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THE NAME IN EVIDENCE: RICHARD MILLET'S *LE RENARD DANS LE NOM*

Le Renard dans le nom was published in 2003, and bears the indication *récit* on the title-page.[1] It was composed during a pause in the writing of *Ma vie parmi les ombres*, which is the final work in a cycle of five novels that Richard Millet published between 1995 and 2003. One reason why these novels seem a fictional whole is that, like *Le Renard dans le nom*, they are set in the imaginary village of Siom in the Limousin region of central France.[2] Linked by time (the twentieth century) and space (Siom and the Millevaches plateau), each novel tells the story of one single, central family, although the novels are further linked to each other by the Balzacian procedure of having main and secondary characters reappearing, generally fleetingly, in other novels of the cycle. Like Balzac, too, Millet's narrator sees himself as the secretary, the scribe taking down a world in his writing: 'J'étais peut-être appelé à me faire le porte-parole, le scribe, plutôt, de ces vies sans éclat, silencieuses, banales, invisibles, souvent tragiques.'[3] The world of Siom, however, is dying if not dead, 'une communauté qui ne voulait pas voir qu'elle était entrée dans sa propre mort' (*RN*, p. 71), and Millet's texts are consequently, at one level, a threnody for Siom and, through Siom, for the lost civilization of rural France. Yet the Siom novels are not nostalgic: the tiny village lost among the hills and the cold and the winds of the Corrèze is a foundry producing fictions very much of the twenty-first century. One way to approach this is to say that Siom is double: there is the open, visible part inhabited by the village's few remaining

[1] Richard Millet, *Le Renard dans le nom* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003). References are to the Folio edition of 2004 and are given in the body of the text in parentheses identified by the abbreviation *RN*. The critical literature on *Le Renard* is scant. The first of the two monographs devoted to Millet's work, Syliane Coyault-Dublanchet, *La Province en héritage: Pierre Michon, Pierre Bergounioux, Richard Millet* (Geneva: Droz, 2002), appeared before the publication of *Le Renard*, and the second, Jean-Yves Laurichesse, *L'Invention du pays* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), considers *Le Renard* only briefly to summarize it (pp. 236–38). In his absorbing study 'Un "né de goupil"', in *Richard Millet: la langue du roman*, ed. by Christian Morzewski (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2008), pp. 147–57, Sjef Houppermans interprets the story of Pierre-Marie Lavolps in the light of the anthropological and psychoanalytical structure of the scapegoat. In his chapter on *Le Renard* in *Itinéraires du roman contemporain* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006) pp. 131–47, Roger Godard also sees Pierre-Marie as a scapegoat: he sees him as an innocent handicapped child, victim of a society that maintains its order at the cost of his life. However, his analysis pays scant attention to the complexities of Millet's text.

[2] The cycle began with *La Gloire des Pythre* (Paris: POL, 1995), continued with *L'Amour des trois sœurs Piale* (Paris: POL, 1997), *Lauve le pur* (Paris: POL, 2000), and *La Voix d'alto* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), to conclude with *Ma vie parmi les ombres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003). It might appear misleading to refer to these novels as a completed cycle of Siom novels, given that Siom continues to feature in Millet's fiction. However, in the fiction since 2003, Siom features more as a backdrop for lives that have begun or will end elsewhere than the milieu which shapes lives completely held within its ambit.

[3] *Ma vie parmi les ombres*, p. 559.

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residents, and there is the part buried under the lake as a result of the post-war flooding of the valley to form a hydroelectric dam. It is from this buried past that the central character of *Le Renard dans le nom*, Pierre-Marie Lavolps, seems to emerge as he swims across the lake towards Siom, following the path of the old main road, above the sunken mill and bridge and cemetery (*RN*, p. 54). This overlaying of real and imaginary, literal and symbolic, conscious and unconscious, brought about, in this example, by the dubious mark made by modernity on Siom (as on Viam, Millet's birthplace, the real counterpart of Siom), is at the basis of Siom's generative power, a power that is nowhere more apparent than in the brief *récit* published in 2003.

On the back cover of *Le Renard dans le nom*, in both the original and the paperback editions, there are three sentences, signed 'R.M.':

> Je songe à cette très jeune fille assassinée au début des années 60, à Siom, sur les hautes terres limousines.
> Je songe à celui qui l'a peut-être tuée, et qui se cachait dans son nom propre, Lavolps, comme un renard en son terrier.
> Tous deux sont morts, et seule l'écriture peut aujourd'hui les rendre à leur innocence.

This postscript carries a formidable weight: the deictic pronouns, possessives, and demonstratives refer to a reality that is seemingly before and outside the tale we have just read or are about to read 'today'. For a moment, we imagine that this is the fact, the 'fait divers', that served as the origin for the writing that merely had to consign it, as it were, to the preceding pages; that this is the truth that underpins the *récit*, a truth guaranteed by 'R.M.' as witness rather than writer. Then we notice that 'that very young girl' was murdered in Siom and Siom is, of course, fictional. As we realize that the afterword is still in the bounds of fiction, we notice, too, the ambiguity of 'je songe', thinking, but also dreaming, and we begin to wonder what kind of innocence can be produced by writing to join together two people when one has 'perhaps' killed the other.

