegetal and/as post-exotic community

Multiple critics have pointed out that Volodine’s work expresses both the failure of human attempts thus far to create political communities and the potential of an expanded view of community in the post-exotic.²⁵ And this widened view of community is the basis for an optimism for life, the “*espérance formidable*” of which Volodine speaks in the interview cited at the beginning of this article. In this same interview, Volodine describes the ethics of this community as the following: “The best perhaps of humanity, that is: abnegation, heroism, brotherhood, assistance of the other [...] proletarian morality [...] a morality of the individual who puts himself at the service of others” (11:23).²⁶ Part of the self-denial and fraternity to which Volodine is referring here is the ability to understand one’s own insignificance, to become part of the community. Kronauer is the central character of *Terminus radieux*, but he is not a hero in any traditional sense. He does not manage to defeat Solovieï permanently, or save Vassilissa Marachvili, and he does not even have the distinction of a tragic death, as he must wander the taiga eternally in a sort of half-life. But he maintains throughout the book a solidarity with his comrades and with Solovieï’s daughters.

The “*morale prolétarienne*” can also be thought of in terms of what Volodine calls the “*untermensch*,” a category including exploited groups such as ethnic minorities, women, children, and animals. The *untermenschen* are in need of the individual’s “service.” This “*morale prolétarienne*” cannot be read in a strictly anti-capitalist sense. The blame for the damage that has occurred in *Terminus radieux* cannot be laid at the feet of capitalism as a whole, or even of the fascists who have won the last war. The nuclear meltdown that contaminated the taiga has happened on the watch of the Second Soviet Union. While corrupt industrialists and government officials are a force for exploitation in some places (i.e. *Songes de Mevlido*, *Rituel du mépris*), elsewhere this position is occupied by bandits (i.e. *Terminus radieux*, *Frères sorcières* [“Brother Witches”]) or even a shaman (*Terminus radieux*). The “*morale prolétarienne*” is above all this “*morale de l’individu*,” a personal ethical relationship to all other members of this community (it is in the service of “others” and not “the Other”). It is individual rather than class-based (as the word “proletarian” might suggest); however, it is not individualist, as self-denial allows one to become part of the greater community, of the polyphony of post-exotic voices. This polyphony includes the voices of its writers, who are always both one voice

²⁵ See Rémi Astruc, pp 63-4; Sabrinelle Bedrane, Susannah Mary Ellis; Christophe Meuret; Pierre Ouellet; Dominique Viart. Not all of these are in agreement, however, on the nature of that community going forward, nor on the likelihood of its survival.

²⁶ “[L]e meilleur peut-être de l’humanité, c’est-à-dire l’abnégation, l’héroïsme, la fraternité, l’assistance à l’autre [...] la morale prolétarienne [...] une morale de l’individu qui se met au service des autres.”

among many and many voices associated with the one individual man who presents himself as Volodine.

When members of the community are nonhuman, the individual must take their interest into account as well as adopt a larger view of what constitutes that interest. But is it not presumptuous to think that humans might have any grasp of a plant's interest? How can one go beyond the dedication to conservation of the organization rejected by the *comité*, what Michael Marder calls "irreducible to the instrumental rationale behind efforts to protect biodiversity and enhance conservation" (Marder 2013, 180)? When the "Comité de soutien aux ivraies" speaks, how can it be sure of supporting them and not just satisfying some urge either to be purely contrary for its own sake or for the sake of some self-satisfaction at being more ethical than some other group or committee? Deciphering plants' interest has the added degree of difficulty that plants do not provide a face, do not lend themselves to anthropomorphizing empathy the way that (some) animals do, and so the question of plant language occupies much attention in the field of plant studies, including those cited earlier. Luce Irigaray claims in fact that plants communicate a shared claim to space, a community of different kinds of beings that humans, as a species, have forgotten:

We grew up in the midst of a living world that introduced us to universal exchanges and sharing in life. Then, sharing in the vegetal world was quite natural. We did not exist without communicating, in a way being in communion with it. And this was so immediate, simple, and going without saying that we did not ponder over what was passed on to us and so participated in our existence. (126)

Respect of plants' occupation of space and ability to grow is not, then, merely the dictates of paternalism towards the botanical world, nor a cynical anti-humanist desire that privileges plant life above the human. Rather, it allows the post-exotic community to develop and preserve a sense of itself from an early stage, and to learn to share the same space among beings whose language is radically different. Such a new community must be attentive to the expression of the occupation of that space, the right to take up that space. As Marder argues, plants' articulated growth can be considered their form of language:

It is one of those rare locutions that combines—indeed, articulates—the ideal and the material strata of language, uniting the Cartesian *res cogitans* and *res extensa* [...] as they proliferate by means of modular growth, reiterating their already-existing morphological units, breaking out in all directions, they reaffirm vegetal being, which, through them, becomes more spatially persuasive. (Marder 2017, 119-20)

Volodine's universe is one in which a battle is perpetually being waged: for the ability to continue to exist, to take up space and to maintain coherent subjective boundaries against physical or psychological violence while still participating in the life of the community, a project that cannot be successful if it considers only humans, or even all animal life. The fear expressed by his characters towards their environment, indicated in the first section of this article, shows how powerful the resistance can be towards the right of plants to occupy space. This is seen as threatening to the existence of its human characters, who fear that such domination of space means domination of its other occupants. The construction of the post-exotic universe, however, allows plants to take up space, to grow

as a constitutive part of the community, worthy of consideration, and affirming their existence against those who wish to deny it. They themselves create a structure based on their interactions with each other and their environment mirrored in these shaggås, a genre that is itself collaborative and structured, making a space in post-exotic writing for plants to occupy. Conversely, this structured interrelation, this elaboration of a language other than that of the oppressor, provides a model for post-exotic language itself.

