

## Contents

1. Etat des lieux (Introduction) 1
  2. Jean-Philippe Toussaint: Reticent Narratives 24
  3. Eric Chevillard: Building Babel 62
  4. Marie Redonnet: The Mourning After 106
  5. Antoine Volodine: Inside Wars 144
  6. François Bon: Grueling Prognostications 188
  7. Vague Becomings: Strategies of Fuzziness  
in Twenty-first-Century Fiction (Conclusion) 233
- Notes 245
- Bibliography 265
- Index 305

## I. Etat des lieux (Introduction)

### Inventory

We live in an age of cultural and ideological vacuity. This truism is being repeated ad nauseam from the right and the left, describing in turn the much mediatized death of the ideologies, the McDonaldization of the culture industry, the photos of Robert Mapplethorpe, the novels of Salman Rushdie, those of Barbara Cartland, the homogeneous banality of television, pornography, the Internet, the rise of sects and fundamentalisms, the godlessness of secular societies, censorship, the lack of censorship, and on. Unfortunately this winter of discontent has not spared the field of literature, in France or elsewhere. Indeed, for a number of critics, after centuries of literary progress, stretching from the Ur-novels of Rabelais to the formal deconstructions of the New Novel, the end of French fiction is at hand, as if “a crisis of economic and social structures engendered, *mutatis mutandis*, an analogous crisis in the various domains of aesthetics.”<sup>1</sup> Pursuing what Josiane Savigneau called “French detestation,” Jean-Marie Domenach, editor of *Esprit*, who heralded the coming of the New Novel in 1958, now warns of an impending doomsday for French literature, of the reign of the useless, the gaudy, and the meaningless.<sup>2</sup> Exeunt *les belles lettres*, enter the postmodern. For his part Maurice Nadeau

---

presents the new generation of French writers in the following terms: “After the terror comes the reaction. Which is to say ‘the return to . . .’ which seems like a return to freedom. Return to history, return to stories, return to the subject (after the description of so many objects), return to ‘creation,’ return to the ‘oeuvre,’ return to characters, to plot, to narrative.”<sup>3</sup> Today for Pierre Michon we are witnessing the return of “non-literature on the very turf of the literary,”<sup>4</sup> for the return to plot and subject signals a reactionary attack on the values of the previous avant-garde, and in particular on the theories of the sign and text articulated by Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, and Jacques Derrida. This indictment of post-modernism’s hedonistic and relativistic tendencies, and subsequent critique of today’s perceived individualism and political vacuity, fall within the frame of an overall belief in the messianic nature of art in general and literature in particular. Against the cultural logic of consumer capitalism a familiar rhetoric of art as salvation has yet again flourished in artistic and academic circles, to the right and left of the political spectrum, from Sollers to Pierre Bourdieu, giving a new life to Matthew Arnold’s definition of culture as the best that has been thought and known.

Yet for all the prophesying of the naysayers one would be ill advised to judge today’s texts by yesterday’s standards, blaming their design for our inadequacy of perception, or to overlook the embattled position of the avant-garde in today’s cultural institutions. According to François Rosset: “Right now the mass media take up the field and speak *for* literature and *on* literature (the media as part of an economic circuit that includes announcers and distributors and implies notions of immediate economic return, an audience, a preformatted public, etc.). One may denounce the arrogance of the avant-gardes, their histrionics or vacuity, but the powers-that-be, under which literature toils today, are far deadlier.”<sup>5</sup> Caught in the nefarious dynamics of the mediatization of literature, writers must now vie for their five minutes of fame on television, without which their books have little chance of existing. But the game is not without risks. In *Sur la télévision* Bourdieu rails that not only

does television act as a mediumnic opium for the masses, but it has also gained an almost complete monopoly with regards to deciding the cultural agenda, thus becoming the supreme arbiter in the marketplace of intellectual values. Arguing for the autonomy of the domains of cultural production and against the heteronomy of “made-for-TV” intellectuals and philosophers (“essay writers, journalist-writers, traditionalist novelists”), Bourdieu warns that heteronomy—that is, the crossing-over of spurious scientists, politicians, and writers to the small screen—constitutes nothing less than “collaboration,” a grave accusation in the postwar political and cultural environment.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for Bourdieu the isotopic configurations of this “collaboration” can only turn the intellectual debate into a media circus, a Babel-like maze of discourses that eventually cancel one another out, in the manner of today’s political shows, where what seems to matter most is not so much whether issues are being resolved, but that a certain level of noise (both literal and semantic) is generated.

Bourdieu’s contention that television is both antidemocratic and culturally insipid is part of a widespread critique of the electronic mass media. In his cynical opus *La télévision* Jean-Philippe Tousseint joins the anti-TV chorus by casting doubt upon TV’s greatest claim, that it can accurately represent reality. “If artists represent reality in their works,” the narrator muses, “it is to embrace the world and capture its essence, whereas television, if it represents the world, does so by mistake, . . . through mere technical determinism, through incontinence.” And yet even if the narrator of *La télévision* is all too aware of the trite illusionist nature of television, of its *incontinence*, as he so eloquently puts it, he cannot help but watch it for hours on end, drifting into a state of apathy and exhaustion.<sup>7</sup> For him, as for the “journalist-philosophers” of Bourdieu, television looms large on the horizon, like a mediational white whale for retinally sensitive Ahabs.