While it is not quite unique in Millet's output—*Ma vie parmi les ombres*, published the same year as *Le Renard dans le nom*, has a similar text on its back cover—this postscript is the only one of the two to bear the signature 'R.M.'. It is a convention for certain Gallimard authors to add, on the back of certain of their works, a straightforward paragraph of introduction, summary, or presentation to the work that precedes, and to sign this text with their initials. Indeed, Millet does this on several of his books, both fiction and non-fiction. The use of initials raises a lot of questions in itself. Why initials and not the full name? Is it a sign of haste, of brevity, redoubling the brevity of these postscipts in comparison with the volume of the text that precedes? What are the initials abbreviating? Do they stand in relation to the name of the author on the front cover in the same position as initials in the margins of a document that repeat, relegitimize the complete signature at its beginning

or end? If they are the initials of the proper name of the author of a work of fiction, is the relationship between that name and the work of fiction the same as the relationship between the intials and the text on the back page? If the author signs these brief texts with his abbreviated name, is that to distinguish them from the anonymous production of editorial staff, and if so, to what effect? Does his signature guarantee, perhaps, their impartiality or their truth? But what impartial truth is the author adding that is not already in the text? Why do some texts and some authors need these additions and not others? The practice raises many questions about the relationship of signatures to texts, but these questions become all the more troubled if the text being paraphed in this way itself stands in an especially ambiguous relation both to the work that precedes it and to the name that signs it, as is the case with Millet's *prière d'insérer* for *Le Renard dans le nom*.

For a start, there is the question of where exactly to insert these three sentences. Is 'R.M.' thinking of the dead girl and her possible assassin before the writing of the preceding narrative, in which case the *récit* is in some way the expansion or concretization of this thinking and its writing the response to the appeal contained in the last sentence? Or are these sentences to be inserted after the *récit* but still somehow within it, since they inhabit the fictional Siom and give a piece of information that the narrative itself deliberately leaves uncertain, that Lavolps is dead (although he is of course not necessarily dead according to any of the narrative possibilities suggested in the main body of the book)? In which case, the postscript that is also perhaps a preamble is continuing or supplementing the tale in a way that underlines and intensifies the undecidedness of the ending or, rather, endings, of the story of Pierre-Marie Lavolps and the murdered Christine Râlé. The answer is that it is no doubt both. One thing it clearly is not is the expression of a pronouncement by 'R.M', as the abbreviated surrogate of the author Richard Millet, authorized by the signature on the front cover and title-page to stand outside the bounds of the fiction and impart an insight, or a judgement, or give an indication as to the contents of the work that that name signs.[4]

What the workings of these three sentences of afterword or exordium indicate is a particular undecidedness that impinges on the watertightness of the narrative itself. They point to a hesitation as to the context or framework of Millet's *récit*, a hesitation which continues from the first sentence with the narrator's assertion that the story is outside time and could be located in the

[4] The questions being raised here are the echo of what Derrida formulated as the impossibility of the 'rigorous purity' of any signature, its 'enigmatic originality': 'Pour fonctionner, c'est-à-dire pour être lisible, une signature doit avoir une forme répétable, itérable, imitable; elle doit pouvoir se détacher de l'intention présente et singulière de sa production. C'est sa mêmeté qui, altérant son identité et sa singularité, en divise le sceau' (*Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 391–92).

closing years of the Algerian war but just as well during one of the world wars or the Middle Ages: 'Une histoire hors du temps [. . .] quelque chose qui pourrait s'être passé il n'y a pas si longtemps, par exemple quand l'Algérie était à feu et à sang' (*RN*, p. 11). The narrative then remains marked by what is on the one hand a contingency—these personages and events could have been, would have had to be, quite different if another era had been chosen—but, on the other hand, a necessity, the imperative of keeping up the appearance, as it were, of events unfolding at the beginning of the 1960s: 'Une histoire qu'il faut donc raconter comme si elle venait d'avoir lieu' (*RN*, p. 12). That 'comme si' affects the whole work with a certain unreality, it installs a distance between the narrator and the narrative such that the fiction is doubly fictive, a figment of fiction, a simulacrum that the narrator assumes as such, returning at several points in the tale to the idea that it would be preferable to situate it in other historical times or that, at other points, it has become ahistoric and intemporal.[5] And, hovering over these statements, there remains the question of what it might be that is said to be outside time in this way or, indeed, what it means to be 'outside time', a question which is perhaps linked to *Le Renard*'s position as an interruption, a hiatus in the composition of the summational Siom novel, *Ma vie parmi les ombres*.

The particular narrative stance in *Le Renard dans le nom* also works to create a distancing and an indeterminacy in relation to the story of Pierre-Marie Lavolps and Christine Râlé. The story is told, has been told, by a mother to her son, and the son is the narrator retelling his mother's words. Neither mother nor son is identified, just as no indication is given as to the location where the story is told. Both are natives of Siom and the story happened forty years before its telling, at a time when the son was a baby. As Christine Râlé's murder occurred in 1960, the mother's telling of the story takes place in the early 2000s. However, although it is the mother's voice that tells the story, it is collected by her son and retold by him. The narrator-son's presence is discreet: it is occasionally implied by second-person singular markers such as possessive adjectives ('ta tante' (*RN*, passim), 'tes cauchemars' (*RN*, p. 12)), imperatives ('souviens-toi' (*RN*, p. 57), 'regarde-le' (*RN*, p. 100)), and pronouns ('comme toi' (*RN*, p. 12), 'ce que je vais te dire' (*RN*, p. 87)), or by the 'mon fils' with which the mother apostrophizes her son (*RN*, p. 12). On five occasions the narrator intervenes to make a brief comment or put a question to his mother, his words in quotation marks and followed by 'murmurai-je' or 'demandai-

[5] 'Bien sûr, il serait à ce moment plus facile de situer cette histoire en un temps plus reculé' (*RN*, p. 87); 'Comme on aurait dit autrefois, dit ma mère, par exemple pendant les guerres de Religion [. . .] ou au Grand Siècle, ou encore au siècle suivant' (*RN*, p. 89); 'C'est alors que cette histoire devient intemporelle, dit ma mère [. . .] parce que les personnages semblent avoir bondi hors d'eux-mêmes, hors du temps' (*RN*, p. 69); 'Une conception [de l'honneur] venue de la nuit des temps et qui rend cette histoire intemporelle' (*RN*, p. 85).

