



JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

First selection of the Jury – Edition 2011

Mark Kharitonov

The Solitude Project

Mark Kharitonov has a large and superb body of work to his credit. Only one title, *A Day in February*, was published during the Soviet years but he did bring out numerous translations, of Thomas Mann in particular.

But when *perestroika* came, he had a drawer full of manuscripts: these were the three volumes of *Provincial philosophy*, and the invention of his characters, semi-virtual and semi-real, who migrate from an underground social and political world to an underground cyber world. Civil war, emigration, the Soviet world, and the camps are all caught in his mirrors, but they don't occupy the forefront of the stage. In a sense, you have to go behind the screen. Reading his work leads from the repository of ideological falsehood to the virtual worlds that besiege the denizens of the internet.

The same character who tried to track down the mysterious philosopher named Milachevich in the candy wrappers he used as minuscule writing paper - stolen from the nearby factory, they were all that was available - and to reconstitute his ideas as has been done for the Presocratics (in *La mallette de Milachévitch*), the enigmatic Zimine, begins to explore a number of worlds that become increasingly virtual and terrifying, but at the same time speak to us because they are ours, addressing us from the computer screen, the laptop, and the various imaginary boxes.

It is the dawn of the Third Millennium. It might be Moscow, or anywhere. The old codes, expressions of a domestic civility, have taken refuge in the back kitchens of a dehumanized world. Everything develops at breakneck speed; everything very soon comes to an end. Zimine is a little-known writer abandoned by his family - a wife and sons - who have gone to live in America. Surrounded by books, not all of which he has read, just as he is unable to write his own, Zimine receives letters, in verse and steeped in nostalgia, from a former friend, a shady *littérateur* who has moved to Western Europe. He also receives mysterious phone calls from a woman probably confined to a mental institution who is a prey to her phobias. And also the visits of a liberated, modern German woman who turned up in Moscow with plans to establish televised meeting-places for solitary individuals. The Organization of Solitude. Such is the Great Project.

For Zimine, solitude is in a way the natural condition of man, more so than human contact, more than love, more than attraction to others. It sublimates what is most human. Zimine collects quotations from writers and philosopher who all shared this passion for solitude, the only thing it is possible for loners to share. They include Lev Shestov, Beckett, and especially Kafka, the supreme master of voluntary solitude.

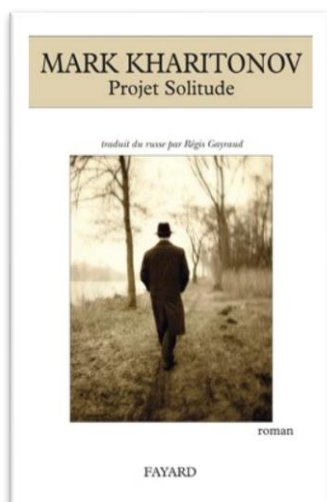
Zimine's world is positively Kafkaesque. Not that the Moscow of today is more Kafkaesque than the Moscow of yesterday. Not that our world is more Kafkaesque than it was before the spread of cyber- and virtual reality. And just as Kafka is Kafkaesque, Zimine creates a Zimineesque world of missed opportunities, words left unsaid, regrets, and afterthoughts. Zimine is a champion of fiasco.

Everything goes around and nothing ever comes to a standstill in this world of loners : plagiarism, literary themes, internet relationships. The literary world, like all the others, has become a *non-environment*. Zimine is at the same time a plagiarized writer and the narrator of the plagiarized work, the author of the works of a certain Kharitonov (Mark), the author of *Project Solitude*, the plagiarizer of his own double. This is a magical world of dereliction.

Distinguishing *Project Solitude* with the Jan Michalski Prize would award recognition an author still little known to the public, though highly appreciated by all those critics who have read him, and who is one of the masters of prose in contemporary Europe. Those who wish to discover more of him can read his *Means of existence*, a fragment of the daily journal he keeps in addition to his fiction writing, and which he has baptized : « The Century in Shorthand. » One can also detect in it the enterprise undertaken by this born writer : the pursuit of time by means of writing, like Achilles in pursuit of the tortoise in the famous paradox of Zeno which, though it has long since been solved mathematically, has been restored to life by our new mode of virtual existence.

Georges Nivat
Member of the Jury

23.02.2011



Mark Kharitonov
Project Solitude - Novel - Fayard - 2010