If this were not enough, authors who resist the lure of the small screen—when they don’t answer the siren call of the big screen, à la Bernard-Henri Levy—find themselves caught between a rock

and a hard place, for the state of publishing seems equally grim. Indeed, today's frantic mercantilization of art has dispelled any illusion as to the immediate future of literature. Small publishing houses more than ever tarry under the pressure of bigger houses, and bookstores that may have carried obscure experimental literature are being ground down by the bookstore chain FNAC and other major groups (e.g., Amazon.fr, BOP.com). Without the moral caution of Canal+ (or the attribution of a major literary prize, like the Goncourt or the Fémina), a book today has very little chance of seeing the light of day or remaining on bookstore shelves more than a few weeks. But even media coverage (should it happen) may not allow authors to be financially self-supporting. The late Jérôme Lindon, founder and former director of Editions de Minuit, put the financial break-even point for authors at ten thousand copies. Below that writers must rely on other sources of income or apply for one of a number of writing fellowships, like the Médicis. In a way today's writers find themselves in a position more similar to that of seventeenth-century artists, whose work was commissioned by the king, than that of their nineteenth-century peers, who were more financially independent. In the face of such pressure, in the absence of more consequential support from critical journals, and due to the plethora of texts that come out each year and the ever-slimmer chances of media coverage, it should not be surprising that writers now favor more adumbrative types of radicalism than did former avant-gardes. Indeed, there were sixty daily or weekly newspapers for every one hundred novels published each year before World War II, compared to a dozen or so newspapers for three to four hundred novels published per year now.<sup>8</sup>

Of course a century ago artists and writers were in a situation not completely unlike this one. As Manet, Flaubert, and Baudelaire were struggling with the predicament of censorship and the misgivings of the general public, the likes of Octave Feuillet and Jacques Offenbach were producing bestsellers and filling theaters to capacity. And yet the avant-garde still went on to revolutionize aesthetics and become a cardinal part of the cultural capital, from

academia to the art market. “This will kill that” (*Ceci tuera cela*), Archdeacon Frolo—who had not read Marshall McLuhan—may have forewarned in *Notre Dame de Paris*, arguing that the new cultural commodity (literature) would replace the old (architecture, and in this case religious architecture). Yet to this day architecture still plays a significant—albeit diminished—role in the elaboration of cultural values, from the modernist Eiffel Tower to the ostentatiously postmodern structures of Disneyland and Las Vegas. Likewise the current fears brought about by the development of the Internet sound like yet further McLuhanian doomsday predictions. But despite the warning signs emanating from some quarters, to this day nothing permits us to say that the computer, or the Internet, or both, will sound the death knell of the Gutenberg galaxy. Rather, the Internet has provided a number of new outlets for young or established artists, some of whom run their own sites (François Bon, for instance) and some of whom are published online, like Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, and Yann Quéfellec on oohoo.com, or Jacques Séréna, Alina Reyes, and François Bon on the Web site Inventaire/Invention.

Yet another element belies the idea that today’s literature has forsaken avant-gardism and fallen into some postmodern consumer zero-consciousness. Throughout the nineteenth century up until the 1970s literary history was defined in Darwinian terms, best illustrated by the *Lagarde & Michard* manual, as the evolution, or progress, of novelistic forms extending from Cervantes to degree-zero writing (Barthes). But today’s writers do not necessarily write “after” Robbe-Grillet, or “after” Sollers; they might rather write “like” Cervantes, Faulkner, and Proust, without being concerned by anachrony. For Ursula Heise the postmodern has allowed us “to articulate the past and present not in terms of sequentiality, but in an often deliberately paradoxical and self-contradictory simultaneity.”<sup>9</sup> Speaking of the new generation, Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens, director of Editions POL, argues that it has achieved “the project of the previous generation, that of a literature in movement that got rid of its yoke. They [today’s writers]

---

no longer must stage their position based on specific intellectual currents.” He adds: “They are part of them. The time is about tolerance, about the opening out of individualities, about freedom of form, with the following caveat, whereby ‘all things are equal’ against which one must fight.”<sup>10</sup>

The problem here is one of designation: how does avant-garde literature define itself? For the most part it does not. Most writers today shun association and *embrigadement*, and the few ephemeral movements that surface now and again are the result of promotional campaigns rather than the efforts of authors themselves. Thus when Minuit’s editor-in-chief, Jérôme Lindon, launched an advertising campaign around a literature of “impassivity,” featuring Minuit writers Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Jean Echenoz, Christian Gailly, and Christian Oster, he did so more with marketability in mind than with the intention of establishing new critical or literary paradigms. (Incidentally, a few decades earlier Lindon and Robbe-Grillet invented the New Novel for much the same reason.) In the same vein it was Editions J’ai Lu that brought readers an unfussy “New Generation” (Nouvelle Génération), and not literary critics, rounding up their own motley collection of young Turks, like the scandalous and mediatic Virginie Despentes, but also the trashy Medhi Belhaj Kacem (better known as MBK) and hopefuls Eric Faye, Eric Holder, Michel Houellebecq, Lorette Nobécourt, and Vincent Ravalec. In 1998, not wanting to be left out, NRF christened its happenstance collection of minimalists the “Less than Nothing” (Moins que rien); the group included Philippe Delerm, Gil Jouanard, Eric Holder, Jean-Pierre Ostende, Pierre Autin-Grenier, and François de Cornière. Michel Houellebecq, the much decried author of *Les particules élémentaires*, found himself expelled from Perpendiculaire, a hyperrealist movement centered around a journal of the same name (created in 1995), which consisted of Nicolas Bourriaud, Christophe Duchatelet, Jean-Yves Jouannais, Jacques-François Marchandise, Laurent Quintreau, and Christophe Kihm. Others, like François Coupry, Patrick Carré, Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud, Hubert Haddad, Jean Lévi,