je'.[6] Otherwise, his intrusions are limited to the recurrent 'dit ma mère' that punctuates the flow of what is an almost uninterrupted monologue addressed to the silent son, but at a distance, since her words are retold by him and he is acting as a kind of copyist. In the absence of quotation marks, the repeated occurrences of 'dit ma mère' serve to remind the reader, sometimes with a jolt, that the narrative is direct speech and not indirect speech, or indeed, at times, that it is not the work of an anonymous, external narrator. They also serve to remind us that the narrative is at second hand, direct speech relayed by the son. There are other consequences of this stance: it avoids the use of the past historic and makes the narrative voice more immediate, closer to the inflections of speech.[7] In particular, it is natural to use the colloquial 'on' form to replace 'je' and 'nous', which then merges with the frequent passages that use 'on' to relay the anonymous information, opinions, and rumour provided by the inhabitants of Siom.

For, although the mother is an omniscient narrator who is able to relate scenes that happened before her birth or when she was a baby, and scenes of which she can have no first-hand knowledge, her narrative is constantly, and increasingly, supplemented by a multiplicity of other voices that are interwoven with her own. Sometimes these other voices are marked as being in direct speech within quotation marks, but mostly not. Sometimes they are embedded as indirect speech in the mother's voice, sometimes simply juxtaposed. Some of these additional sources are summoned up only once to give some precise information or commentary, as is the case with Marie Bugeaud, who plays such an important role in *Ma vie parmi les ombres* (*RN*, p. 20), or with figures who are new to the world of Siom, such as Ginette Luche, the Lavolpses' serving girl, or Joseph Verdeilh, the baker from Villevaleix (*RN*, p. 21), who make their contributions to the rumours surrounding the young Pierre-Marie Lavolps. By far the richest named source of additional information is the mother's younger sister, who takes on something of the role of a detective and whose remarks are credited with a 'disait ta tante'. In general, though, the voices that thread their way into the mother's tale are anonymous, indeterminate in different impersonal verbal constructions ('il se murmurait que' (*RN*, p. 30) or 'ce qui faisait dire que' (*RN*, p. 98)), or identified simply as 'on', an anonymity that sometimes includes the mother and sometimes does not. When the mother joins the chorus of voices, she does so on occasions as 'nous', especially in the passages where she includes herself in the group of young or adolescent girls who observe Pierre-Marie

[6] Three of his interventions are followed by 'murmurai-je' (*RN*, pp. 23, 82, and 113) and two by 'demandai-je' (*RN*, pp. 26 and 107).

[7] It is noticeable that when the narrative comes closest to the murder of Christine Râlé, in the paragraph where her brother finds her body and confronts the gendarmes, the past historic is suddenly used throughout (*RN*, p. 63).

from afar ('pensions-nous en nous signant comme de vieilles femmes', *RN*, p. 30).[8]

This multiplication of the narrative voice has much in common with the experimentations in the other Siom novels. In polemical terms, it is at the heart of the rejection of much of recent literature which has been gathering pace in Millet's non-fictional work since at least the appearance of *Le Dernier Écrivain* in 2005.[9] For example, in the recent *L'Enfer du roman*, his desire to read a particular novel dissolves because of its use of a third-person narrative:

> Le livre est rédigé à la troisième personne du singulier, avec de lourds brodequins narratifs. Je ne lirai donc pas ce roman. Je n'accepte pas ce protocole narratif. La première personne seule m'est supportable en tant qu'anonymat de l'énonciation.[10]

In *Le Renard dans le nom* everything is always already a repetition, in which the son is repeating the mother's voice, which is repeating events and voices from forty years before. Millet's writing is constitutively citational: the story of the two young people never happens in a present, but has always already happened. Moreover, it is grasped only through the observations of outsiders whose exteriority to the events and the people at their centre is complete. The mother and the other sources have strict limits to what they can tell. None of them has access to the principal protagonists, and the tale is limited to their fragmentary observations. Notwithstanding the mother's occasional narrative omniscience, she and the other witnesses are bound by what they have seen and by what they think they have seen, by what other people have seen and think they have seen, by what they have heard or think they have heard, and, by and large, they have not seen or heard the essential. In particular, the mother's narrative is silent over the identity of Christine Râlé's murderer. Increasingly, the tale is based, not on seeings and hearings, but imaginings: 'disait-on', 'dit ma mère' are increasingly replaced by 'on peut imaginer' (*RN*, pp. 97, 100), and a proliferation of different versions of the conclusion to the events in Siom in 1960. The characteristic movement of the narration is a folding over, in which the clauses of Millet's complex periods continually double over each other in a succession of corrections, hesitations, qualifications, contradictions, suppositions, supplements, to leave a narrative full of lacunae that create a further distance, a decentring: 'cette histoire avec sa sauvagerie, ses plis et replis, et les ténèbres qui en constituent le fond' (*RN*,

[8] Houppermans is mistaken in reducing the voices to just those of the mother and her younger sister ('Un "né de goupil"', p. 154). Godard seems confused as to just who the narrator is, saying at one point that it is 'un récit raconté par la mère du héros' (i.e. Mme Lavolps) (*Itinéraires du roman contemporain*, p. 132) and then that it is a 'double narration' split between a *narrateur* and a *narratrice*: 'c'est la mère du narrateur qui, en fait, conte l'histoire' (ibid., p. 133).

