

REVIEWS

Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *The Truth About Marie*. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011. 160pp. \$12.95

A quarter of a century and nine novels by Belgian writer Jean-Philippe Toussaint separate the following scene descriptions:

The rain had become a downpour, as though all the rain were going to fall: all. Cars slowed on the drenched roadway; sheaves of dead water rose on each side of the tires.... I was looking for a sweater. Was there no sweater anywhere?

Outside the sky was dark, black, immense, invisible, and an unbroken sheet of rain falling through the yellow light of the streetlamps blocked the horizon. I threw myself straight into the downpour, my jacket's collar raised.

Rain is rain, but the change in style will be apparent even to readers who have not followed Toussaint's prolific career in English translation from Dalkey Archive Press—from his debut novel, *The Bathroom* (French 1985; English 2008), to the latest, *The Truth About Marie* (2009; 2011). (Since 2007, there have been seven novels: *Television* [1997; 2007]; *Monsieur* [1986; 2008]; *Camera* [1989; 2008]; *Running Away* [2005; 2009]; and *Self-Portrait Abroad* [2000; 2010]). It's a change from a writer who once delighted in using a dry, dispassionate, almost scientifically precise narrative voice ("water rose on *each side* of the tires") to a writer unashamedly sentimental, loquacious, even verbose.

Dispassion has been more than just a narrative voice for Toussaint—it is an entire milieu, with its own version of morality. The nameless narrator of *The Bathroom* decides to move himself, books and all, into his bathroom, in order to combat a general, unnamed malaise. This premise offers Toussaint the chance to poke fun at social graces and personal foibles in a light comedy of manners: the narrator hosts his visiting mother in the cramped space and exchanges verbal spars with two house painters his girlfriend hires to paint the kitchen. Here is the typical denouement of a wild episode in which the painters offer their hosts an octopus for lunch (and spend hours on the kitchen floor trying unsuccessfully to cut it up):

He told how he'd spent the night playing chess in the back room of a café and made friends with his tablemate, a young fellow who, when the bar closed, had dragged him to Les Halles, where they bought a crate of octopus which they'd divided at dawn in the Invalides metro station. I looked at him, thinking of something else.

Much of *The Bathroom* reads like a tale of utter disinterest, like the narrator (or Toussaint) is constantly just “thinking of something else”—or merely offering the preamble to a real story to come. Mechanical descriptions of mundane activities—eating, shaving, picking clothes out of a drawer—overexplain each discrete step while refusing to elaborate on or evaluate their significance.

Toussaint increases the psychic distance and the comedy by casting another early novel, *Monsieur*, in the third person. We follow insouciant Monsieur, a commercial director for Fiat France in Paris (and a dead ringer for Jacques Tati's clueless Mr. Hulot), as he spends his days doing unexciting things with uninteresting people. Like the narrator in *The Bathroom*, Monsieur moves in a child's world of simple pleasures and pains, inscrutable motivations, and general inconsequence. The story's premise is that Monsieur needs a suitable place to live: he moves back and forth between rented rooms, adjusting chairs, trying to avoid nuisances while being one himself. But few real problems appear, few solutions are found, and no one grows or changes. The narrative is cursory with abrupt transitions. Dialogue is reported and indirect, creating an awkward distance that lends itself to situational irony. Without access to Monsieur's interior motives or thoughts we cannot identify or sympathize with him. But this is part of the fun. And although events do in fact occur in *Monsieur*, more striking are the innumerable plot opportunities Toussaint cheerfully denies. What did Monsieur do when he visited Cannes?

He bought the papers and bet on horses, racking up modest winnings, occasionally thinking of going some time in person to the nearby track at Cagnes-sur-Mer, to get the thrill of being in the stands. And so time passed.

Where another writer might exploit such an opportunity (winning or losing big at the track) for a lively, character-revealing episode, Toussaint keeps mum. Instead, we only glimpse excitement from afar, and focus on what Monsieur “occasionally” thinks about. The narrative voice of these early works taunts us, overloading transitions with meaningless time designations: “The day, three years ago”; “the following days”; “little by little”; “very quickly”; “in the course of the morning”; “twice a week.” But such ordering devices

do nothing to develop character and have no significance in the whimsical plot. Instead, they highlight the tedium of storytelling logic.

