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Zadig and Voltaire in the best of Orwellian worlds?

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I started teaching French about 40 years ago in a time when having students read Boris Vain or Raymond Queneau risked getting you "excommunicated" from National Education. Peddlers of *beau langue*,[1] we had the mission of transmitting the language of Molière, not Rabelais, Céline or San Antonio. (Regarding this point, when Molière's language is mentioned as a reference point of beauty and proper speaking, does it mean the language of his peasants, his bourgeoisie or his little Marquis?).

I spent 20 years in the enlarged *banlieue*,[2] from Montereau-Surville to La Garenne-Bezons, through Versailles and Neuilly-Sur-Seine and, over that time, I acquired the certitude that writing was the best way to bring students into the French language, in all its forms and in all conditions: writing poems, photo-stories and highbrow novels. My work aimed at not reproducing the worrisome teaching that we had suffered, to not recreate those situations where the fear of mistakes and of not writing as well as Châteaubriant, had inhibited entire generations. Our keyword was "invent", rather than imitate clumsily.

In the '90s, I was sent to a middle school in Pantin, at Courtillières, one of those places that are regularly on the nightly news in the "local news" section. 5,000 residents left in one of Europe's biggest cement blocks, nicknamed *The Serpent*. A record unemployment rate, a deliberate non-mix and generalized disrepair. Teaching there in the '90s was a feat: verbal and physical violence, theft, rackets, rape, car fires, depression ... Starting at age of 14, the boys made a point of coming to school without pen or paper. There were three fire alarms a day; the principal's car exploded during a class meeting ... Despite my 20 years of experience, I found myself reduced to a novice, obliged to readapt my teaching style and, above all, to reinvent it. Writing poems allowed me to make contact with the students, asking them to describe their *cité*, [3] its inhabitants and its daily happenings. Their texts – raw, sarcastic and funny – helped me better understand this territory characterized by prejudices and phantasms: I found a new vocabulary in reading my student's texts: a few words here and there, a little bit of *Verlan*[4] ("*Keuf*" short for "*kelfi*", the Verlan for "*flic*"[5] and not, as today's student think, Verlan for "fuck"); Romani terms: "*poucave*",[6] "*bédave*",[7] "*gadjo*";[8] old argot words from the end of the 19th century: "*condé*"[9] or "*daron*",[10] and even the Middle Ages' "*catin*".[11]

With a colleague, Fédéric Teillard, we decided to do some research with the students to see if this terminology was just a passing and generational fad, like there are cyclically. We asked them to gather the most words and expressions possible. We were submerged by a verbal tsunami. We thought, in doing this research, to defuse the verbal violence that we saw and sometimes were victims of. Taking those words seriously, revealing their coded character (to not be understood by the police, professors and their parents) and hashing it all out with the students; discovering the random orthography

and understanding the need to define it: how to spell "*bolosse*"? "*Baulhauss*", "*Beauloss*"?[12] (It is interesting to note that in the '90s this word meant the little white foreigners in the *cité*, the *gaulois*,[13] the *toubabs*,[14] who came to get cannabis; it now means the good student, the "ass-kisser" – we say "sucker" today, and by extension an "*intello*",[15] or a "nerd"!).

We searched for the etymology of the word "*niquer*"[16] (from ancient Egyptian and not derived from the sports shoe brand). We recognized the verb "*aller*"[17] in the interjection "*Vazi*",[18] inacceptable when used when addressing a prof; why inacceptable? Because of the imperative, because of using the familiar "*tu*" and because of the implicit sense of the pronoun "*y*": go where? Somewhere else. To do what? *Go to hell*, *to get fucked* and maybe even *fucked up the ass*![19] We weren't afraid of words or profanity, (that they were also surprised to find in the serious *Robert*),[20] nor of words with more than two syllables. Words name the real; let's look reality in the face! Beyond these linguistic kitchen problems, we could be brought to reexamine basic notions of anatomy when, for example, a girl said "*J'm'en bats les couilles*" that she wrote as "*J'm'emballe les couilles*".[21]

As soon as we started this project, outraged parents alerted the principal who, just as quickly, notified *Inspection*[22] who then urgently rushed an inspector to verify that we weren't dragging Voltaire's language into the gutter. Not obtuse, the inspector found that we were indeed studying language, in all its registers.