[9] *Le Dernier Écrivain* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 2005). The reflection continued in *Désenchantement de la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007) and *L'Opprobre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

[10] *L'Enfer du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), p. 263.

p. 89). If, in a tale of rape and murder, the crime never happens in the narrative and the culprit is never identified, what exactly is the tale about, where is its centre? The result is an undecidedness around the question as to who is speaking and how the narrative is framed, and, in particular, as to whether anyone has the last word, whether anyone masters or controls the narrative flow, whether anyone is in a position to impose on it a unified perspective. It is an expression of this hesitancy, for example, that, arriving at a point in the narrative where the only response to the question as to the contents of a vital letter is to imagine them, the mother loses her composure and falls into a silence where the story, for a moment, effectively breaks down:

> Ce qui s'est passé? dit ma mère après un moment de silence pendant lequel elle sembla oublier non seulement où elle en était de cette étrange histoire mais où elle se trouvait en la racontant, et si même il était possible de la conclure. (*RN*, p. 90)

What, then, is this 'strange story' that the mother relays to her son? 'Une histoire d'amour doublée d'une affaire d'honneur, voilà ce que c'était, dit ma mère' (*RN*, p. 51). The tale involves two families in Siom, the semi-aristocratic Lavolpses and the peasant Râlés. Pierre-Marie, an only child, declares his love for Christine Râlé, the youngest of six children, by reciting in class the Song of Solomon, which he has learnt by heart. The children are aged around thirteen and are in the same class in the local school. Pierre-Marie directs his recital at Christine, who has to leave the room amidst an uproar. In the ensuing scandal, Pierre-Marie is sent away to boarding school and disappears for three years. A few months after his return, Christine Râlé is found raped and murdered in a field near her home. Her five brothers, and in particular Jacques, the eldest, are convinced that Pierre-Marie is the murderer and demand that his father kill him, otherwise they will. Louis Lavolps sends his son away from Siom in an attempt to protect him. What becomes of him after that is matter for three very different versions, which themselves have variants. The narrator decides between none of them.

One layer of strangeness in this story lies in the functioning of the name Lavolps, for the principal evidence against Pierre-Marie is his name. The first scene in the book conjures up Louis Lavolps registering the birth of his much-awaited son in the freezing depths of the third winter of the war, in January 1942. He thinks the secretary in the Town Hall sees something portentous or ill-fated in the child's name, and the text focuses on the unusualness of the composite name, Pierre-Marie, because such a name is foreign to the Siom of that time, but also because it couples a boy's name with a girl's, in this case the name of his dead sister. However, it is the surname that will turn out to be the real site of the drama. The first four years of the boy's life change the father's joy to suffering: '[il] semblait aussi tourmenté que si le renard qui était dans le nom de Lavolps s'était mis à lui dévorer les entrailles' (*RN*, p. 17).

His pride at the presence of the Latin *volpes* in his surname gives way to the conviction that his name is a curse, that he has engendered a fox cub and not a son: '"Il n'est pas bon de porter certains noms", disait M. Lavolps à qui voulait l'entendre' (*RN*, p. 17). The mother's narrative and its supplements establish three areas in which Pierre-Marie stands apart from the rest of Siom: firstly, he is extraordinarily beautiful, of a beauty whose semantic and symbolic resonances exceed 'handsome' and 'handsomeness'; secondly, he is what Millet calls an innocent—not quite an idiot, it is made clear, but someone who lives in semi-night, 'dans cette demi-nuit de l'esprit où il était' (*RN*, p. 95); and, thirdly, he is cruel in a way that makes it difficult for him to mix with the rest of the village and leads to him being guarded night and day, first by the serving girl, Luche, and then by Luc Malcard, a local orphan of the same age as Pierre-Marie who is taken on by the Lavolpses for this purpose.

It is this last characteristic, the cruelty, that first awakens the associations with the fox in the name. Rumours originating with Luche and the baker, but also others, tell of 'ce que Pierre-Marie faisait subir aux insectes et aux bêtes qui lui tombaient entre les mains, dans cet appentis situé derrière la maison des Lavolps, à Sestérée, et qui lui servait de geôle autant que de salle de jeu' (*RN*, p. 21). Later, Pierre-Marie being unable to attend school, his parents hire a tutor for private lessons:

> Une jeune institutrice de Villevaleix qui prenait chaque jour le train jusqu'à la gare de Siom où l'attendait Mme Lavolps, dans sa vieille Citroën noire, et où elle la ramenait, le soir, en larmes, souvent, l'une comme l'autre, la mère par dépit d'avoir engendré un tel fils et l'institutrice essayant de soutenir que nul n'était mauvais au point d'être abandonné [. . .] oui, murmurant cela alors qu'elle renoncerait à cette place au bout de quelques semaines et qu'il faudrait la dissuader, à prix d'or, disait-on, de porter plainte pour outrages et violences. (*RN*, pp. 26–27)

However, these are scant details, and the hostile feelings which he awakens in the rest of the village, especially when he joins the first year of secondary school, having passed through the hands of a more successful tutor, are the result of his general apartness, his otherness, arousing an aversion 'qui faisait dire à certains, en se bouchant le nez, qu'il n'était pas possible d'aller à l'école en même temps qu'une bête sauvage' (*RN*, p. 35). Alongside those who see in him a wild animal in general there are also those who call him the fox: 'il n'y avait pas un élève qui ne se serait fait coller tous les jeudis après-midi plutôt que de partager le banc du renard, comme on l'appelait parfois' (*RN*, p. 36). The real conjunction between Pierre-Marie and the fox is in the minds of the Râlé family in the aftermath of the scandal at school when the young boy uses a school exercise as a pretext for reciting the Song of Solomon and its sensuous love poetry to Christine Râlé.