Submission received 16 May 2019

Revised version accepted 16 July 2019

Works Cited

- Astruc, Rémi. "La satire 'post-exotique' et la possibilité contemporaine de l'engagement." *Satire socio-politique et engagement: Dans la fiction contemporaine*, edited by Annette Shahar, Peter Lang, 2013, pp. 59–74.
- Bedrane, Sabrinelle. "L'engagement politique d'Antoine Volodine: Le communisme de la parole." *L'exception et la France contemporaine histoire, imaginaire, littérature*, edited by Marc Dambre and Richard J. Golsan, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010, pp. 181–192.
- Clément, Gilles. *Éloge des vagabondes: Herbes, arbres et fleurs à la conquête du monde*. Robert Laffont, 2014. Amazon Epub.
- Bertina, Arno. "L'animal humilié, l'homme escamoté." *Volodine, etc.: Post-exotisme, poétique, politique: Colloque de Cerisy*, edited by Frédérik Detue and Lionel Ruffel, Classiques Garnier, 2013, pp. 283–286.
- Draeger, Manuela. *Herbes et golems*. Olivier, 2012.
- Ellis, Susannah Mary. "Rewriting Community for a Posthuman Age in the Works of Antoine Volodine, Michel Houellebecq, and Maurice G. Dantec." Oxford University Research Archive, Oxford University, 2015, ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:270b1582-f9a3-4d1a-a16a-13aab278ac2d.
- Laist, Randy. "Introduction." *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, ed. Randy Laist, Editions Rodopi, 2013, pp. 9-18.
- Librairie Mollat. "Antoine Volodine - Terminus Radieux." YouTube, YouTube, 24 Nov. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wystdZmsFac&t=200s.
- Hollister, Lucas. *Beyond Return: Genre and Cultural Politics in Contemporary French Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2019.
- Irigaray, Luce. "What the Vegetal World Says to Us." *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*. Edited by Monica Gagliano et al., University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 126–135.
- Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: a Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- . "To Hear Plants Speak." *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Gagliano, et al. U of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 103-125.
- Meurée, Christophe. 2014. *Fictions de la communauté et communautés de la fiction: Antoine Volodine*. Conference hosted by Figura, Centre de recherche sur le texte et

- l'imaginaire. Montréal, Université du Québec à Montréal, 19 septembre 2014. Document audio. Available online: l'Observatoire de l'imaginaire contemporain. Accessed on June 25, 2019.
- Moncion, Isabelle. "Antoine Volodine et ses hétéronymes, ou Comment constituer à soi seul une communauté d'écrivains." UO Research, Université d'Ottawa, 2015, ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/31990.
- Ouellet, Pierre. "La communauté des autres. La polynarration de l'Histoire chez Volodine." *Identités narratives: Mémoire et perception*, edited by Pierre Ouellet et al., Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2002, pp. 69–84.
- . "Poétique de l'être-contre: Portrait en négatif de la communauté post-exotique." *Volodine, etc.: Post-exotisme, poétique, politique*, edited by Frédéric Détue and Lionel Ruffel, Classiques Garnier, 2013, pp. 318–321.
- Rebollar, Patrick. "Onirologie post-exotique." *Volodine, etc.: Post-exotisme, poétique, politique: Colloque de Cerisy*, edited by Frédéric Détue and Lionel Ruffel, Classiques Garnier, 2013, pp. 177–194.
- Reuber, Alexandra. "À la recherche de l'identité dans Alto Solo d'Antoine Volodine." *Études françaises*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2010, pp. 137-152.
- Ruffel, Lionel. "Interrogation: A Post-Exotic Device." *SubStance*, Translated by Laura Balladur, vol. 32, no. 2, 2003, pp. 79–94.
- . *Volodine post-exotique*. Cécile Defaut, 2007.
- Turin, Gaspard, "La stratégie du silence dans l'oeuvre d'Antoine Volodine." *Volodine, etc.: Post-exotisme, poétique, politique: Colloque de Cerisy*, edited by Frédéric Détue and Lionel Ruffel., Classiques Garnier, 2013, pp. 85–100.
- Viart, Dominique. "Solitudes, similitudes: Topiques contemporaines de la singularité." *Nuove solitudini: Mutamenti delle relazioni nell'ultima narrativa francese*, edited by Matteo Majorano, Quodlibet, 2012, pp. 33–47.
- Volodine, Antoine. *Rituel du mépris*. Denoël, 1986.
- . *Lisbonne dernière marge*. Minuit, 1990.
- . *Le nom des singes*. Minuit, 1994.
- . *Nuit blanche en Balkhyrie*. Gallimard, 1997.
- . *Nos animaux préférés: entrevoûtes*. Seuil, 2006.
- . *Songes de Mevlido*. Seuil, 2007.
- . *Le port intérieur*. Minuit, 2010.
- . *Écrivains*. Seuil, 2010.
- . *Terminus radieux: Roman*. Seuil, 2014.
- . *Frères sorcières*. Seuil, 2019.
- Wagner, Jean-Didier, et al. "Let's Take That From the Beginning Again." *SubStance*, Vol. 32, No. 2, no. 101: Contemporary Novelist Antoine Volodine, 2003, pp. 12–43.