So, with the students we compiled a dictionary where we also included a chronicle of the year in that sensitive school one of the hardest institutions in Seine Saint Denis (*Les céfrans parlent aux français*).[23]

But a new misunderstanding came up: lazy journalists only read the dictionary part of the book. They only bantered about it, about the inventiveness of those little *banlieue* "kids", focusing only on the most salacious words and only showing the project's exotic side. We were then brought under the fire of offended university paladins of Racine's French: proponents of a demanding pedagogy, like the strict fathers demanding that there not be a single orthographic mistake in your entire education. They treated us like sloppy demagogues. We were accused of being jailers, trapping these youths in their linguistic ghetto.

We had great difficulty in explaining that we affronted the language without scorn, or reserve to show the students that equivalents could be found in current French, that these clandestine words, destined to be opaque for adults, obeyed grammatical rules too, that we could find their etymologies; in a word, that their language could be an object of linguistic study. In taking interest in the words that they used, we took their world into consideration; we helped put distance between them and their language and therefore a way out of that supposed language ghetto. The reflection became common: they taught us as much we taught them. There was exchange, dialogue. Their language was recognized instead of being "ostracized".

If we talk about ghettos, we are talking about social, economic and ethnic ghettos. Immigrant families are put in the same place, compounding their problems; unemployment, single parent families or families with too many parents, parents' illiteracy, parallel economies, violence, delinquency.

Socially excluded, stigmatized and demonized, it isn't shocking that these adolescents in turn opposed us teachers, representatives of the culture that looked down on them from the height of our great

writers. Why adopt the oppressor's language, the language of the "bourgeois" (I recently learned that a bourgeois was "a blond"!), of profs that spoke "like Joan of Arc"? And it wasn't the vocabulary or the grammar rules that they didn't accept, it was also the self-speaking values of an unequal system that consigned them to unemployment and to which they refused to conform. Thus, for many of them, science was only "the white religion". As for the notions of fraternity, respect and tolerance, everything in their immediate environment showed them that these were empty and inoperative concepts. There were other rules in the *cité:* "dominance" isn't accepted, all problems are resolved among each other. Obeying, responding to injunctions equals submission, being a "*baltringue*".[24] The law of silence, the law of the strongest. We therefore didn't only have to deal with problems of mastering a language that can be resolved through scholastic remediation, as if you are treating an entire sick body.

A misadventure, analogous to ours, happened to Faïza Guène when she published her first novel, *Kiffe kiffe demain*,[25] at the age of 19: I had her as a student and she participated in the writing workshops that I directed at Les Engraineurs (an association that produces scripts co-written with the youth of the neighborhood); [26] she wrote and shot scripts for short films and had timidly shown me the first 30 pages of a novel written in her school notebook; I showed the manuscript to an editor (Hachette) who immediately signed Faïza. It was a story narrated in the first person (although the character wasn't Faïza herself) and told of the daily life of a young girl from the *cité* ...

An initial article in the *Nouvel Observateur* set off a firestorm of reviews and radio and television interviews that made her book a best-seller (more than 200,000 copies in France). A touching, funny, ironic novel that even the students liked; they devoured it

in three days while they were reluctant to read ten pages by Maupassant: “what the hell is this old French?!” they would say.

But Faïza didn’t have the right to an article in a literary column. No interviews on a literary program; she was always set aside in the “society” column: “Tell us, how is it that a girl who comes from a *cité* could manage to write a book full of words; and with your parents, how was it? Did your father beat you? And drugs? And how were you able to not fall into delinquency? ...”.

It was only abroad, in American universities, in Brazil, in Japan, that she was received as a French writer (*Kiffe Kiffe demain* has been translated into more than 20 languages!). This is because in the literary world, my dear sirs, we don’t mix – at least not outside an endogamous circle.

Even stranger: when I proposed to my French department colleagues to study *Kiffe kiffe demain* with 14-year-old students, having seen the interest that the novel generated, I came up against polite refusal. I realized that, put off by the title as if it was a bowl of worms, one of them didn’t think it necessary to go much further than the cover. Another argued that the “author” was too close to the students and that an “Author” had to maintain a certain “Height”, probably floating in his aura of inaccessible artist. The others didn’t see the pedagogic interest in it and what we could get out of it, in the framework of our scholastic program, in advancing the students’ learning to write: “we still don’t have the manual approved by *Inspection* with the questionnaire that goes with it”. The famous questionnaires that are the salt of Literature, like we will see later on.

The most amusing thing about this story is that, a year later, a copy of *Kiffe kiffe demain* landed in our cubbyholes, approved by the

academic authorities, with a whole pedagogic kit of prefabricated questions included. I probably showed it with a smile that was a little too snide to the colleagues whose convictions were already set, so much that I was the only one who benefited from the arrival of this Author. An interesting anecdote: only 5 copies of the original 30 donated by the editor are still in the middle school's library.