Throughout Toussaint's books, the rejection of stylistic features that might be thought to hold a message or a moral is so self-conscious that it has become a distinct feature—even a kind of moral in itself. This is surely not a new feature of the European novel: Toussaint's brand of irony and willful mystery is, as critics have rightly noted, the suppressed angst that we usually ascribe to Beckett. The chance encounters and mundane observations of Toussaint's protagonists are both symptoms of and antidotes to an ongoing existential crisis. Contemplating the "dread" he feels looking out the window at the rainy street, the narrator in *The Bathroom* realizes, with a candidness that only works because it has the nonchalance of repetition, that "what had really terrified me, once again, was the passing of time itself." The language is more forceful and there is more sting in Toussaint's treatment of the contemporary world in *Camera*—as when he describes a Parisian suburb as "a row of stylized streetlights placed at regular intervals like derisory and apocryphal accessories"—but there is a "once again" feel to the observation and whatever inscrutable emotion might lie behind it.

Television marks the first significant change in Toussaint's work by pursuing this style to its logical end: the ironic acceptance of dread by full embrace of distraction. The narrator resolves to stop watching television in order complete a monograph on Titian, and then he wastes hours doing anything but: he reads the newspaper in a café, he goes to the park or the pool, he agrees to care for and then neglects his vacationing neighbor's plants. The struggle of his own attention is the novel's central dramatic tension, and the narrator finds a near-inexhaustible opponent in television itself. *Television* is on the one hand a (perhaps dated) critique of television; on the other hand, television's function in the novel as an emblem of distraction still works. Rather than critiquing the subject of distraction, the novel is really about our complicated anxieties around our own productivity. One memorable scene has the narrator stuck watching *Baywatch* in a dismal suburban apartment, when he looks out the window at other apartments in other buildings and sees that everyone else is also watching television:

I looked at all those televisions glowing in the little metal frames of the windows; I could even see fairly clearly what the people in those apartments were watching, those who were watching the same series as we were and those who'd chosen another, the ones watching aerobics and the ones watching Sunday Mass, the ones

watching cyclo-cross and the ones who'd chosen a home shopping program, and I reflected with dismay that it was a Sunday morning, that it was only a little after nine, and that it was a beautiful day.

But the narrator himself is watching others watch television—and the reader is now watching and thinking about television, three steps removed. Toussaint asks us to confront the meaninglessness of the narrator's heroic gesture of renunciation, and then to consider why we have the authority to call it meaningless at all.

The Truth About Marie's opening paragraph signals a drastic change in focus for Toussaint. It is explicitly about the value of intimacy and, more importantly, the tremendous significance of its loss:

I realized we had made love at the same time, Marie and I, but not with each other...during a sudden heat wave in Paris...we can almost pinpoint the moment, at one twenty, one thirty at the latest, Marie and I were making love at the same time in Paris that night...our bodies sweating in the half-light, the air heavy.

Marie is the story of a brief and not so rivalrous love triangle between the narrator, Marie, and Jean-Christophe, though it continues a longer saga between the narrator and Marie that Toussaint has developed earlier in *Making Love* (French 2002; English 2004) and *Running Away*. In a mixture of first-person reminiscence and third-person speculation, the unnamed narrator reflects on a year of being separated from Marie, depicting the overblown significance that any and every moment has in the face of absence. The paragraph above closes with the narrator's injunction to himself that he be "cautious as to the exact chronology of the night's events," because that chronology is important: it deals, ultimately, with "one man's fate, or rather his death, though it would be a while before we would know if he'd survived or not." Life is no longer "mere child's play"—even one's happiness is at stake in the mundane.

In *Marie*, Toussaint has lost his taste for the gestural. A newfound volubility in his treatment of process and action offers a glimpse at something like value. In a lively, accurate telling of the arrival of paramedics in Marie's apartment, for example, the minute details form a counterpart to the crisis, enhancing its significance by contrast. The banal steps of process tend toward something greater—if not plot, then character or vivid thought. Short on incident and long on detail, Toussaint's precise physical descriptions and metaphysical speculation on minutiae can be drawn out almost indefinitely. In an extended scene in which Jean-Christophe's horse Zahir

escapes an airport hanger and runs loose at Tokyo's Narita Airport, the narrator follows the horse's pursuers:

At the end of the road they went around a roadblock and drove onto a runway, still creeping along, silent, probing the night, scrutinizing the darkness with careful eyes, when, suddenly, charging out of nowhere, with the same unexpectedness as when he'd disappeared, Zahir's black and powerful body materialized in the beam of the headlights, at once galloping and at rest, mad, his eyes gleaming with terror, his coat black and wet, as if suddenly defined against the night into which he had, just moments before, dissolved.