First, the Râlé twins, the next in age to Christine, threaten Pierre-Marie in

the school playground, straight after the event, and there he is said to look like a fox, with 'cet air méfiant, craintif et souriant qui faisait dire qu'il portait vraiment bien son nom. Un renard, voilà à quoi il ressemblait; un renard relevant lentement les yeux vers ceux qui s'approchaient' (*RN*, pp. 42–43). Then, the Râlé family finally study the Old Testament text one evening and find there the confirmation that their daughter's honour has been attacked and that they are bound to do something to avenge the slight. This conclusion is drawn from the verse 'Saisissez pour nous les renards, | Les petits renards qui ravagent les vignes, | Alors que nos vignes sont en fleur' (*RN*, p. 46).[11] The eldest brother, Jacques, interprets the biblical imagery as recognizing that a debt has to be paid: 'il s'était passé quelque chose qui ne les laisserait plus en paix, les uns comme les autres, et qu'il y aurait désormais une proie et des chasseurs, une chasse au renard, disaient déjà certains' (*RN*, p. 43). He goes to see the Lavolpses and, whether as a result of his visit or not, is told that Pierre-Marie will be withdrawn from school. He communicates the news to his family in the following terms: 'Le renard ne viendra plus dans nos vignes' (*RN*, p. 49). Except that Pierre-Marie does come back to Siom, after a three-year absence, and, at the end of the summer, Christine Râlé is found dead. For her brothers there is no doubt—she has been killed by the Lavolps boy, and this is no more or less than what was bound to happen, because of the fox in the name:

> [Les frères Râlé] savaient qu'il devait arriver un jour, ayant [. . .] toujours redouté ce moment, non seulement celui où Jacques Râlé découvrirait sa sœur violée et assassinée, mais où il pourrait enfin régler son compte au fils Lavolps, ce maudit renard revenu au pays pour commettre ce qu'il avait toujours rêvé de faire, avait songé Jacques Râlé à l'entrée du pré, devant le corps de sa sœur. (*RN*, p. 62)

From this point on, the fox hunt is really in earnest and the second half of Millet's text relates the Râlé brothers' demand that Louis Lavolps kill his own son if he will not let them kill him, and the different versions according to which Pierre-Marie's father does or does not save his son's life and the Râlés' hunt is or is not successful. Now that we have some idea of the strange story told by the narrator's mother, we can begin to analyse its central premiss, that Pierre-Marie is a killer because of the fox in his name. The evidence, in both senses of the word, that sends the Râlé brothers to demand Pierre-Marie's life is that the etymology of his proper name makes him a fox. Put so crudely, the evidence seems fantastical, farcical even, and the intricately woven fabric of Millet's prose, in which each assertion is immediately hedged round with counter-assertion, refinement, doubt, and further surmise, is mobilized to say just that: in the eyes of the law there is no proof of Pierre-Marie's guilt and he is never arrested, 'faute de preuves pour confondre celui que la rumeur dé-

[11] The quotation is from Le Cantique des cantiques 2. 15.

signait comme coupable, par cela seul qu'on se souvenait qu'il avait autrefois déclaré sa flamme à la jeune morte, et parce que solitaire et trop beau' (*RN*, p. 71). Yet, for a moment, in some way, we have to accept that it is also saying the opposite, that Pierre-Marie *is* a murderer and that that is because of the fox hiding in the etymology of his name.

There are four layers to this presence of the fox. The first is an expression of the worry that is to be found everywhere in Millet's œuvre, that the line between the human and the animal is not clear. The whole world of Siom serves to give verisimilitude to such a concern: with its isolation amidst the granite rocks, the cold, the winds, the forests, and 'la grande nuit siomoise' (*RN*, p. 27), with its abandonment by time, by history, by the Republic, and by God ('sur ces terres abandonnées de Dieu', *RN*, p. 51), Siom becomes the theatre of an otherness that is the otherness of dream or the imaginary, while also being an exemplum for the unending decay of rural France and its civilization in the twentieth century. And when the mother talks of 'le bourg désert, le monde mort de Siom' and of a community 'qui ne voulait pas voir qu'elle était entrée dans sa propre mort' (*RN*, p. 81), this sounds in both registers, the historical and the fantastic, the real and the imaginary. In this way, it becomes possible for the mother to say, at the beginning of *Le Renard*, that her strange story could happen only in Siom: 'une histoire en tout cas bien étrange, dit ma mère, qui ne pouvait avoir lieu que chez nous, entre l'eau, le granit et le ciel' (*RN*, p. 13).[12] For this elementality extends to the human inhabitants of Siom. Quite apart from the references to the fox, *Le Renard* abounds in imaginary transformations of humans into birds, bulls, boars, trees, and, generally, animals, as though they were constantly in danger of being fused with the harsh world that surrounds them and, in particular, with the animals with which they share Siom.[13]

Nowhere is this danger more obvious than in the domain of sex. Sex in the Siom novels is a violent and brutal affair. The villagers wonder how the slimly built Mme Lavolps can withstand the 'assaults' of her bull-headed husband, their congress a matter more of the coupling of unsuited livestock than anything recognizably human.[14] The element of fire missing from the elements of Siom ('l'eau, le granit et le ciel': see above) is in the village's

[12] The archaism of Siom also gives credence to the Râlé brothers' vendetta. They are living according to older, ancient, biblical rules, and not the rules of the French Republic: 'Le père avait eu beau lui répondre [à son fils aîné] qu'on ne vivait plus en un temps où on fait soi-même justice, les différends se réglant selon le code civil et non sur les livres saints' (*RN*, p. 46); 'C'était, disaient certains, qu'on en était une fois encore revenu à la Bible, à l'Ancien Testament, au peu qu'en savait Jacques Râlé' (*RN*, p. 84).