A first, early conclusion: ghettos are socially planned and stigmatized by a fearful and lazy press and reinforced by elite intellectuals who, in wanting to impose The Culture, the true one, like in forced religious conversions, throw all popular culture in the trash of the Republic. It is enough to observe the censorship of rap. Besides Skyrock,[27] which only plays the worst in mainstream productions, where can we hear rap? Is it unlistenable? What are we afraid of? Isn't it a bit short to think that it is just a bunch of insults or homophobic and macho provocations? Isn't it simply a renewal of popular poetry, a flow of words that we don't want to listen to, words that cross the borders of neighborhoods and nations? How can we explain that a mode of expression that started in the '70s with the Last Poets in the United States and that still exists on every continent gets so little airplay? Why refuse these texts the status of poetry if not because rappers depict the ravages provoked by a postcolonial liberal system? It is a combative poetry that fights to bring peoples together (for example with Israeli-Palestinian crews), and against excision in Senegal, etc. ... (see, for example, the excellent program on Arte[28] about hip hop culture). This censorship only reinforces the feeling of exclusion that these youths experience.

This is the context that we have to teach in. It is a difficult task, above all for new arrivals or substitute teachers who find themselves thrown into an ostensibly hostile universe. Certain ones

crack and quit, others deal, both well and badly, with burnout, class resistance and discouragement. Like a priceless little black infantry of the Republic, we go to the front every morning of the only adult interlocutors with these adolescents under pressure. Does this mean we are living in hell? I have worked in this middle school for 20 years, 20 years I've been facing these terrible monsters who are, let us remember, 10 to 16 years old, and I still haven't given up. Not for masochism, but because it is a veritable challenge. The fact that today 80% of students pass their final exams while 20 years ago only 30% did is a reason for being satisfied. That Faïza or Mourad are now members of a theater troupe after having shot short films with Les Engraineurs is another. That we can manage tardiness, absenteeism and reduce violence can also be considered a success. But the hardest is still to be done.

First course of French, this year, with a class of 16 year olds. I ask the students to tell me what the subject, French, consisted in; what we do, what we learn. They spontaneously tell me that it is about learning how to *speak* better. To communicate better, to dialogue.
Yes, but what else?
To write only came after a long moment of perplexity.
Oh, yeah! Orthography, conjugations, vocabulary and all of that!
Evidently, in French, we learn to better express ourselves in writing, but what does it mean to write better?
To write without mistakes, without smudges!
It's true that, on a CV, we shouldn't make mistakes. But we also have a spellcheck that underlines mistakes in red and with that we get along.
And then, accountants, "nurses", hostesses, mechanics, estheticians, clerks and athletes (the most desired jobs): when are

they ever in need to write anything other than their name and their social security number?

With texting, we communic8 w/o probs.[29]

Students are docile: they more or less submit to conjugation controls; it even reassures them that they've had lessons. We either know them or we don't, but at least we don't go crazy, like with the "*chelous*"[30] texts that we make them read.

So, then: is that all we do in French? I insist.
A blank. They really don't see it.
Does the word Literature mean anything to you?
No, not really … Ah, if we look closer … Literature, that's the questions you ask.
What? I'm offended.
Well, yeah, the questions about texts: who is the narrator? What are the temporal connectors? Metaphor or metonym? Are the enunciations cut off from the context or not?

I don't have the time to seriously address the scope of the pedagogical disaster that brought about these answers so I'll valiantly continue: these texts were written by writers, they are excerpts from books. What genre of books do we find in Literature? They ended up laboriously citing novels, poetry, short stories, but also celebrity magazines like *Closer* and … "films"?!

I leave the course steaming and I speak frankly with my colleagues during the break: do you realize? Speak well and answer questionnaires – that is what they learn from what we teach! My passion only got small, semi-compassionate, semi-fatalist smiles …

To be clear, I am not complaining about the level of the students dropping … No, what gets me is the professional deformation generated by our teaching methods.

The problem is complicated we have to recognize that. What to do about it? Make the students read? That's easier said than done. What does reading the *Iliad* help if they have already seen it in an animated film? The newspaper? When I ask them to bring me one, they bring me the Carrefour catalogue.[31] Reading doesn't help anything. I agree, it's not a question of service. Telling them that reading helps with vocabulary, that forced reading will result in less mistakes doesn't convince them anymore that it does me.