A prose style that was once cool and tight-lipped has become just scrupulous. Toussaint's syntax must expand to accommodate ever increasing amounts of detail. This shift in focus moves to the furthest extreme once again. Little in *Marie* occurs that isn't intensified by some natural disaster threatening to annihilate all of the characters. Likewise, Toussaint is eager to show character psychology, though this can feel both masterly and mawkish: "Marie and her exasperating love of open windows, of open drawers, of open suitcases, her love of disorder, of chaos, of bazaars and fabulous messes, of whirlwinds and storms." Toussaint has foregone his earlier detachment for profound investment in everything. While this adds emotional power to beautifully detailed scenes, it risks losing the irony that saved some of his trite passages: soon it is always darkest night, always raining, and one's jacket collar *must* be turned up in the yellow streetlight.

Toussaint's narrators are not antiheroes, but they are all paralyzed in some way, and their paralysis represents a sinister side of the game they repeatedly dismiss with playful, dry wit. What Toussaint shares with the *nouveau roman*—isolated protagonists beyond moral comprehension, dramatized anxiety about objectivity and knowledge itself, the refusal to shape the world to a human scale—reveals his true theme: freedom. The struggle to move and speak freely draws his protagonists in two different, though not opposing, directions. On the one hand they seek enclosed spaces where they can remove themselves from the world—they will end up in a photo booth, or a bathroom, or, as at the end of *Camera*, in a phone booth conveniently or irrelevantly set at a crossroads. Thus Toussaint's approach to storytelling is to close things off, to leave more unsaid than said. On the other hand, these characters move about unbound by attachment, affection, or schedule: they travel, play tennis, sit in cafés. Toussaint's focus on these minutiae offers seemingly infinite room in

which to move, infinite possibilities to choose. Thus, this excess itself becomes menacing, its humor dark, because it is meaningless.

Marie shows Toussaint moving beyond gestures of futility and gestures of liberation, and beyond the existential problems of the *nouveau roman*, but it does not show him solving them. Instead, he substitutes intimacy for freedom—which, though it may indulge in rainstorms and slanting yellow streetlight as its milieu, may at least be attainable. And in dramatizing this intimacy, Toussaint’s meditations on the circumstances of fate and death do not deflect storytelling or plot, as they do in the earlier novels, but rather look into its very center with a sentimentality that can no longer be dismissed as ironic: “Its only aim the quintessence of the real, its tender core, pulsing and vibrant, a truth close to invention, the twin of fabrication, the ideal truth.” In *The Truth About Marie*, Toussaint comes very close to mastering a style that embraces both ideals, so that the novel, with its cliché rainstorms and dazzling ceremonial descriptions, is like Marie’s wildflower arrangements, which the narrator praises in the novel’s closing section for “never forcing novelty or originality,” yet calmly and expertly bringing together, in one place, “the obvious and the impossible.”

John Lennox

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Roy Fisher, *Selected Poems*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2011. 155pp. \$15.95

August Kleinzahler’s compact selection from Roy Fisher’s fifty years of poems presents a poet of consistent preoccupations: his native city of Birmingham, landscapes of the British Midlands, his own domestic interiors, and American jazz music. But despite this steadiness of attention, Fisher is also a poet of great formal variety, and his restlessness, in addition to his avoidance of the literary centers that have defined postwar British poetry, has made him hard to place. While Marjorie Perloff has praised Fisher’s 1971 experiment “The Cut Pages” as an “unwitting precursor” to Ron Silliman’s “new sentence,” and Donald Davie has compared Fisher to Philip Larkin, the poet presented here keeps company with neither Language poets nor the Movement. Furthermore, the poet shies away from personal anecdote and overt self-expression. Kleinzahler characterizes Fisher’s poetry as “almost entirely without charm,” restless and impersonal, but the poet who emerges from these pages is finally an intimate, deeply companionable one. For Fisher, writing poetry is the work of finding himself in relation to the things around him and the ideas in his head. Thus, this modest and seemingly impersonal