[13] Standing in for a list that would be too long: 'un de ces cris qu'on pousse devant la nuit qui vient, quand on est seul dans la forêt, loin de Siom, pour s'assurer qu'on n'a pas été transformé en arbre ou en animal' (*RN*, p. 26).

[14] '[. . .] à cause de son étroit visage et de sa taille menue qui faisait se demander comment elle pouvait supporter les assauts de son mari' (*RN*, p. 20).

human inhabitants: it is in drunken fathers eyeing their daughters,[15] or it is in the 'brandon de chair' with which 'le renard qu'était Pierre-Marie' takes or is taken by Ginette Luche in a *coitus a tergo*, 'la peau du cou entre les dents de l'animal' (*RN*, p. 58). The narrator's aunt keeps apart from the young girls of Siom, Christine Râlé among them, who are trying to attract the attention of Pierre-Marie at the lake in Siom, during the summer holidays of 1960, because she has no wish to resemble a heifer on heat waiting for the bull: 'peu désireuse [. . .] de ressembler à ces génisses qui demandent le taureau' (*RN*, p. 56). It is above all in a passage just before the death of Christine that the mother develops at greatest length the question of man and his desire, concluding that animals are to be envied for the periodicity of their rut while men are constantly pursued by the strangeness and violence, the irrepressibility and simple stupidity, of their desire: 'Bienheureuses les bêtes, car elles n'ont pas cette ceinture de feu autour des reins ni cette couronne de flammes qui les aveugle, et bienheureux ceux qui pourraient trouver la paix des bêtes couchées dans les prés et contemplant les nuages, dit ma mère avec un étrange sourire' (*RN*, p. 59).

The second layer of the text which is working to identify Pierre-Marie Lavolps with a certain animality is onto- rather than phylogenetical. The otherness which can be equated with animal existence is his simplicity of mind, associated with cruelty and, at adolescence, with sexual desire ('car on le disait coureur, comme son père', *RN*, p. 57), but also, unexpectedly, his beauty. Initially his exceptional beauty associates him, as a child, with the status of an angel, the exact opposite of animality, and he is known as 'l'ange de Siom' (*RN*, p. 25), but his legend as an adolescent confirms the mother's fears that there is a link between the fragility of real beauty and evil, 'et qu'une telle beauté fût le résultat d'un compromis avec des puissances qu'on n'évoquait pas sans se signer' (*RN*, p. 20). Paradoxically, the distance opened up by his angelic/demonic beauty between Pierre-Marie and the rest of Siom works to identify him with the beauty of an animal: 'le renard est un bel animal, rusé, malin, et fier' (*RN*, p. 17).

The third layer is a further example of the constitutional citationality of Millet's text. The possible–impossible, possible yet impossible, assimilation of human and animal, boy and fox, angel and devil, innocence and guilt, is brought about through the thoroughgoing implication, in *Le Renard dans le nom*, of *Le Roman de Renart*. The infolding of the late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century texts that make up the *Roman* is made visible at two points in Millet's *récit*. The first is the epigraph, which is from the episode where the cock Chantecler tricks Renart into opening his mouth and releasing him:

[15] '[. . .] ce qui faisait murmurer à Denise Orluc, les larmes aux yeux, elle qui avait eu à repousser son oncle, ou son propre père: "On dirait qu'ils nous regardent de derrière les flammes"' (*RN*, p. 29). Ginette Luche is also rumoured to have been raped by her father.

La bouche, fait-il, soit honie
Qui s'entremest de noise faire
A cele eure q'el se doit taire.[16]

And the second is when, as a new and final set of variants on the outcome of the Râlés' vendetta are suggested, the word 'branche' is used. In the last three pages of *Le Renard dans le nom* it is proposed simply to forget all the previous hypotheses which revolved around Louis Lavolps sending his son away in the company of Luc Malcard, either to be killed by him or by his wartime Resistance comrade, Lucien Condeau, or to kill Malcard and take his place, suppositions which have occupied a third of the length of the book: 'oublions cette branche de l'histoire, peut-être trop belle pour être vraie' (*RN*, p. 121). The term 'branche' is the one used by modern editors to designate the twenty-five or twenty-six segments of the *Roman*, but the term is actually used with this meaning in the medieval text itself.[17] Apart from these two precise references, both of them inviting again the question of the framing of the narrative, the polymorphous animals of the medieval text, both wolf and feudal lord, both lion and emperor, now badger now baron on muleback, now blushing lady now bristling she-wolf, now hypocritical pilgrim now hare-devouring fox, inhabiting a world where a hen is given a solemn burial in a tomb that begins to work miracles, where cocks have dreams that their hen-consorts interpret, where Renart's cunning and mastery of words allow him to carry out his endless, amoral predations on the rest of the human/animal kingdom, are what make Pierre-Marie's metamorphosis into a fox possible.[18]

The fourth layer is Millet's belief in the significance of names, both of people and of places.[19] *Le Renard dans le nom* contains nearly seventy names in its one hundred and twenty pages, almost all of people and places in and around

[16] *Le Roman de Renart*, ll. 438–40, ed. by Armand Strubel (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 266. This Pléiade text uses a manuscript source that is slightly different from the version quoted by Millet.

[17] As Strubel points out in his edition, the term is used six times in the *Roman* 'pour désigner un récit qui vient en quelque sorte se greffer sur un tronc commun préexistant' (*Le Roman de Renart*, p. 1463). The different branches are developments and embellishments, however, not variants, as in Millet's usage. In *Le Renard* there are branches without a trunk.