Make them write? Writing is copying a course, reciting a course, responding to a question. So we should fight to convince them: learning conjugations isn't only for reciting them during an exam, but are tools that help situate yourself in time, in projecting yourself into the future, of distinguishing the present from the near or far past (their way of saying "at the time" puts everything before in the limbo of a prehistory where Lucy "is the chick who eats the apple").

How can we convince them of the importance of history, of ideas, of their own ideas, when everything is made to plunge them into a permanent present, made of entertainment and immediate consumption? How can we get them to gain consciousness of the reality, of what goes beyond the spaces in the *cité* and their close circles; a reality that is not the tele-reality while we incite them to immerge themselves in the virtual? How can we get them to take into consideration ancient texts (rather than devoting an obliged respect to them) when Sarkozism is bent on devaluating intellectuals with an ignorant spokesperson who confuses Literature and fast food? How can we bring their attention to the

sense, the precise meanings of words while we make social regression pass off as reform, "com'" as information, the austere rigor for a project for the future, tradition for progress? How can we in an Orwellian world where nothing makes sense anymore and where all refuge has been destroyed? How can we learn to listen to each other when politicians and their pundits don't? How can we resolve conflicts in a friendly way, without violence, with diplomacy while everyone loses it, in the line at the supermarket, at the post office ticket counter, at the Parc des Princes[32] or in the Middle East and fake wrestling has such a huge following?

Speaking with students and establishing an environment of trust: speaking about everything, without being afraid of words. Speaking with them because, often, their parents don't. Fathers don't tell talk about the difficulties they face; Diabé never told his 16-year-old son that he went from Mali to Morocco by bicycle, that he crossed the Mediterranean on a raft and that he arrived in Marseille … in 1941!

What we are witnessing is a break with the adult world: I was struck when going into the *cité* in 1991 by the fact that the youth lived in a sort of autarky, a closed-off adolescence where adults were perceived as enemies. This realization spurred a writing workshop with about 20 students who drafted scripts that lead to a short film in 1997, *Miskine*.[33] The film tells how a mixed group of adolescents worked to avoid one of their own being sent home.

Since then, that isolation has, it seems to me, gotten worse. Facebook, videogames, websites (like Webchoc,[34] where the beheading of an American hostage or the rape of a "hot-blooded [sic]" Brazilian can be seen), radios or community (i.e. communitarian) sites; there is a world that totally escapes adults: as teachers, we get a few glimpses of it. We learn, for example, that if

Gadhafi killed his own people, “it was because he was Jewish”; that the end of the world is in 2012 since “it is written in the Koran and it will even happen on a Friday!”.

I often have the impression that a part of teachers are content to apply the program in a hysterical urgency generated by the mania of evaluation and control, with their reassuring grills and curves. I myself have the feeling of being squeezed between two exigencies: one of adapting the students to a totally absurd system of standardized evaluation, obsolete but functioning, orienting and above all disorienting ...; and another of adapting myself to the level of the students to raise it if possible, using all of the means available to raise their interests, their questions, their desires to write, to read, to see films ... Taking my time and not being held hostage by planning timetables of lessons and units to be completed, a rhythm cadenced by exams (and that everyone tries to follow without ever actually catching up).

Language is not mastered it becomes impoverished. It is living, instable, rebel, daunting, rigid, illogical. To domesticate it, you need time, patience and trust.

Publications by Boris Seguin: *Crame pas les blases,* Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1994; Co-written with Frédéric Teillard: *Les céfrans parlent aux français*, Calmann Lévy, 1996, *Petit manuel de savoir vivre à l’usage des enseignants* Paris, Hachette littératures, 2000; *Feu le principal* Paris, Stock, 2000

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[1] Literally “beautiful language”, this elitist term has origins in 17th century French literature where emphasis is placed on

aestheticisms, quality, originality in style, tone, use of new words, and how beautiful, subtle and original a work is judged to be [translator's note].

[2] *Banlieues* are translated as "suburbs", as these are also residential areas on the outer edge of a city, but the connotations of the term "*banlieue*" in France can be different from those in English-speaking countries. The "suburbs" in the United States, for instance, are generally associated with low population density, detached or semi-detached housing and middle and upper class inhabitants. On the other hand, in France *banlieues* are more frequently areas of low-income apartments and social housing. Thus, the equivalent of *banlieues* in the United States would be "the projects". In the UK, the equivalent would be a "council estate". The term *banlieue* itself comes from the two French words *ban* and *lieue* ("league", or roughly four kilometers) [translator's note].