[18] Several moments of the narrative of *Le Renard* are closely related to *Le Roman*. The war that is waged between Renart and Isengrin throughout the *Roman* stems from Renart's rape of the wolf's lady, Hersent, which occupies something of the position of Christine Râlé's rape and murder in *Le Renard*. This rape is a matter for the husband's honour, and it is his honour for which he seeks redress, in the same way that the eldest Râlé son, whose attachment to his sister, it is hinted, is more that of a husband than a brother, seeks retribution for his dishonour through the fox's death. The premonitory dream that wakes Mme Râlé is mirrored, for example, in Chantecler's dream of his imminent encounter with the fox. And, when Luc Malcard takes Pierre-Marie to his father's friend, Lucien Condeau, the description of his isolated house and existence evokes the hermitages that appear in *Le Roman de Renart*.

[19] I have attempted an analysis and classification of the functioning of names in Millet's work in a forthcoming article, 'Names Proper and Improper in Richard Millet's Siom Novels', *French Studies*, 66 (2012).

Siom. Where they are not dictated simply by verisimilitude, many of these names obey a poetics of the name that places Millet in a line that goes from Plato through Rabelais and Sterne to Balzac, Joyce, Proust, and beyond.[20] For example, the Râlés' family name has connotations, some of which are mentioned in the text: 'celui qu'on appelait parfois le grand Râleur à cause de son mauvais caractère comme de la puissance avec laquelle il râlait le foin dans les champs' (*RN*, p. 46). These join ideas of violence and rusticity to the Râlés, alongside the idea of death which comes, tacitly, from the death rattle. Likewise, the name of their farm, Peyre Nude, evokes the windswept rock of the Millevaches plateau, but also sets off other resonances, with, for example, the naked body of the dead Catherine Râlé. However, the name that is at the centre of the tale of the fox, Lavolps, is in a different category, one that escapes the considerations of literary onomastics. The founding text for enquiries into the correctness of names is Plato's *Cratylus*, which begins with Hermogenes asking Socrates to agree that when Cratylus says Hermogenes' name is not Hermogenes, he is talking nonsense.[21] Underlying Cratylus's 'oracular speech' is his 'special knowledge' that Hermogenes can be no son of Hermes, because Hermes is the patron of bankers and moneymakers, and Hermogenes is poor. The dialogue sets out to determine whether it is indeed possible to demonstrate that names are appropriate for the people or things they name and whether names reveal the activity of a suitably qualified nomothete. The whole discussion—and, along with it, the poetic productivity of names that plays such a large role in Western literature—is founded on the assumption that there is first of all the person or thing and then the name that is given to it. Whether, in the end, the name is correct or false or whether the whole idea is nonsense, there is the moment in which the thing itself is present, and then there is the moment in which it is named, as in the biblical account, in which God first brings the animals to Adam, who only then names them. But what Millet is considering, at various points in his fiction, is the reverse: first there exists the name, then there comes the person to inhabit it, and the power of the name is such that it determines the destiny of its bearer.[22]

[20] Several recent studies have focused on the importance of names in the work of different authors. For example, Elizabeth Vinten Pinner, *An Onomastic Study of the Works of Robert Pinget* (London: University of London Press, 1996); Jordan Stump, *Naming and Unnaming: On Raymond Queneau* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); and Michael Temple, *The Name of the Poet: Onomastics and Anonymity in the Works of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995). There are studies of the functioning of names in Bataille, Pérec, Céline, and Cixous, among others, in the collection *Le Texte et le nom*, ed. by Martine Léonard and Élisabeth Nardout-Lafarge (Quebec: XYZ, 1996).

[21] Plato, *Cratylus*, *Parmenides*, *Greater Hippias*, *Lesser Hippias*, ed. and trans. by H. N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), p. 7.

[22] Sjef Houppermans founds his analysis of *Le Renard* on an understanding which is quite the opposite, that Lavolps functions as 'une forme particulière du cratylisme posant que la signifiance doit ouvrir sur le sens' ('Un "né de goupil"', p. 147), so that the tale is a quest for this meaning:

The scandal that *Le Renard* enacts is the proposition, not that Pierre-Marie is called Lavolps because he is a fox, but that Pierre-Marie is a fox because his name is Lavolps. For the Râlés, and indeed to some extent for the community of Siom in general, no further evidence of Pierre-Marie's guilt is needed: the guilt is in his name and Christine's death is merely the confirmation of this, an event that was in abeyance ever since the Lavolpses' son was born.

While the case of Cyril Gagneur in *Lauve le pur*, for example, concerns a secondary character whose struggle with the fate enshrined in his patronym is as much comic as tragic,[23] the name Lavolps is, as the title proclaims, the centre of *Le Renard dans le nom*, it is the evidence that propels the narrative, giving sense to the Râlés' fox hunt and Louis Lavolps's decision to hide his son. Now, if this equation between the boy and the vulpinity in his name is not to be considered a quaint archaism on Millet's part, a vestige of more primitive naming processes that is perhaps in tune with the atemporality signified by 'Siom', the question needs to be asked as to how the equation functions and with what results.

For a start, it needs to be remarked that the fox in the name is in evidence also in the sense that it is in the open, is obvious, from the symbolic moment of the father's registering of his son's name at the Town Hall, with which the work opens. Again, this marks the difference between what is going on in Millet's text and the significance of names in other literary texts. The fox is not something that has to be teased out gradually from the name Lavolps, in the way that the meanings of Balbec or Guermantes only gradually accrete around those names; it is there from the work's inception, in the same sentence, both as etymology and, by means of the allusiveness of Millet's style, as reality. M. Lavolps is as tormented as if 'il fût devenu le père horrifié de ce renardeau dont il s'enorgueillissait jusque-là de porter en son patronyme les syllabes d'origine latine, *volpes*' (*RN*, p. 17). The equivalence between etymology and reality is known to more or less everyone in Siom, it seems; the same sentence ends with the Lavolpses more hidden in their house than in a fox's earth, 'murmuraient ceux qui savaient ce que signifiait Lavolps' (*RN*, p. 17).