[3] A "*cité HLM*" [*habitation à loyer modéré*], "housing at moderated rents" or "rent-controlled housing", is a form of subsidized housing in France. There are approximately four million such residences, housing an estimated 12 million people – nearly one-fifth of the population of France. The standard of living in HLM housing projects is among the lowest in the country. They are known for their enduringly high rates of poverty and unemployment, as well as the concentration of first and second-generation immigrants in the communities [translator's note].

[4] *Verlan* is an argot in the French language, featuring inversion of syllables in a word, and is common in slang and youth language. It rests on a long French tradition of transposing syllables of individual words to create slang words. The name *verlan* is an

example: it is derived from inverting the syllables in *l'envers* ("the inverse," pronounced *lan-ver*) [translator's note].

[5] *Flic* is a derogatory term for police officer, roughly equivalent to the English "cop" or "pig" [translator's note].

[6] A derogatory term for informant or someone who supplies information without the consent of the other parties with the intent of malicious, personal or financial gain, roughly equivalent to the English "snitch" [translator's note].

[7] The Romani verb for "to smoke" [translator's note].

[8] A Romani term for "masculine", roughly the French argot equivalent of "guy", "bloke", "dude", or "man" [translator's note].

[9] *Condé* is a loaned word from the Portuguese "*conde*" used in African Colonies to mean "governor". It was initially used in 19th century French argot as "authorization" and has evolved today into signifying "police officer". It is used in *Verlan* ("*décon*") for its homophony with the French argot "des cons", the equivalent in English being "pussies" or "cunts", hence giving the word a double meaning [translator's note].

[10] An ancient French term for "father" or "patriarch" [translator's note].

[11] The 15th century French term for "prostitute", today used roughly as the equivalent of "whore" [translator's note].

[12] A term of uncertain origin, the linguist Jean-Pierre Goudaillier maintains that it comes from the *Verlan* "*lobos*" (from "*lobotomisés*" or "lobotomized") whereas others maintain that it is a contraction of "bourgeois" and "*lopette*" (a diminutive of the French

"*lope*" or "homosexual"– roughly the equivalent of "fag"), thus acquiring its current meaning of an easily individual from whom it is easy to extort money [translator's note].

[13] French for "Gallic" [translator's note].

[14] A word from the Wolof language spoken in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania meaning "white westerner" [translator's note].

[15] French oral abbreviation for "intellectual" [translator's note].

[16] The French argot term for "to fuck" with numerous meanings ranging from "to fornicate" to "to steal" [translator's note].

[17] The French verb "to go" [translator's note].

[18] Oral contraction of the imparative French phrase "*vas-y*" or "go there" [translator's note].

[19] In French "*se faire voir, foutre* [...] *enculer*" [translator's note].

[20] The French dictionary *Le Petit Robert* [translator's note].

[21] Literally, "I beat my balls" meaning "I don't give a fuck", but transcribed as "I wrap my balls" [translator's note].

[22] *Inspection générale de l'Éducation nationale* (IGEN), an inspection corps under the French Ministry of National Education [translator's note].

[23] Calmann Lévy, 1996.

[24] Literally "bastard", this term of uncertain origins means an incapable, incompetent or fearful person, roughly the equivalent of the American English's slang "bitch" used for a male [translator's note].

[25] Translated as Faïza Guène, *Just Like Tomorrow,* London, Chatto & Windus, 2006.

[26] For more information, see http://www.les-engraineurs.org.

[27] A popular French radio station, see http://www.skyrock.fm/ [translator's note].

[28] A French-German television network, see http://www.arte.tv/. The documentary the author is referring to, in English, is *The Furious Force of Rhymes*, directed by Joshua Atesh Litle, 2010; for more information see, http://www.furiousrhymes.com/ [translator's note].

[29] In the original French, the hyper-abbreviated language typical in text messaging is "*on comunik 100 blème*" [translator's note].

[30] Verlan for „*louche*", meaning odd, strange [translator's note].

[31] Carrefour S.A. is an international hypermarket chain headquartered in Courcouronne, France. It is one of the largest hypermarket chains in the world [translator's note].

[32] The *Parc des Princes* is an all-seater football stadium located in the southwest of Paris, France [translator's note].

[33] For more information, see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0252720/ [translator's note].

[34] "*Choc*" being the French equivalent of "shock". Viewer discretion is advised, see http://webchoc.com/ [translator's note].