Secondly, it needs to be remarked that, if the name is in evidence in this way, it is because the semantic content of 'fox' goes without saying. Pierre-Marie in no way develops the concept of vulpinity in the course of the *récit*; his actions, such as they are, in no way add up to an illustration or an expansion of what it might mean for a human to be said to be a fox: on the contrary, it is the

'la quête vise à détecter la vérité du nom' (ibid.). I am arguing that the name and its etymology or its truth are so much in evidence, are so obvious from the start, that their functioning needs to be understood differently, as the fragile mark of a subject position that is swept away when the fox comes out of the name, is released from its earth.

[23] This is discussed at greater length in Jackson, 'Names Proper and Improper in Richard Millet's Siom Novels'.

term that defines him. The content of 'fox' is simple and self-evident because it is the result of the long and rich cultural tradition of which the Fables of Aesop and La Fontaine or the *Roman de Renart* are only the most prominent examples. As such, it is anthropomorphic: human beings are vulpine, foxes are just foxes. In La Fontaine's words, 'je me sers d'animaux pour instruire les hommes'.[24] It is also, above all, metaphoric: 'fox' is a virtually lexicalized metaphor for cunning; there is no proper meaning of 'fox' when it is assigned to a human being—it is through and through metaphoric. The inescapable figurativity of 'fox' takes us further towards an understanding of what is at play for Millet in the proper name.[25]

On the one hand, Millet's fiction since *La Gloire des Pythre* has been inhabited by a profound desire for names as foundations, as a mark of eternity, the patronym passed on from father to son in the unending renewal of rural France. We can see a trace of this in *Le Renard* in the remark that proper names 'durent généralement plus longtemps que les corps et que le souvenir' (*RN*, p. 13). Again, it is not by chance that the opening sequence of the tale is concerned with Louis Lavolps formalizing the identity of his son. On the other hand, the Siom novels recognize, against their wish, as it were, that the impossible names of Pythre, Piale, and Lauve are names for dissolution, destruction, and death, not only in terms of the general decline and decay of the isolated rural communities of the Corrèze, but also in much more precise terms, in terms of the identities of the main protagonists.[26] In each of the novels the hope of founding something, a family, a farm, a fortune, a future, is undone by the obscure forces which, at some point or another in each text, are found to be at work in the name, which is at best an imposture. (This link between name and imposture is the motor of Millet's most recent *récit*.)[27] To see the name Lavolps as being affected by a constitutive metaphoricity is to approach the impossibility in the name, the fact that the name is always already unsettled, displaced, improper. In Derrida's terms: 'Le propre du nom n'échappe pas à l'espacement [. . .] La métaphore travaille le nom propre. Le

[24] 'Épître en vers à Monsieur le Dauphin', in *Œuvres complètes*, I: *Fables et contes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 29. This cultural figure of the fox is present in another recent text, Pierre Michon's *La Grande Beune* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1996): 'la bête emblématique, le coyote ou le chien *dingo*, le goupil, le décepteur des vieilles cosmogonies, le roux, le rusé, le flatteur du fabuliste' (p. 49).

[25] There is another figure in the fox, or rather, in 'le renard', and that is the antonomasis by which Renart displaced 'goupil' as the common noun as a result of the success of *Le Roman*, not to mention that Renart is itself a proper noun whose earliest forms, according to Littré, are the Germanic *Raginohard* or *Reginhart* (Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris: Gallimard Hachette, 1968), s.v. renard). The 'proper' in the name 'Lavolps' recedes ever further away.

[26] The opinion in Siom is that it is better to be called Lavolps than some of the other local names, 'que ça valait mieux que de s'appeler Pythre, Luche, Nifle ou Zirphile' (*RN*, p. 17).

[27] *Tarnac* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

sens propre n'existe pas.'[28] In this light, it can be seen that what constitutes the drama in *Le Renard* is not the fox in the name, but the fox out of the name. Until the September evening of Christine Râlé's death, the fox is in evidence in the Lavolpses' name, blazoned for all to see, but it is a blinding evidence: that night the fox escapes, both literally and metaphorically, and what the name can no longer contain results in the unthinkable.

After the rape and murder, for which there are immediately six other suspects besides Pierre-Marie, including Jacques Râlé and Louis Lavolps, with Pierre-Marie as the chief suspect only in the eyes of the Râlé brothers, the narrative is concerned with re-establishing a certain order, expressed in terms of putting the fox back in his name: 'il s'agissait de faire rentrer le renard dans son nom, dit ma mère, de lui faire regagner son terrier, de l'enterrer dans son etymologie, d'oublier enfin ce que voulait dire ce patronyme' (*RN*, p. 87). The narrative exhausts itself in burying Pierre-Marie in the different 'branches' of the Râlé brothers' revenge and the cunning twists and turns of that other fox, Louis Lavolps, until the narrator's mother comes to the point of saying that it is time to forget the story altogether, alleging that 'tout ça était à présent trop vieux, et d'un autre âge, et qu'il fallait que le silence retombe' (*RN*, p. 123), rejoining in this way the story's epigraph, which cursed, even before the story began, the voice that spoke when it should be silent. And so the story effaces itself, leaving the traces of a murder which is past without ever being present, a 'non-lieu' in every sense of the word, a girl who falls prey to the savagery of male desire, a murderer who is perhaps in his turn murdered and is perhaps innocent, and a community closed in silence over the crime that happened in its midst a long time ago, in another age, outside time.

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[28] *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 136.